

TOYS
FROM
YESTERYEAR

BRIAN WEIMER

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PHOTON BOOKS

Toys From Yesteryear

Unbroken sunlight from a cloudless sky radiated onto the empty streets and abandoned buildings of the old town square. Once a center of activity, it was now anything but. The residents and businesses of the town were long gone, leaving behind the shell of what once was. The windows boarded up years ago, the physical structures standing as monuments of the past; shrouds of a bygone time.

Thirty-five year old urban explorer Aaron Sanders knew the town's history; that it had thrived until a couple decades earlier, when it dried up and died.

Exploring was a weekend excursion for him. Not only a hobby, but a nice escape from his unsatisfying eight to five, Monday through Friday job in the city. Exploring abandoned places allowed Aaron to forget the demands, disappointments and burdens of life.

He found an unusual solace in the

isolation places like this offered. There was no pressure to socialize, compromise or appease others.

So many hopes and dreams, Aaron silently affirmed as he studied his surroundings. Lost forever.

He had planned to explore the old town for weeks, just an hour's drive from his home. Here at last, Aaron wondered why he had taken so long.

The town had a vague familiarity to it. Unable to figure out what it was, he dismissed the feeling.

One ghost town resembles another.

Aaron attempted to imagine the place in its prime, with cars driving down the empty streets and people walking along the sidewalks.

Pausing to examine the dilapidated buildings, he spotted what appeared to be an old variety store. It reminded him of one he and his father used to frequent in another town, many years before.

Aaron searched for a name but was unable to locate one. The signs had long been removed. He took a series of photos from varying angles, then continued on. Following an alley between two of the buildings, Aaron ended up on the backside.

He attempted to open the first door he came to but it refused to budge. Aaron

continued on to the next one, discovering the same thing. The back doors seemed to be barred, blocked or sealed off entirely.

Several wooden crates sat leaning against the fourth back entrance he came to. One by one, Aaron moved them out of the way. Clearing a path, he attempted to access the door.

Applying a small amount of pressure, Aaron was surprised when it actually opened. Ready to record, he pressed play.

“Alright, let's go inside,” he said, narrating the expedition as he ventured forth.

Almost immediately, he was struck by the strong smell; a stale odor he knew well of places shut up for many years.

Led by the light on his camera, Aaron ventured down a dusty corridor, leading to the front of the old building.

“This hall appears unobstructed,” Aaron added. “From the look of things, nobody's been here in a long time.”

The footage would be edited later. Eventually, it would be uploaded to his channel on a popular video sharing site, where Aaron had a significant, and rather large group of followers.

He turned a corner, his camera capturing everything. Stepping on a few pieces of old cardboard littering the floor, Aaron slowed. He stopped, feeling phone vibrate. Someone was

calling.

Ignoring it, he continued on, progressing further into the building. Once inside, Aaron checked the device to see the identity of the caller. A friend from work.

It could wait. He would call them back once he was done.

Wishing he had left the phone in his car, he continued on. Aaron followed the path before emerging in a large, dark area. Several tall, empty shelves remained standing, yet turned haphazardly. The remains of an old store.

“Whatever this place used to be, it's obviously been closed for at least a couple decades,” Aaron guessed aloud, recording everything he could. “Probably longer.”

Past the shelves, boards covered the windows, blocking out the sunlight.

Abandoned places spoke a language that Aaron had learned to hear and understand. Words spoken through silence. The cracked wood, old plaster and dust told a story.

They always told stories, if one were able to listen.

Stirring up dust with each step, Aaron passed another partially broken shelf. Convinced his eyes were deceiving him, he looked down to see several items sitting near the floor. He moved closer, realizing the objects were toys.

The light on the camera revealed a three-foot tall castle with a flag at the top. Sitting next to it was an old toy rocket ship, like something out of Flash Gordon or Buck Rogers.

On another shelf was a doll house.

How did these get left behind?

Aaron knelt down, looking through the small windows of the doll house and seeing miniature furniture inside.

Abandoned rooms within a room. How about that?

Moving to the opposite side of the display, he saw more merchandise. Aaron panned the camera from left to right, recording close ups of several antique lunch boxes and a few other items. A burst of excitement coursed through him. At this point, there remained no doubt what the shop had once been.

A toy store.

Before he could narrate any further, the power on his camera went out.

“No freakin way!” Aaron said with a curse. He quickly changed to another battery, but the camera still refused to function. Aaron cursed again.

He sat the electronic device and his camera both down on the floor. Scanning the room, he was unable to shake the familiar feeling it provoked within him.

Aaron moved closer to the front. As he

did, a single ray of sunlight penetrated one of the thick boards. It cut through the dark, revealing another shelf full of toys nearby.

“No way!” Aaron uttered.

Before him sat a variety of old toys for children of different ages. Certain the items had not been there previously, Aaron moved closer. From his observation, the toys appeared to be antiques, coated in a thick layer of dust.

“I can't believe it,” he confessed.

Another beam of light penetrated through the wood. He turned around to see an additional shelf of toys.

Either he was imagining things, or the room was increasing in brightness, but how? Aaron walked to the end of the aisle, discovering yet another shelf stocked full of toys. Vintage board games, doll houses, toy trains, small trucks and space ships. Across from them stood a wall of old action figures, hanging in organized rows.

Mini superheroes, villains, sidekicks, robots, space adventurers, soldiers, aliens, monsters, and everything in between. Aaron remembered many of the toys from early childhood.

A strange, surreal sensation settled over him as he studied the toys. Feeling momentarily disoriented, Aaron wondered if he were actually there or having a vivid dream. It seemed real

enough, but how could it be?

The odds of discovering something valuable like this were very low, he knew from experience. All the good stuff had been found long ago.

Carefully, Aaron removed one of the carded figures from the wall. A character from a popular space series from his youth. The plastic man inside the bubble wore a tan outfit, black boots and a brown cape. A small gun accessory was taped beside it.

Aaron picked up another figure from the same line. Inside was a metallic centurion with chrome head and armor, along with a large, rifle-like weapon.

"This place is a gold mine!" he exclaimed, holding the toy and scanning through the others.

A part of Aaron, the child within, wanted to rip open the packages and remove a few of the vintage figures. At the very least, take some of them with him. But he fought the temptation, valuing the rules of urban exploring; to not take anything found from any site.

After carefully hanging the figures back on the wall, Aaron turned. As he did, a large toy came into his line of sight, capturing his immediate attention from nearly thirty feet away.

"It can't be," Aaron whispered,

recognizing the item.

Barely able to believe his eyes, he walked towards the toy. Behind glass stood his childhood dream toy - a foot tall, fully articulated Galactic Warrior. Multi-colored, with parts comprised from several smaller vehicles, the figure held a silver sword.

I don't believe it! How long has this been here?

Aaron remembered desperately wanting the toy as a young boy, feeling certain he had asked for it for Christmas one year, but never getting it. Now here it was, standing before him after all this time, appearing new, complete and in perfect condition.

Fragmented recollections from childhood raced through Aaron's mind unexpectedly, as if released from captivity. Memories thought long forgotten surged through him. Memories of old friends, movies, elementary school, and the way life used to be. The pleasant stream of thoughts came to a head as he recalled his younger brother Timothy, who died from a rare disease when Aaron was ten.

Pushing the painfully memory away, he bent down, almost touching the glass with his nose. Behind the clear barrier, the toy faced him, as if looking directly at him.

Calling him.

For a brief moment, Aaron thought he

saw the sword light up. He recalled imagined adventures with the toy from childhood.

Unable to tear his gaze away from the old toy, his thoughts gravitated towards more memories from his youth. Aaron felt around the exterior of the case, searching for a way to open it. As he did, the atmosphere seemed to change all around him.

More surreal than the brief sensation he experienced previously, the building altered somehow. Additional beams of sunlight pierced through the wooden boards blocking the windows and the interior of the building grew brighter.

Aaron watched as his surroundings changed before his very eyes.

The temperature shifted and the musty smell dissipated all at once, replaced by a pleasant aroma. The thick dust faded away as more sunlight filtered in. The window boards covering the store front vanished completely; the colors of everything intensified, growing brighter, becoming more vibrant. Within moments, the shop was restored to its fullness.

Feeling like he had been plucked from reality and thrust into a dream, Aaron expected to wake up at any moment. He turned in a circle, witnessing the store in all its glory.

“Impossible,” Aaron mumbled, convinced his imagination was in functioning in

overdrive.

“Nothing's impossible,” a male voice suddenly said, coming from behind him.

Aaron quickly turned around to see an old man standing behind the counter. Having short grey hair and mustache, he wore an old-fashioned shirt with bow tie.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you,” the gentleman added with a disarming smile. “I'm Reggie, the store owner.”

“How are you here?” Aaron asked. “I thought this place was closed.”

“Closed for some, open for others.”

“Huh?” Aaron walked over to the window and looked out. Sitting below it, to be seen by people passing by, sat an elaborate toy train set among other random toys.

Painted on the outside of the large glass in bright red letters was the name of the shop.

‘TOYS FROM YESTERYEAR

Aaron closed his eyes tightly and pinched himself hard. He waited several seconds, preparing to wake up in his bed and tell himself what a crazy dream that was. Instead, he found himself still standing in the store.

“Tell me, what brings you here on this fine day?” Reggie asked.

In a daze, Aaron turned to him. “I ... I

don't know.”

“Certainly, you must have some idea.”

“I was just exploring.”

“Wonderful. Exploration is what life is all about.”

How old is this place?”

“Older than you,” Reggie responded enigmatically. “But in truth, age isn't important. This store contains that which once was, and some of what shall be.”

Aaron gave him a nod, pretending to understand.

A bell rang out as the front door opened. Aaron turned to see a man enter the shop with his young son, who looked to be about seven years old. Like Reggie, they were both dressed in outdated clothing from decades earlier.

The Owner smiled at the visitors. “Hello and welcome.”

“Thank you, Sir,” the father and son responded before looking around the establishment. They began in one of the aisles containing a series of military action soldiers, accessories and vehicles.

The boy squealed with excitement, picking up one of the boxed figures and showing his father. “Look, it's Sargent Storm! He comes with a helmet and accessories. Can I get him, dad?”

“We'll see,” the father responded.

Watching from a distance, Aaron broke into a smile, remembering back to a similar experience with his father.

“That one is a new arrival. A limited edition,” Reggie announced.

The father responded with a nod before turning back to his son. “You can only get one today. Is this the one you want?”

“Yeah! He's my favorite!”

Aaron chuckled as the child continued telling his father about the figure, enthusiastically reading the front and back of the box.

“I don't suppose you were ever like that, were you?” Reggie asked.

Redirecting his attention, Aaron turned to the store owner. “Look, I still don't understand how this store can be here and have all these toys.”

Reggie smiled widely. “Boggles the mind, doesn't it?”

“To say the least,” Aaron confessed with a confused expression.

“I'm glad you returned. It's nice to see you again.”

“Excuse me?”

“You may not remember, Aaron, but you've been here before,” Reggie told him. “Many years ago.”

“I don't think so.”

“Yes, when you were very young.”

“I think you must have me confused with someone else.”

“Oh no, I never forget a child. You're the only Aaron Sanders who's ever visited the shop.”

“How do you know my name?” Aaron asked.

“I remember the names of every boy and girl who enters.”

“That's some memory.”

“If it involves children, toys and youth, it's second nature to me,” Reggie explained before motioning to the Galactic Warrior figure in the case. “I saw you looking at this one. It's a beauty, isn't it?”

“Yeah. I haven't seen one in a long time.”

“Oh, quite right. You've wanted this toy since you were about the same age of young Christopher over there.”

Aaron looked at the old man, perplexed.

Reggie smiled again, as if reading his mind. “I have an affinity for these things.”

“Look, I'm really having a hard time trying to understand all this. This store should be closed, just like all the other buildings in this town. They've been boarded up for years.”

“Closed for some, open for others,” Reggie politely reminded him.

“You already said that. What does it mean?”

“It means not everyone is allowed to visit.”

“Why not? I don't understand.”

The old man laughed. “One must have eyes to see and ears to hear.”

“I guess I'm blind and deaf,” Aaron suggested.

“Nonsense. You found this place again, so that in itself means you are, in fact, neither.”

“Well, I'm still not sure this isn't a dream.”

“Oh, it's not a dream. I assure you, you're awake,” Reggie said, rearranging a few things atop the counter.

Aaron bent down and looked again at the Galactic Warrior toy. “How much is that, anyhow?”

“Well, it's a rare item. Complete and practically in mint condition,” Reggie explained.

“Could I see it?”

“Of course. People have not because they ask not.” Reggie opened the case and removed the figure, sitting it on top of the counter.

Aaron touched one of the shoulders of the toy, feeling the silver sword held up in one hand. More childhood memories flooded back

into his mind.

“Go ahead, pick it up,” Reggie encouraged.

Slowly, Aaron gripped the toy by its waist and lifted it off the counter. As he did, he felt the smooth plastic, along with the grooves, noting the multiple points of articulation of the arms and legs.

“Serendipity,” Reggie announced, as though inventing the word. “Sometimes we find things we’ve wanted most in the least likely of places.”

“Right,” Aaron mumbled, studying the toy from different angles. “I wanted one of these so bad when I was a kid.”

“I know, but your parents couldn’t afford it and you ended up with a less expensive toy instead. One that you quickly discarded.”

“How did you know that?” Aaron asked. “I barely even remember, myself.”

“As I said, toys are my specialty, as are the dreams of children.”

“You sound like Santa Claus.”

Reggie laughed. “Perhaps he sounds like me.”

“How much is it? I don’t see a price,” Aaron said, checking the toy for a tag, but not finding one. “Come to think about it, I don’t see prices on anything in here.”

“That’s because the toys in this shop

can't be purchased by just anyone. They have to find the right owner. Someone who'll appreciate and cherish them."

Aaron bit his bottom lip, wishing he had taken better care of his old toys as a child.

"Childhood is a special time," Reggie explained. "A time when laughter springs up from the purity of youth. It's most unfortunate that childhood isn't fully appreciated until the time is long past."

"You're not kidding. I'd give almost anything to be a kid again," Aaron confessed.

"You needn't go back in time in order to enjoy childhood again. The child is still within you. He merely needs to be reawakened. You may have forgotten him, but he hasn't forgotten you."

"I'm not sure I follow."

"Like I said, age is relative. One can be young when old, and likewise, old while still young."

"How's that?" Aaron inquired just as Christopher and his father approached the counter with the selected toy in hand. Aaron stepped out of the way as the dad placed the toy on the counter, the child bouncing with excitement.

"It this the toy you've chosen, Christopher?" Reggie asked.

"Yep!" The boy responded, overflowing

with glee.

“A true collector's item, for sure. I know you're going to enjoy playing with Sargent Storm, creating many exciting adventures that shall stay with you a lifetime,” Reggie said. “May you never forget the times of happiness it brings.”

“I won't, Sir. I promise.”

“Don't worry, I'll make sure he doesn't,” Christopher's father interjected as Reggie placed the toy in a bag and handed it to him, who gave it to the boy.

“Thanks, dad,” the boy said.

“You're welcome.”

Aaron watched the delighted child exit the store, holding his new toy. The father waved goodbye through the window as they proceeded down the sidewalk, out of sight.

“Another satisfied young customer,” Reggie happily announced.

Curious, Aaron walked to the window. He looked down the sidewalk but was unable to see where the father and son had gone.

That's weird, he silently affirmed before realizing he was still holding onto the Space Warrior toy. Aaron returned to the counter. “Sorry, I didn't mean to take this all the way over there.”

Reggie smiled. “No apologies are necessary.”

Aaron sat the large figure back on the counter, still looking it over. "I desperately wanted this when I was a kid, until ...," he said, stopping in midsentence, remembering the death of his younger brother, Timothy. "Until I was about ten."

"It's unfortunate you experienced such a loss and that your childhood ended prematurely."

"No offense, Reggie, but there's no possible way you can know what kind of childhood I had. And it didn't end prematurely. I just grew out of toys. Got too old for them."

"One can never be too old to experience the enjoyment of such things."

"If you say so."

Reggie stroked his chin, looking at Aaron. Quiet wisdom radiated from the old man.

Aaron looked at Reggie, attempting to decode his expression like a poker player. "What?"

"Life isn't always easy, Aaron, but you mustn't allow pain and disappointment to snuff out the fire of youth in your heart," Reggie explained, like a teacher to a student. "You needn't grow old. So long as youth burns bright, you never will."

Aaron scoffed. "That's easier said than done. I'm a realist. There's not a rose on every

corner and I seriously doubt that toys and wishful thinking are going to make anything better.”

Reggie stepped out from behind the counter. “It’s more than simple toys that transform youth into a magical time. Wonder and imagination bring it to life.”

“If you say so,” Aaron responded, wishing the old man would stop talking.

Reggie directed his attention again to the Galactic Warrior. “This particular toy means a lot to you. It captured the heart of the child within you years ago, and it still does.”

“Yeah, but so what? I’m not a child anymore.”

“As I said, age is relative. Sadly, many allow the dreams of childhood to die while they’re still young. It’s the greatest tragedy in life.”

“I can think of a lot worse.”

“Aaron, the time of youth determines many things about life. Such a time retains a place of fondness that must be held on to, protected and cherished at all costs, just as the heart must be guarded. For from it spring the issues of life.”

“Look, I’m not a kid anymore, Reggie. I don’t play with toys,” Aaron clarified, stepping away from the counter to look down the nearest aisles. “Part of being an adult means doing away

with kids' stuff. It means growing up, getting a job, taking on responsibilities, paying bills and all that.”

Reggie raised his eyebrows. “And those are the most important things to you?”

“My point is, I haven't bought a toy in over twenty-five years and I'm not going to start now.”

“You sound certain.”

“I am,” Aaron confirmed, glancing at the large space toy. “Besides, this is just a chunk of plastic.”

“Oh, it's much more than that,” Reggie replied. “Being an adult need not exclude the things of youth. Having responsibilities are part of adulthood, yes, but you can still carry the dreams that inspired you through the eyes of a child,” Reggie explained. “Before the world told you who to be, what to value and how to live.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Being an adult doesn't mean you can no longer enjoy childhood. The child can live and thrive within your heart at every age.”

“So what am I supposed to do?” Aaron threw up his arms. “Even if I buy that toy you're obviously trying to sell me, it's not going to change anything in my life.”

“No, it most certainly won't. It's not the toy itself that's magical, but the wonder locked away within you. You must rediscover the inner

child and now is the time to do so.”

Aaron released an ambivalent laugh.
“You're crazy.”

“All I'm asking is a step of faith.”

“Faith,” Aaron repeated. “And what am I supposed to do?”

Reggie pointed across the store. “See that tall case in the corner?”

“Yeah.”

“Walk over to it and look into the glass.”

“And then what?”

“That's it.”

Aaron thought about it for several moments. “Sure, why not? Sounds simple enough.”

“Simple is the faith of a child,” Reggie added with a smile.

Aaron slowly walked over to the case, looking through the glass. Inside, vintage comic books dating back to the 1930's, 40's and 50's were displayed. All were in mint condition with vibrant colors. “Are you trying to sell me this stuff, too?”

“Just look into the case.”

“Alright, but all I see are these comics.”

“You must look beyond them.”

Taking a deep breath, Aaron continued gazing through the glass, looking at the comics. As he focused on the covers, he half expected the colorfully dressed, larger-than-life characters

on them to come alive before his eyes. Instead, they remained completely still.

Frustrated, Aaron took a step back. As he did, his focus shifted to the reflection in the glass. Seeing his familiar face and hair, he exhaled. "What now?"

"Look deep," Reggie instructed him. "Remember the dreams of youth, life as it once was, innocence unencumbered by the worries of the world. Being a child means believing in the impossible, possessing wonder, grand imagination and simple faith."

Aaron maintained his focus on his reflection. As he relaxed his mind, his thoughts shifted. Before he realized it, a barrage of childhood thoughts raced through him. In an instant, the reflection before him was no longer his own. Staring back at him was a child; a boy appearing to be around nine years of age.

"What's going on, Reggie?" Aaron asked before the child became familiar. "Wait a minute, is that me?"

"Indeed it is."

"But it can't be. I grew up a long time ago," Aaron said, hearing his words spoken through the voice of the child he once was. "How can this be me?"

"Because the inner child never died."

Aaron looked closely at the young face from years past; The same one he occasionally

saw in photographs from childhood. Raising one arm, he placed his hand on the surface of the smooth glass. As he did, the image of the child did the same. The two versions of himself touching as though meeting for the first time.

A barrage of feelings invaded Aaron's soul. He smiled, remembering the childlike perspective he once knew. He recalled the way he once saw the world, through the eyes of undefiled youth. Touching his face, Aaron felt skin smoother than he remembered ever having. There was no hint of stubble whatsoever.

"It's me. It's really me!" Aaron said.

Reggie walked to him. "Do you believe now?"

Aaron silently nodded up and down. "Yes."

"Good. Now things you previously thought impossible shall be possible once more."

Like a curious child, Aaron looked around once more at the toys in the shop. Adjusting to what felt like an a reversal in years, a jolt of excitement surged through him. As he studied a particular toy, the front door bell rang. Aaron turned, but the sunlight blinded him from seeing who was entering.

"Aaron, you have a visitor," Reggie announced.

"I do?" Aaron asked, looking up at the

old man. "Who?"

"Someone you haven't seen in a long time."

Slowly, Aaron walked towards the door. As he stepped closer, another child appeared out of the bright light shining into the building. A young, seven-year old boy with short blond hair entered, dressed in clothes from years past.

"Hi Aaron," the child said.

"Timmy?"

The boy confirmed with a smile Aaron had never forgotten.

"Is it really you?"

Timmy giggled. "Of course it is."

Excitement flooded into Aaron's heart. Unable to restrain himself, he ran over and wrapped his arms tightly around his brother. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too," Timmy responded.

"But I don't understand. How can you be here right now? You got sick when we were kids and,"

"I know, but I'm fine now. More than fine."

Aaron nodded in agreement, at a loss for words. The two boys, close in height, stood facing one another for the first time since Aaron was a child. "Are you really here? You look exactly the same."

“So do you.”

“Oh, that's just because I...,” Aaron began to explain, pointing to the case. Unsure how to explain, he stopped, then chuckled.

Timmy laughed. The boys laughed together as if remembering a private joke between them.

“I want to show you something,” Aaron told his brother, running over to the counter, where his dream toy stood. “Remember this?”

“The Galactic Warrior battles evil throughout the universe, defeating enemies with his sword of light,” Timmy said, quoting the familiar opening narration from the program Aaron had not seen in decades.

“That's right. How did you remember?”

“I don't know.”

“Do you remember everything?” Aaron asked.

“Only the good.”

“I wish I could forget all the bad stuff.”

“One day you will,” Timmy told him.

Aaron nodded in silent agreement, then continued showing his brother the figure. “Cool, huh?”

Timmy responded enthusiastically.

Going to a nearby shelf, Aaron knelt down. He picked up a small jet and flew it around Timmy, circling him. The younger boy laughed as his older brother played with nearby

toys. Aaron briefly glanced over at Reggie, watching them from a distance. Going from one shelf to another, the brothers explored the store, talking, laughing, playing and reminiscing about good times from the past.

After a time, Aaron began to believe childhood had never ended. Perhaps it had not, and he had awakened to his true life. Although he did not completely understand how this was possible, he was fine with it.

He never wanted it to end.

After visiting the last shelf, Aaron watched his brother return a toy to its rightful place.

"Come on, let's play with the ships again," Aaron suggested, running to another aisle.

Instead of following, Timmy remained in place. Aaron stopped and turned around. The expression on his brothers face was no longer one of playfulness, but more serious.

"What's wrong?" Aaron asked.

"I can't stay."

"What do you mean? Of course you can."

"I have to go," Timmy said.

"No. We can play for as long as we want to, can't we?" Aaron looked at Reggie.

"I'm afraid Timmy's right, Aaron. It's time for him to go," the old man confirmed.

"But why? Why can't he stay?" Aaron asked. "I don't understand. I thought you said childhood can last as long as we want it to."

"Yes, but not here in this place," Reggie explained. "In your heart."

"But why?"

"Because times like this are reserved for special moments, when we need them most."

"Can't you do something to make it last?" Aaron pled.

"I'm sorry."

Aaron stepped toward the store owner. "What if I wanted to stay here? Could Timmy stay, too?"

"No. Timmy has to return to his present home, just as you must return to yours."

"But I don't want to," Aaron argued.

"We must all do things we don't enjoy, whether child or adult. It's part of life. That's why it's important to never let go of the wonder of the child within us."

Aaron nodded in reluctant agreement. Troubled, he raced over to his brother and hugged him. Tears began to roll down Aaron's cheeks. He tried to wipe them away, but they kept falling. "Please don't go."

"I'm sorry," Timmy said. "I have to."

"You *will* see your brother again, one day," Reggie announced.

"When?" Aaron asked.

“One day.”

Aaron watched as Timmy picked up the Galactic Warrior from the counter, then handed it to him.

“Here,” Timmy said.

“I can't. It's not mine.”

“Sure, it is.”

Aaron slowly took the toy from him.
“But I haven't bought it.”

“The toys pick the owner,” Reggie reminded him.

The tears down Aaron's cheeks now fell onto the toy.

“Please don't be sad,” Timmy offered.
“We can play again one day.”

“Okay,” Aaron slowly responded, fighting back a flood of emotion.

“See you later, Aaron,” Timmy said with a wave as he walked back toward the entrance.

“Later.” Aaron watched as his brother walked to the door and was absorbed into a brightness. Aaron ran to the window and looked outside, but Timmy was nowhere to be seen.

Reminded of the pain of losing his little brother as a child, Aaron's countenance fell.

“Come now, Aaron. Nobody is ever really gone,” Reggie said. “Your brother will live on and so will you.”

“Where did he go?” Aaron asked, wiping away more tears with one arm.

“Back to the place that awaits the young and pure,” Reggie responded. “Where happiness abounds forever.”

Feeling a combination of joy and sadness, Aaron gazed through the front window of the store. He hoped to catch one final glimpse of Timmy, but was unable. After taking a deep breath, he returned to where Reggie stood. “I have to leave now, too, don't I?”

“Yes.”

“And what about you?”

“I must also return to my rightful place,” Reggie told him.

“How can I go back to my everyday life after seeing all this?”

“That's for you to determine. But remember, always hold on to the child within. As long as you do, you'll never grow old, and life will always be new.”

“I will,” Aaron responded with a nod. “Thank you, Reggie.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” the owner said, stepping back behind the counter. “So don't be sad. It's only the beginning.”

Looking at Reggie, Aaron witnessed another shift occur. The store owner slowed faded, along with the brightness and colors surrounding him. The light within the shop dimmed and everything around Aaron grew old before his eyes. The dust reappeared and the

wooden boards covering the windows reappeared, blocking out the sunlight.

The old shop appeared exactly as it had when Aaron arrived.

Abandoned.

Standing in the dark room, he felt a change in himself, as well. Aaron touched his face and felt stubble. He looked down at his adult hands, surprised to see the Galactic Warrior still there.

“Reggie?” Aaron called out. “Timmy?”

No reply. Only silence.

Several minutes passed as he struggled to absorb all that had occurred.

Returning to his camera, he picked it up. He searched the store from one side to the other, but none of the other toys remained.

“Until next time,” Aaron whispered.

He turned, taking one last look before leaving the same way he entered. With his camera and the toy in hand, Aaron departed, stepping back out into the sunlight.

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