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### The End of the Toymaker's Apprentice

“Dammit Bill, you need to leave that god-forsaken shop and find a place that will pay more,” my wife Jo Ann says to me, her voice vibrating against the frying pan she was using to make scrambled eggs. “That shop won’t be around forever.”

We were in the kitchen; Jo Ann was at the stove and I was at the table, my black coffee searching my nostrils. I lowered the sports section, my glasses sliding down the bridge of my nose, my stare eye level with Jo Ann’s shoulder blades. Our four year-old daughter was sitting at the table with me, creating a new world of red, green, pink, blue, purple, orange, and any other color her grubby little hands could possess. Her little brother strained against the straps that held him down, only an arm’s reach from the Cheerios sprawled before his chubby ten month-old face. The little O’s he didn’t want he threw to the family dog, Bobo—who was waiting at the highchair’s feet to gluttonously scarf any food the baby was willing to part with.

I exhaled, the pages crumpling beneath the force. “Jo Ann, you know that I can’t do that. I love Jack and my job at his shop. I can’t quit on Jack—not after what he’s been through,” I said. Jo Ann rests the palms of her hands on the counter next to the stove, forming a hole in the plains of her back, her fingers curling a death grip around handle of the spatula. I have seen her body in that position many times over the past thirteen years—mainly whenever she was frustrated with something I said or did. The first time this form took shape was the day we met back in 1982.

A group of friends and I decided to go *Bubba's*—our favorite place to eat, but long ago shut down—after a grueling football practice in the never ending blanket of heat; walking into *Bubba's* was a long awaited relief to our bodies. Jimmy, Matt, and I split from the two other football players we had come in with as we made a beeline to the corner pinball machine, the change out of their prison before we even reached the game. Jimmy took the first round of thumping the ball, the chimes and clangs creating a beat to the cry of encouragement Matt and I yelled.

I ambiguously remember a fifteen year-old Jo Ann coming into *Bubba's* off the same crowded street my friends and I had just come in from. She had three of her friends in a circle around her, their laughter and words reaching not my ears but Matt's ears.

“Looky there Billy; four nice pairs of legs just waitin’ to have Matt Langer discover them,” Matt said. He dug his arm into my ribs one...two...*three* times, making sure I was looking in the same direction as him as he stared at Jo Ann and her friends. I rolled my eyes at Matt, but my eyes stopped when I saw the beauty with wheat golden hair at the counter across the restaurant looking at us—at *me*. A high pitch cut across the room as Matt lowered his fingers and hollered, “Hey hot-things, how about you all come join us?”

My mouth filled with flies as the tight grip of my lips loosened and my stare slipped to the side of Matt's pimple infested face. The blonde, still facing our direction but looking at Matt and not me, didn't miss a beat and replied in kind. “In your dream asshole,” she said. She turned back to her friends, not sparing our group another look. Matt's laugh boomed from his chest. Embarrassed of Matt, I left to go to the jukebox—the left-over change seared my pocket. There was a wide selection of music, but my eyes kept wondering back to John Cougar—my favorite

artist at that time. Lost in the obstacle of choice, I didn't hear the hollow footsteps or feel the breath cooling the heat on my neck until the change was stolen from my open palm. Red painted fingernails reached passed me with the stolen change, the hand and arm attached to the fingers slightly putting pressure on my chest as it inserted the money and pressed D2. The beat of 'Jack & Diane' poured out of the speaker. I lifted my eyes to the blonde's face, her lips wide. "I like this song," she said. "I'm Jo Ann. Just so you know." Her back faced me as I watched her return to her friends, her hips sashaying as each heel connected with the floor.

I stare at that same back now of the aging fifteen year-old that I met that summer day. "I've been his only employee—except himself—he's had since his sons and I was a sophomore in high school. I can't quit now," I said.

Jo Ann beat the kitchen utensil she was holding against the pan, making Molly leap from her position over her drawing, her hand in mid-coloring. The splash of yellow stood out on the corner-chipped, gray countertop. Jo Ann spun to face me. "*Exactly*," she said. "You've never had another job in the last thirteen years. I mean you are almost *thirty years-old* and you work at a failing toy shop with an owner that should have stopped making and selling toys years ago. Nobody wants toys that are handmade anymore." Her hands were raised at that point, the spatula gone from her grip, extending their lengths through the wheat gold atop Jo Ann's head. I leaned my back against the old wooden mismatched chair, my coffee and the newspaper forgotten on the table. Molly's baby blue eyes went back and forth between her mother and I, her fingers still positioned to continue coloring. The baby was still happily tossing his food to the German Shepherd beneath him, his coos reaching my ears as I contemplated Jo Ann.

Jo Ann continued, “Kids are more into those darn PlayStations video games nowadays. Not old train sets or homemade dolls.”

Molly could sense that something was wrong with me, the newspaper bending in my hands from my frustration. Molly stretched her short legs to meet the floor before she walked over to me, her hands wrapped around the drawing she had been working on. “Here Daddy. You can h-have dis picture I draw. It make you feel better,” she said. She laid the drawing between us. It was a picture of us—her family. I was a short, plump man in a yellow shirt and orange pants. My eyes resembled black pebbles, a smile on my face. My wife was depicted the same way, only in a dress the color of lilac. Molly’s little brother resembled a warped potato rather than a person cradled in Jo Ann’s arms. Our background was our house, a lovely shade of green. Our house is white.

My mouth formed into a smile, my anger receding some as my fingers slid through the curls of her soft brown hair, messing her hair. “Thank you, sweetheart,” I say to Molly. She smiled and went back to her seat. She gathered her tools to create some more. I turned my attention back to her mother. Jo Ann’s arms were crossed over her chest, her face pulled down. I said, “Don’t you remember how much fun we had using our *imagination* to play with? How often we played both games outside and the games at *Bubba’s*? The fun we had playing with dolls and wooden trains? That is what Jack and I are trying to bring to people...”

“I remember everything,” the words spat from her mouth. “And that’s an old idea. You both need to get out of the past and look at how things, like toys, are now. How they are selling today. Really you need to get a new job...”

I stopped listening to her after that, though she kept talking. Her hands were stationary at this point on her hips, the V-shape of her brows contorting her normally beautiful face and the lines on her face growing deeper as she continued to speak. "...He probably wouldn't be so lonely and desperate if he hadn't killed his two boys. That's why he and his wife got divorced. He pushed them too hard: in school and for that damn store, making toys. If they weren't just right he'd whip them. He'd whip them..." My hand came down; Molly's unused crayons went flying in the air. My daughter lifted her eyes to me, my wife stopped talking. The baby started crying, the struggle—and defeat—of the straps on his highchair and my burst of anger the last wall before the tears and screams started.

I went to the backdoor; my green, worn Salvation Army jacket was a beacon as I reached it. My wife's eyes bore into the back of my head. "Bill, where do you think..." she said. My body reaches the door, a high whistle cutting through my wife's words. Our German Shepherd Bobo comes barreling to me, his feast from the baby forgotten in the excitement of leaving on a walk. We strolled through the door. "I'll be back," I said.

"Bill! Where..." Her words never reached my ears as the door closed behind me and Bobo and I started our walk.

As Bobo and I strolled through the small town of Greenwood—population 3,500—my feet crunched beneath me as my lower body pounded what was below it, the air cut through my coat—the weight of my tattered coat barely controlled the trembles that surged through my body. The curve of my back became more and my breath became a cloud in front of my eyes. I probably should have worn a heavier coat off the wooden rack, but Jo Ann was pissing me off

with those accusations and rumors of Jack. Bobo froze every moment he could to take in the aromas of the other animals' scent left behind. He sometimes bent his leg and left his own. We had been walking for what seemed like thirty minutes with no direction except for away from home.

The gray, broken sidewalks were littered with the few remaining leaves from the trees as we walked down them. The streets downtown are empty except the buildings that make up the area. I suppose people are working, like I should be. I remember the first time I ever entered Jack's when I was a young boy. It's ironic because the scene was much like what I was doing now, the same chill settling into my bones as I walked the same streets for my mother. It was towards the end of October, not November as it was now, and I was walking my pet dog Radley. It was three days before Halloween. I remember I was so excited, jumping up and down, waiting for the sweets that would soon find themselves in my stomach. I am proud to say that year I was a cowboy, complete with the boot, hat, and holster carrying a dead-look-alike revolver. Anything in my sights was dead when I wore that costume.

My mom—a rather kind woman who would give any person a slice of her famous cherry pie if they were hungry or her ear if they needed a good talk—had sent me to get some eggs and butter to help make supper that night. “Don't forget to take Radley and to chain him up outside the store when you go in,” she explained to me. I remember the back of my eyelids before answering, “Yes ma'am” and I left with Radley.

Radley and I were having fun running squirrels up trees and making birds fly away in a panic. The exhilaration almost completely consumed me, almost making me miss the one store I desperately wanted to go into but both my parents would never let me. Their reasoning was if I

went in that store, then I would see a toy I would want and beg for but one they couldn't afford to get me. I didn't understand what they were talking about.

I didn't know at the time my parents and I were barely making do with money. My dad made money working at one of the farms outside of town and my mom made some side money from cleaning a few houses down the road. I didn't know at the time that the medical bills my parents had been receiving from the hospital was piling up from when my baby siblings—my five month-old baby brother and sister—stayed in the hospital the previous year for a sickness I don't know before it took them. I didn't know the hospital was threatening to take the home my father had been raised and where I was being raised in away from us. I didn't know any of that until many years later, after I had graduated high school and was married to Jo Ann, when my parents could talk about the deaths of my only siblings. I remember I just wanted to play with the toys at the store like all the other kids did.

My body was positioned tall, the ghost and vampires stared back at me from outside the glass display case, their red eyes glowing brightly, their movements stiff from the mechanics of their wiring. Cobwebs littered with spiders filled the window and orange lights circled the red and gold stenciling of *Jack's Toy Emporium*. It was so awesome in my eight year-old mind. I had to go in. And my mother didn't say I was to hurry home.

The grip I held on Radley tightened as I walked to the door of Jack's, a light ringing spoiling the air as we continued into the store. It was better than I thought! A red train was looping its way around, the clang and crackling of toys lingered in the air. I was in heaven. A man was behind the counter, red and gold making the black of his hair stand out.

His lips widened when he saw Radley and me. “Well hello there, son. And who might this pleasant beast be?” Radley and I were the only customers in the shop save for two boys my age—the same black hair coloring as the man who was talking to me. I had seen them at school but didn’t know who they were. They were playing with a replica of the train that was traveling around the store, cowboys and Indians sprawled on their sides or attacking one another. The man walked over to me, his fingers coated through Radley’s fur. I was about to warn the man not to hold onto Radley for long because he was known for biting people he didn’t know. But as I opened my mouth, I noticed the dog ate up the attention, trying to lick the man’s face instead of trying to take it off. That was weird; Radley never did that to people. “That’s my dog, Radley.”

“As in ‘Boo Radley’ from *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee?” he asked, his eyebrows rising as the words lifted from his mouth to my ears.

“I dunno. My momma named him. I was just learnin’ to talk when we got him so I didn’t choose his name.”

“Ah, what an appropriate name for this mutt of black and gray,” he said as he continued stroking the dog. Radley continued to enjoy the attention. The boys in the back were looking at our exchange, but made no move to come join us as they looked from the dog to the man in front of me, a debate evident in their eyes. One last look at the man, they continued their game of Cowboys and Indians. I wanted to join them.

“It’s weird, sir,” I said to the owner of the store. “Radley never acts like this with strangers.” My voice inflicted the awe I felt, I’m sure, at Radley’s behavior.

A chorus of hearty sounds escaped from his lips. “Well then I will consider myself lucky then. Now tell me, son, what is it you’re looking for?”



“N-nothing, sir. I just always wanted to come in here and see what there was. It’s all really neat in here. Way better than I thought it would be.”

The sounds returned, his smile rose higher. “You think so? Say, how about I give you a candy in celebration of your first visit? I always try to do that to special kids like you. Would you like that?”

“Yeah,” my voice rising higher than before, Radley’s bark chorused in.

The man went back to the counter, reaching under, and brought into view the pure sugariness of white and what eventually became every color I could think of. He came back to me and the ball was in my mouth before the man fully extended his arm, the sugar coating my tongue.

“I’m Jack, by the way, owner of this neat shop. Those two boys over there are my sons, Matt and Jimmy. And what’s your name?”

“Billy,” my mouth strained against the candy, the sweet sugar rising to my nose.

“How would you like to come by tomorrow and I can show you some new toys I’m making with the boys? You can tell me how they look. And bring Boo Radley with you.” He smiled. I heartedly agreed before running out with Radley towards the grocery store to finally do what my mother had asked me to do.

The visits to *Jack’s* became my weekly routine. Matt, Jimmy, and I became friends—my excuse to my parents to always go into the store they didn’t want me going into. I wasn’t using Matt and Jimmy for their dad’s business; I really liked them. We were at Jack’s almost every

day until middle school when all three of us boys started playing football. My visits became more sporadic until eventually I stopped going there by high school.

That was until I needed money to save up for a car to take out Jo Ann on dates. At this time I was walking from the grocery store after asking the manager about getting a job as a bagger when I passed *Jack's*. I stopped and looked at the display that was laid out for the public. Its pizzazz was missing. I remember as I entered, the same bell chimed my entry as it did when I was eight. Matt was behind the cash register; Jimmy was nowhere to be seen.

“Hey man,” Matt said to me.

“Hey.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Well I went to Dixie to try to see if ol’ Mr. Webber would give me a job as a bagger. He says he doesn’t have any openings.”

“That sucks man.” He looked at me funny. It’s never a good idea when he looks like that, his head cocked to the side, his eyes squinting. “You know you can ask my dad if he would hire you. He likes you and thinks of you like a son. I’m sure he would. Hey Dad!”

“What,” Jack yelled, coming out from his office. Jack was surprised to see me, the astonishment from my changed appearance evident on his face. There were lines around his smile that weren’t there before, gray caught his roots.

“Billy is looking for a job. Think we could hire him for some extra help since Jimmy and I are going to have to take more time off,” Matt asked.

I remember looking down at my feet, my fists shoved into my pockets. “Yeah” I heard Jack say. My head shot up as he said, “Come into my office Billy and we will talk about what you can do. Matt redo the display by the register.” We talked and by the time I said my goodbyes I had my first job. That was the last time I talked to Matt.

Looking into Jack’s display case as a twenty-nine year-old man with a German shepherd by my side, I remember the broken promise to play catch with Matt and Jimmy I made before I left that day. My reflection stared back at me as I looked at the once vibrant words of *Jack’s Toy Emporium* on the window, the display void of any decorations for the impending season. I tug Bobo with me, entering the same door I had when I was eight and sixteen, the same ringing filling my ears as the first time and every time since then. The once black-haired man turned his hunched body towards mine from behind a display of cars. “Bill, you’re late,” the grunt came out of his lips. “And you know you aren’t allowed to bring pets in here.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I was out walking and lost track of time.”

“Just get to work. Put the dog in my office and start restocking the shelves.” The shelves did not need to be restocked, but I went ahead to his office to put Bobo in there. My hand stopped before it could curve around the handle; for there were a cowboy and Indian having a face-off in the window of Jack’s office. I never noticed it was there before. The memory of Matt and Jimmy as boys playing with these toys brought a surge of longing for my lost friends.

I looked back at Jack; at the man I have considered my second father—especially after my own father had died when I was twenty two. I never really observed how the years have not been kind to him, the loss of his two sons in the car accident he caused pulling the lines of his face even further than Mother Nature intended for at his age. He was in more pain than he ever

would admit, even after twelve years. I couldn't do this anymore. I couldn't work for him. Inhaling—the dense cloud of fog that had been dragging my feet since breakfast cleared to a soft mist clinging to my face—I found my voice. “Jack, I'm sorry. I quit.” With that, the door came into my view, the shock on Jack face disappeared as Bobo and I exited the opposite way of where we entered.

Bobo and I were not out of Jack's door more than two feet before I was assaulted by a pink fluff ball, the arms attached to the ball of pink tightly squeezed the breath out of me. My own arms found the blonde hair attached to Jo Ann's head, my lips meeting her forehead. “Thank God I found you,” she said. Her breath was warm on my exposed neck. “I didn't think I'd find you. But I knew I could find you here. I just knew I could.” Her chest deflated against mine as she released the breath she held as we embraced.

My arms didn't loosen our embrace, but tighten, stealing Jo Ann's breath as she had mine. “Yeah, you always know where I am. But you won't have to worry about me being here anymore. I just told Jack a minute ago that I quit.”

“What?”

“That's what you wanted, right? For me to quit my job?” I asked. The uncertainty of my actions made my arms loosen from Jo Ann, resting lightly on her sides.

“Yes, but I never thought you would do it,” she said, amazement breaking off her last word. “Come on. Let's go and we can talk about what we have to do next.”

“All right,” I said. We went to the silver van where Molly and the baby were waiting for us. I let Bobo in the back with them, and got in the passenger seat myself. “Daddy,” Molly

exclaimed from her seat behind me. My lips curled as I turned to look at her. Jo Ann started moving the van. The cassette came on, 'Jack & Diane' sweetly pouring to my ears as calm washed over me. The van pointed us towards home, Molly, the baby, and bells sang to me as the bleak world outside the van passed me, my eyes shut as my head rocked back and forth against my headrest.

When we got home, Jo Ann and I talked for a long time. We sat in the kitchen, all evidence of breakfast gone. We talked about the deaths of two of my best friends when I was seventeen. We talked about Jack's drinking problem from before and after he lost his family. Jo Ann listened while I talked. She hardly ever did this, so I knew she really wanted to know what was going through my mind. We talked about the past and the future. What we couldn't have expected when we discussed what would happen in the future was the closing of *Jack's Toy Emporium*.

I don't know what became of Jack after hearing of the closing of his store. I suppose he left because I have not seen him around town and his house is empty. Or he may sit in that house, finally retiring and trying to cope with the death of his blood. Death is hard to overcome. I have had so much death in my life—my brother and sister, my father, my best friends—it stopped me from moving forward with my life. Talking with Jo Ann has helped me in beginning to deal with all my losses. A therapist has been helping with the rest. A line of 'Jack & Diane' finally spoke true to me: life does go on. We can't be sixteen forever. We have to release that which holds us back, letting it rise in the air and off with the wind.