



# *Clockwork Devils*

Blake Fugler

Fable

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In a house (a very standard, run-of-the-mill sort of house) in a mid-sized town (a very standard, run-of-the-mill sort of house) there was a child. Let's say that he was a boy. And this little boy was very much like you or me (when I was a child.) Indeed, he is ordinary and average in every single way you might think of.

For instance, he was well behaved, for the most part. He got himself into trouble, of course. What sort of little boy doesn't, after all? But as a general rule, he generally followed the rules. No talking back, get good grades, no bad words in front of his mother, et cetera.

But of course he was no little angel. That wouldn't be a story worth telling, now would it?

No, this little boy had one major, unforgivable flaw: he was utterly and totally ungrateful.

Have you ever given someone a gift, expecting that wonderful feeling you get when their eyes to light up and they break out into that sort of beautiful, warm smile (you know what I mean), only to instead get nothing more than some slightly raised eyebrows and an unenthused "oh, thanks"?

Well, this little boy had done that to every gift giver ever in his life. Never once did he even attempt to act grateful for something given to or done for him. It goes without saying that behavior is cruel, terrible, selfish, and thoughtless. But his parents did tell him that, all the time.

"Your behavior is cruel, terrible, selfish, and thoughtless," they would tell him every time. Yet they continued to buy him lavish presents and treats and be at his back and call, more or less. They are what are called "enablers" and that is their major character flaw for which they receive just comeuppance. But that is a tale for another

day.

About now you're probably wondering what this little boy's just comeuppance was. Don't worry, it's terrible.

It came not too long ago on our most second most sacred and precious of holidays: Black Friday (the most sacred and precious being, of course, Cyber Monday.) The little boy was waiting patiently in line with his mother for a brand new game system that his mother would purchase for him so he could react with a stoic lack of gratitude and spend the rest of his school vacation calling people names online while playing it while she wasn't around (as kids do.)

In front of them was an old, old woman. A very old, old woman. Once might even call her ancient and be forgiven for mistaking her for an especially lifelike mummy animatronic that had somehow been misplaced from her rightful spot in a traveling carnival style haunted house. She would turn occasionally turn and smile a toothless smile at the little boy, who would smile back toothfully and a bit awkwardly.

"Are you excited to play this newfangled thing?" she asked him.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered politely (remember, he was ungrateful, not necessarily rude.) "Is your, uh—" he thought for a moment about how many generations back he should go "—great-grandson looking forward to playing it?"

"Oh, my, no. He died years ago. Old age. No, this is for me. I look forward to whooping you!" she said and turned away and put on her headphones (well known as the universal signal for "please don't talk to me.")

After some indeterminable and boring crawl of time, it was almost the boy's turn to receive his console. But, in a predictable but still minorly cruel twist of fate, the old lady in front of him got the last one. She turned to the little boy and pulled out her earbuds with the shiny, waxy box in her hands.

To the little boy's credit, he was stone-faced and appropriately polite. He didn't cry or stamp his feet or throw anything. The boy, while little, was a little too old for such behavior as public temper tantrums.

So his tragic, unfortunate, but still ultimately justified, end could almost be blamed on the old lady. One might even call her an agent of fate, like so many old crones in so many old tales before hers.

The old lady tucked the box under one long, wither arm and with her free hand she reached into her tattered old cloak and pulled out a plain wooden box much too large to have any business hiding in there.

“Here you go, young man. A consolation prize for you. It was one of my great-great-grandson’s favorite things to play with when he was a little boy,” she said. “It’s a classic kind of toy. And you just can’t beat the classics.”

She handed it to the boy, who took it even though he had no interest whatsoever in it. He was just somewhat greedy like that. The old lady looked at him expectantly with he beady little black eyes.

The little boy looked at the box, which was quite heavy, and turned it over in his hands. It was rapidly becoming obvious that he was not going to say “thank-you.” At least not sincerely.

“Maybe you’ll even like it better than this shiny, highly anticipated new gaming console. The last little child who owned this box was certainly head-over-heels delighted and, moreover, appreciative when someone gave it to him,” she said, perhaps trying to give the boy one last out.

“Oh. Why?” The boy said, prompting his mother to clear her throat disapprovingly. “I mean, uh, thanks. Yeah, thanks,” the boy continued, thus sealing his own doom.

A few hours later, the box was lying on the boy’s bedroom floor, covered in a pile of the day’s dirty clothes. The boy had opened it, saw that it contained a two dozen or so small, wind-up angel toys, immediately gawn bored of it, and tossed it haphazardly onto the floor for his mother to deal with later (or scold him to deal with later.)

He slept soundly that night, for a few hours at least. All the shopping and gift receiving and being ungrateful for said gifts had left him all tuckered out. As he dreamed, probably of slinging crass insults over a microphone to future gaming opponents, the clothes on his floor began to stir. The little clockwork angels had come alive, and they were clicking and clinking and clattering their way to the boy’s bed.

The boy awoke to see them all at the foot of his bed. He was terrified, of course, like any of us would be. These toys had made their way from the box on the floor to the foot his bed. Naturally, his childish mind immediately came to the conclusion that there was some supernatural force at work, rather than a more logical explanation such as that they had been placed there by his parents or something equally mundane.

His childish gut instinct was right, though. The dull brass-colored angels, which he could now see were so lovely and intricate that even his uncultured mind in its frenzied, panicked state was somehow able to

appreciate their craftsmanship, crept forward until they covered him. The boy was unable to move, held down by weight and fear and maybe even something else.

Then the toys began to twist. In the sick pale yellow light of a streetlamp coming through his bedroom window, the boy watched at their gears and springs turned and clicked and sprang and moved until they had become strangely beautiful and breathtakingly creepy clockwork devils. One of them smiled at the boy.

“I was the last little child before you who was given the box,” the little devil said with a voice that sounded like it came from a tiny music box, which it very well may have. “Or I was, once. I should have been head-over-heels delighted and, moreover, appreciative when she the old lady gave me that box. We all should have been.”

As for how the little boy reacted? Well, you can probably guess that there was no smiling coming from him and that there was likely a lot of crying. Maybe some unsuccessful begging or fighting or something. Use your imagination for the details. Make them as personalized and scary as possible for maximum effect.

The end result was that before the sun rose the next day, the little boy was gone. Nowhere to be seen. His parents walked into his bedroom around noon to tell him to wake up and stop being so lazy and to stop wasting his vacation away in bed, but they didn't find him. They never saw him again, in fact. They also never again saw the roughly-hewn wooden box that the old lady had given him, though they didn't actually notice this. Not that one could blame them, having experienced such a tragedy as it were.

Now, it is quite understandable if you find this all completely unbelievable. You probably find it quite silly, frankly. But peel back the layers of irony that this generation was born in and expose yourself just a little bit to the truth of these words. After all, how many little children go missing every year without explanation? Enough to produce content for countless episodes of Unsolved Mysteries and online top-ten creepiest disappearances lists, at least.

So perhaps, just perhaps, this tale provides an explanation for about two dozen or so of them, plus one. And perhaps it would behoove you to simply say “thank-you,” and try to sound like you mean it.

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