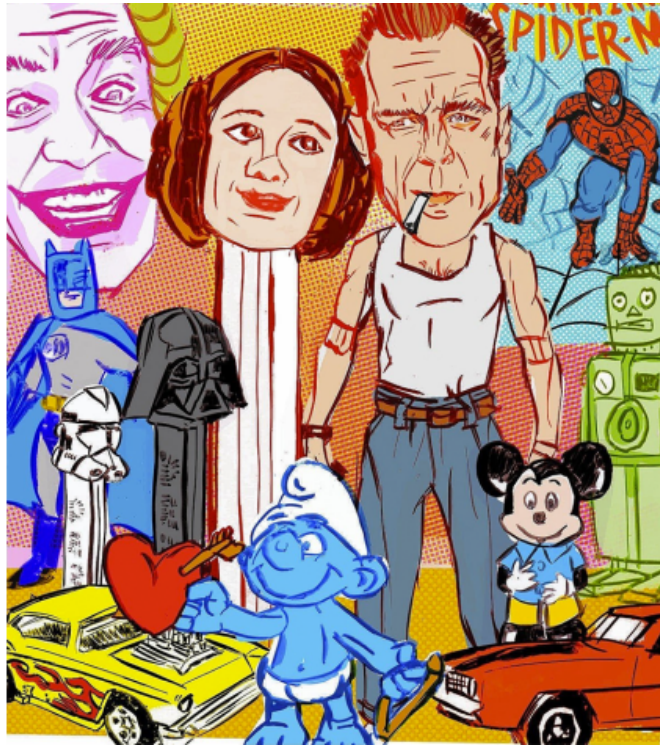


# The man who toyed with his affections

[latimes.com/style/laaffairs/la-hm-affairs-20140222-story.html](http://latimes.com/style/laaffairs/la-hm-affairs-20140222-story.html)

By Amy Paturel Feb. 21, 2014 4 PM PT

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(Johanna Goodman / For the Times)

When I met my husband, Brandon, online, we covered most of the essentials over email.

I knew he lived in Murrieta, 53 miles from my Seal Beach home. I knew he was a widower. I also knew he had a freezer stocked with microwaveable pocket sandwiches — meaning he didn't cook.

Hardly the perfect catch, I mused. But I was still drawn to him.

Then I got this:

“There's something else you should know,” he wrote. “I have a unique hobby.”

I prepped myself for a collection of Civil War guns, a lifetime membership in the official Disney fan club, even a fascination with vampires. So when his next email came through with three photos of a tricked-out three-car garage, I was relieved. Somewhat.

Turned out his “hobby” involved filling and organizing shelves packed with toys. His collection of more than 450 Pez dispensers, 20-plus Batman models and a 6-foot-tall Spider-Man seemed more appropriate for a 40-year-old virgin than a 29-year-old bachelor. I even spotted a prominently displayed action figure of “Die Hard” hero John McClane.

When I asked about his affinity for Bruce Willis’ illustrious character, Brandon said, “John McClane is a reluctant hero. He’s a regular guy who goes through this incredible ordeal because he loves his wife ... I like that.”

I decided I wouldn’t run for the hills ... yet.

Still, I worried his toys represented a boy who didn’t want to grow up, that our earnings would be poured into action figures and Disney collectibles rather than stocks and bonds. I even wondered if I could share a bed with someone whose prized possessions included bobble heads and vintage lunchboxes.

A few weeks into our relationship, Brandon led me to the garage for my first tour. The sheer volume of stuff looked like something out of “Hoarders” but was meticulously organized. Every shelf was categorized by character and collection: Marvel on one side, DC Comics on the other, with Dick Tracy, Ninja Turtles and G.I. Joe in between.

We walked a few feet and stopped in front of a cleaned-out aquarium fashioned into a “Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves” diorama. “I picked up that rock as my friend John and I descended into Devil’s Hole at the base of Niagara Falls,” he said, pointing to a reddish stone beside Little John.

Next, we stood before an entire wall of Pez dispensers, including Elvis and the first 15 presidents. What started as a gift of 10 “Star Wars” dispensers from his late wife had evolved into an eclectic shrine to all things Pez.

“She was hoping to interest me in something simple, easy to find and cheap,” he said.

Wise woman, I thought.

Soon, it became clear his collection was more than just action figures, models and novelties. It was his way of cataloging life-changing moments, special memories and important relationships.

Eventually, I made my way into his collection too, starting with the Matchbox cars we bought and raced at Irvine Spectrum on one of our early dates. Later, when I realized he was more promising than originally thought, I bought him a toy knight. The sticky note I penned is still attached to the back: “Free training to prospective knights in shining armor.”

Of course, Brandon's hobby doesn't come without drawbacks. Toys take precedence over almost everything else. Whether we're honeymooning in Venice, Italy (where he purchased a Joker mask) or wine-tasting in Santa Barbara (where he bought Spider-Man comics), he's always on the lookout for collectibles.

When we started shopping for a house, square footage and upgrades became an afterthought. His mission was finding a garage that could not only accommodate his collection but also give him creative freedom to display it in a way that commands attention.

The rub: I can't park a car in our garage. Ever.

Despite the inconveniences, this esteemed "man cave" will be a refuge for our sons. It's a place they'll be proud to show off to their friends. A place their dad will secure with an industrial-strength padlock to ensure nothing breaks or disappears. A place where they'll glimpse firsthand the collection of memories that displays how deeply their dad loves them.

When I walk through the garage now, I see the Halloween wind-up toys we played with when I was hospitalized during my pregnancy with our twins, the wagons we received the day they were born and the Mickey Mouse cake toppers that adorned their 2nd birthday cake.

As the years pass, I will continue to embrace Brandon's passion and try not to begrudge him the time he spends in the garage. While he isn't physically with us during those times, I know he's organizing the best of our family memories. It makes him a better husband, a better father and a happier guy. And when he shows me another impulse purchase or a new EBay find, I'll remind myself that, someday, if we have to, we can hock it all to fund our kids' college tuitions — or an encore trip to Venice. Without the Joker.

*Amy Paturel is a freelance writer in Temecula.*

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