

The Toymaker

By David Southworth

In the center of the city, there was a shop. An old toy shop, lost in ambiguity, sandwiched between busy shops selling all sorts of modern marvels. Far past its prime, the old shop, with its peeling paint and faded sign, blended into the background. It lacked the vibrant colors and large windows full of the newest electronic gadgets seen in the shops adjacent to it. Passersby would wander from store to store, gazing through windows and visiting shops, while passing the old toy store by without a second thought. The store, while full of wonder, failed utterly to capture the attention of those who wandered by.

It had been a long time since the bell over the door rang its greeting ring, announcing that customers had entered the shop. In fact, the only time when the bell rang its distinctive, tinny, Ting, Ting at all anymore was at the comings and goings of the store's single occupant, its owner, the old toymaker. The interior of the shop was filled with rows of shelves packed full of curious trinkets and toys made of wood and metal, vibrantly painted, and made with a quality no longer seen in playthings. While showing signs of having sat on those shelves for a long time, all looked lovingly cared for and carefully placed. The walls were artfully painted with murals of different marvelous and fantastical things meant to bring a smile to children's faces. These murals too were starting to show the signs of age, however, with bits of paint flaked off here and there, and parts faded with time. Past the shelves with their wonderful toys and the walls with their fantastical painting, all the way in the back of the store, behind the counter, the toymaker was hard at work. Surrounded by his tools, he meticulously worked away at his latest creation. Despite the lack of customers, the toymaker was hard at work creating the toys he loved.

The dented trashcan fell over, scattering its content across the floor. An assortment of small pieces, brass clippings, and wood chips lie spread out around the trashcan where they come to rest. Empty tubes of glue and paint cans were sent rolling across the floor, and paint-covered rags, dirty paintbrushes, and other materials lie in a heap around the upturned can. The old toymaker sighed as he bent down and started gathering up the mess. He picked up a pile of old newspapers, faded with age, and tossed them in the can as he proceeded to sweep up the rest of the mess. He, like the newspapers, was a product of a bygone age, quickly fading into obscurity. Yet, despite his waning relevance in a world now fascinated by digital entertainment, he continued to make the handmade toys he has made since he was a young man.

With the mess all cleaned up, the toymaker went back to his spot at the workbench, inspecting his latest creation. Freshly painted eyes stared back at him from the face of the brightly colored robot in his hands. It was a beautifully crafted toy made of wood and brass. Similar to one he had made for his own son many, many years ago. Now he was all alone. His wife had passed 10 years prior; his son too consumed in his own life to even call. All the toymaker had left in the world was this shop and these toys. But what was a toy but a tool to bring joy? What was the point of building things that no children wanted to play with anymore? Sighing, the toymaker put down the robot toy and leaned back in his chair.

“What is the point?” he muttered to himself. “Why even bother.”

Sighing, he picked up his tools and got back to work. This store was his everything, the product of decades of hard work and dedication. It was all he had left in the world and all he knew. Even if the store was destined to fade into obscurity, never to sell a toy again, he would remain there, working away to the end.

Ting... Ting... The tinny sound of the little bell reverberated through the store.

The bell? The old toymaker looked up in surprise. The doorbell had rung. Someone had entered the store. Gazing over the counter, the toymaker was stunned to see a small boy, staring in wonder at the shelves full of toys and trinkets. The boy's eyes opened wider and wider with awe as he took in one toy after another. The toymaker watched as the boy began to wander between the shelves, picking up and examining one toy after another.

"Can I help you?" Asked the old toymaker from behind the counter.

"Huh?" replied the boy with a start, spinning towards the sound.

"Sorry, said the boy timidly, "I didn't mean to pick them up, I was just so excited to see them."

"Excited!" the old toymaker replied with a scoff. "By these old trinkets? Wouldn't you be more excited to see video games? To play something on a phone?" The toymaker looked incredulously at the boy, before returning to his work.

"But they're amazing!" said the boy, "so much cooler than the toys in the other stores." Straining to see over the counter, the boy took in the workbench full of tools and materials where the toymaker worked, along with the robot toy.

"Wow! Look at that!" the boy said with wonder, gazing at the robot. "Did you make that?"

"I made all the toys you see in this store." The toymaker replied. "This robot is just another, destined to sit on these shelves collecting dust."

"I would love to have a toy like that." Said the boy. "I think it's perfect."

“Do you, now?” the toymaker replied with a chuckle. “It has been a long time since one of these toys has found a new home. I think this toy here can find a new home with you.”

“Wow, really?” the boy said with astonishment, taking the robot toy from the old toymaker.

“It makes me happy to see my creations bring joy to a young face again.” The old toymaker replied. “Consider it a gift to you as a thank you for the gift you gave to me.”

“But I didn’t give you a gift.” The boy responded, confused.

“Oh, but you did!” The toymaker replied with a smile. “I was beginning to think that these toys would never be good enough for children anymore. Seeing your happiness gives me hope that there is still a place in this world for me and my creations, and for that, you have more than earned this toy.”

“Wow! Thank you, mister!” The boy exclaimed excitedly. “I’ve got to go, but I’ll come back again!”

Ting, ting...

The doorbell rang again as the boy left, running off toward his next adventure. As quickly as he had come, he had gone, leaving the toymaker all alone again in his shop. The old toymaker leaned back in his chair, gazing over the shelves of toys and trinkets. Though it all looked just as it had that morning and the morning before that, it all seemed different. A little brighter. Like a park, basking in the rays of the sun after a long and dreary storm. Where once it was filled with an ambiance of gloom, a feeling of hope, and remembered purpose started to take root again.

“Maybe there’s still some room left in the world for us yet.” He said to himself with a smile. “Well, time to get back to work.” The old toymaker, again hunched over his workbench, started on his next creation.