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Chapter 1

I am the boy who was once a log; I am the boy who traveled over land and sea seeking to be changed; I am the boy who was born again in a whale. Many have told my story, but not one of them got it right. I suppose I must tell it myself.

I first saw the light of day in a village so small it had no name. No stranger passing through its twisting streets would have suspected that the two greatest woodcarvers in Italy lived there, unless he turned aside from his business to browse in their shops.

The younger of these masters was my father, Gepetto. Nothing about Father's appearance suggested what an extraordinary man he was. Father was short, plump, and pear-shaped. He had a broad face with hazel eyes, a button nose, and a weak, clean-shaven chin. At the time of my creation Father was fifty years old. His hair, once chestnut brown and luxurious, had faded and shrunk to a grizzled fringe around a shiny dome. His skin still glowed a youthful pink, but lines now fanned out and up from the corners of his eyes and mouth, creating an impression of perpetual merriment.

Father looked like Saint Nicholas; and in our little village he played the part as well. He carved and painted wooden figures: dolls that brought sparkle to the eyes of even spoiled little rich girls; fierce dogs that put cats to flight, tails between their legs; gilded angels so glorious you knew the Lord himself was only a step behind. Father carved soldiers, hunchbacks, kings, crones—every character that delighted and amazed. And the animals! You would have sworn his butterflies, peacocks, and lobsters were real till you touched them. As for his lions and bears, ... well, you would not have dared approach them to make the test.

Our other master carver was named Giuseppe. In appearance he was everything Father was not: tall and lanky, a mane of white hair cascading down to his shoulders, a white beard masking most of his face. Giuseppe was older than Father, but not a single line etched his pale face. His deep-set, coal-black eyes held your gaze whenever he spoke. In many respects, Giuseppe looked like a prophet.

Giuseppe's line was clocks—not ordinary cuckoo clocks like

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those turned out in every village and town between the great Po River and the Alps, but one-of-a-kind creations that displayed the most cunning casework and intricate mechanisms to be found in the kingdom. Many of Giuseppe's timepieces were cuckoo clocks, of course, for some customers could imagine nothing else on their parlor wall. But buyers who wanted something unique always came away satisfied. Many of Giuseppe's most delightful clocks sported a little stage where wooden figures emerged from a door to perform amusing antics on the hour and half-hour. My own favorite featured a butcher waving a cleaver and pursuing a dog making off with his sausages.

Giuseppe fashioned his clocks entirely out of wood, except for the mainspring. None of his masterpieces ever broke down or wore out. Fifty years ago, Giuseppe carved his first clock to grace his own hearth. It hangs there still, keeping perfect time. Father appreciated Giuseppe's work as only another master craftsman can, and Giuseppe was Father's greatest admirer. For forty years, they were the best of friends.

Giuseppe was a happier man than Father, for he had a son, Giovanni, to carry on his name and work; but Father had never married. As a young man Father had found satisfaction and contentment enough in his craft, but as he grew older he began to long for a boy of his own. Thoughts of the son he did not have made Father more unhappy as the years passed. Once he felt pleasure watching a boy or girl leave his shop happily clutching a toy; now he would sigh as bright-eyed children ran home with their prizes, reminded once again that he had no son of his own to delight with his wonderful creations.

Father never spoke of his sorrow to anyone, but Giuseppe knew all the same and did his best to relieve Father's loneliness. Many nights the two men would get together for coffee and dominos. They would talk and laugh about old times, and Father would leave Giuseppe's house in high spirits at the end of the evening; but alone again at night in his empty house the sadness would return.

One spring day Father burst into Giuseppe's shop more excited than the older man had ever seen him before.

"Giuseppe, I just had a marvelous idea! What an inspiration! You can make me a happy man in my old age; you can make me a father!"

"Calm down, Friend. Sit here and take ten deep breaths before



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you speak—no, make it twenty. You know I would do whatever I could to bring you happiness, but making you a father is one thing I cannot do.”

Gepetto rapidly inhaled and exhaled twenty times, then went on, just as breathless and beside himself as before.

“Really, Giuseppe, you can make me a father. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before. I want my boy to have dark hair, and a nose just like mine, but lips not quite as thin. And freckles—he must have freckles.”

Giuseppe cocked his head and squinted at Father. “I’m getting worried about you now, Gepetto. You’re talking too fast to be joking and I know you’re not drunk. I’m afraid you’ve become deranged. You must explain how I can make you a father or I’ll have to call Doctor Luca.”

“I’m sorry, Giuseppe. My tongue has run ahead of my thoughts; but I’m entirely sane, perfectly serious, and deliriously happy. You *can* make me a father, Giuseppe, only you. Listen, I’ll explain.”

“This is bound to be interesting. Proceed.”

“I’ll carve a wooden boy to be a son to me. I’ll make him hollow. You’ll fill him with gears and levers and whatnot to make him walk and talk and blink and cough and do all the things real boys do. You’ll fit him out with a mainspring, and I’ll wind him up when he needs it.”

Stopping the torrent of words only to breathe, Father went on. “I know my boy will never grow up, but he’ll be happier that way. He’ll escape the sorrows that come with age, sorrows you and I know well enough. In fact, he’ll escape death itself: After I’m gone someone else can wind him up. Well, what do you think?”

Giuseppe sat silently for a long time, his brow furrowed in thought. Father waited patiently, his face radiating a serene confidence that Giuseppe could and would do what he asked. When Giuseppe finally replied, he spoke slowly and gravely.

“Gepetto, I could do it. But do you know what you would be getting into? A wooden puppet that can walk and talk and do the things real boys do could bring you more sorrow than happiness. Children don’t always make their parents proud; sometimes they bring them grief. Talk to the Martinis about their wayward Giovanni or the Respighis about their unfortunate Domenico. They’ve had their troubles! You don’t have the energy you had at twenty-five to

discipline a woodenheaded son. Maybe you ought to think about this some more.”

“No, I’ve been through all that in my mind. I want a boy of my own even if he turns out as lazy as Giovanni Martini or as stupid as Domenico Respighi. I will still love him. I want a boy of my own to *love*, Giuseppe. Do you understand?”

“I think so. In a way I too would be the boy’s father, for we would share the joy of creating him. I would rejoice with you if he were a good boy; I would feel the same pain if he were bad. A part of me would be in him. Yes, I think I understand how you feel.”

Giuseppe stopped talking and thought for a long time. Just as the silence was beginning to make Father uneasy, his friend stood up and grasped his hand.

“Very well. I agree to make you a father. You carve yourself a son just the way you want him on the outside and hollow him out. I’ll take care of the works inside. We’re in this together, for better or worse.”

“Giuseppe, you’ve made me the happiest man in the village,” responded Father.

“Old friend, let’s hope so.”