

TWO CHRISTMAS TOYS

By J.A. Willoughby

In the early 1960's there existed a small cracker box house on a small alley in a small town in Pennsylvania, with a small family living inside. The family consisted of a mom, a dad who worked two jobs, an occasional pet, a young boy and a younger girl. Though the family was poor, the children didn't know it, and everyone was happy, especially during that magical time of Christmas – when the mystical and unexplained became reality for a few short morning hours.

Even at the young age of five or six, the boy was a ponderous and imaginative little being, spending the days of summer and holiday vacations in creative freedom from the confines of school. Having few toys, he manufactured “worlds” from the contents of a kitchen drawer. The utensils fueled his imagination: a nut cracker became an alligator, an aluminum colander, a space helmet, and all sorts of other mysterious water creatures that lived on a vinyl tablecloth; the bottom of a deep ocean spread across a gray laminate table with chrome legs. Such was the boy's mindset, making a large world out of a small place.

Then there was the girl, The Little One. She had nothing in common with the little boy, other than the pet, and their common parentage. She did not like the things the boy did, and did not go where he went when he went outside (because of her age), and so she lacked any real connection to the boy and his BoyDom – until Christmas, that one magical year.

There came into the house by way of a mythical human two unique toys that year. One was a boy's toy, a fabulous cannon - a glorious, wheeled plastic facsimile of a Civil War weapon that actually fired cannonballs -- and a doll. A talking doll. Her name was Cathy. Chatty Cathy.

A talking doll?

Yes, this was high tech for the 1960's. Unlike other dolls that whimpered “mama” and opened and closed their eyes when tilted, Cathy “spoke” when a string on the back of her neck was pulled. The recording played phrases randomly after each pull of a ring. In a scratchy, tiny girl voice she said things like, “Where are we going?”, “Please brush my hair,” and “Tell me a story”.

The new doll made the little girl very happy – for a few minutes. Then Cathy stopped talking. No one, neither the little girl, nor her parents could get Cathy to talk again. Her Christmas morning chatter had ended after only a few quick pulls of her “vocal cord”. The little girl cried and cried, which was more

annoying to the little boy than Cathy's scratchy girl talk. Tears flowed and the doll was angrily tossed aside, like the torn wrapping paper lying on the floor. She ran from the enclosed porch that served as a playroom and made her way, in her footie pajamas, across the slippery linoleum kitchen floor. She sought consolation in the form of another toy (which was not to be) or cookies or sitting on the grown ups' laps.

Non-Chatty Cathy lay there still and quiet, face up, eyes wide open, and staring at the ceiling. She was an unwanted thing, an un-working thing, a castoff that his sister threw there. She was also...a willing target, an enemy to be conquered, a toy of his own to be re-purposed in an imaginary scenario of a glorious battle that was about to unfold.

With his imagination in full swing The Boy was now able to play with *his* toy this Christmas morning. Everyone was just around the corner in the next room. No one was watching him. He could get off a quick shot, and no one would know. If he did get caught he had his excuse:

She is not a real person. She is only a doll!

The Boy pulled his toy cannon into place at the opposite end of the porch and walked back across to the other side. He gave a quick sideways glance to the kitchen. The grownups were consoling the little girl. No one saw his stealthy move. The Little Rebel picked up the silent doll and propped it against their shared toy box. It stood perfectly straight, eyes open looking forward across the room, ready for the fight!

He walked back across the opening to the kitchen undetected yet again. It was as if he was a ghost of Christmas Present with a great new toy to be tested – finally! He inserted a plastic cannonball into the barrel and used the ramrod to lock it in place against the resistance of a formidable spring. It clicked once, ready for firing.

He skillfully positioned himself behind the artillery piece, aimed the barrel and pulled the string.

“KABOOM!” was the sound he heard in his head.

Srrrrring of the uncoiling spring, and **smack**, were the actual sounds made in that instant. Then almost immediately, one more sound, a tiny, scratchy little girl voice that said...

“I love you.”

The words that came from the doll's belly weren't very loud, but loud enough for the grownups to hear. From the kitchen they came with the little girl who wasted no time picking up her resurrected toy and pulled the string on the back of her neck. It spoke again: a phrase now-forgotten because the little boy was in shock and anxiously awaited his inevitable fate.

Is punishment on Christmas morning even possible?!

Still crouching behind the life-giving cannon, he looked up to the parents standing in the archway, who looked down to the little girl, who, with doll in hand, ran across the little room and hugged her big brother. The parents and grandparents smiled. The little boy was safe from reprisals. It was a happy Christmas, after all. Quickly, he thought of a backup excuse to his excuse and took great pride in saying to all the happy people in the little room:

"I thought that would fix her!"

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