

LANI IRWIN

Intolerable Absence, 2016

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TOM BENTLEY

The Dolls

“They’re Bulgarian, right?”

My hand was poised to knock, but I dropped it and looked at Cal. “Yeah. No. They might be Yugoslavian. Can’t remember.” I looked around the door and peered into the window, but that was pointless, because the summer sun was blasting it with light that knifed into my eyes, and the heavy drapes were pulled tight. “You know, one of those old Commie countries. Some Slavic thing.” I snapped my hand through the air and said, “Maybe they’re Transylvanian—what difference does it make?”

“Well, we might at least understand where they’re from,” Cal said. “Maybe they’ll lower the rent if we’re friendly.”

I waved my hand again and said, “C’mon, these guys might as well be from the moon. And the way Mrs. Pokorny goes over the rent checks to make sure every digit is in place, there’s no chance she’ll drop the rent. Man, she could smear the ink by the way she eyeballs every letter.” I knocked and took a deep breath.

Though I couldn’t hear anything, I imagined Mrs. Pokorny scuttling to the door. She’s probably the only person I’d ever describe using the word *scuttles*. She’s apple-doll-like, tiny, the gray hair always tight in a bun, always some kind of faded print housedress. This was the fourth time we’d brought the check—the terrors of the U.S. mail were overwhelming to her—and she usually stood at the door going over it like it was a breaking news bulletin before shooing us off.

This time was different. “Calvin and Richard. Please come.” She swung the door wide and shook her arm toward the room. I thought it was a pretty small house from the outside, but the living room was large, though with a low ceiling. In the dim light, I could see lots of dully glinting tapestry-like hangings on the walls. A giant, tarnished samovar was on a deep mantle over a fireplace. The furniture, heavy with dark wood and bulging cushions, looked like pieces from a museum. The place smelled, like what? Old blankets, maybe.

“Tea. You will have tea.” She moved out of the room like a quick crab. Cal walked up to one of those secretary desks that have a pull-down cover and rows of slots for papers and envelopes. It was scarred and dirty. “Man, look at this desk—it must be two hundred years old!” he

said. I sat on a squat purple ottoman that looked like a bad bruise.

Mrs. Pokorny walked in carrying a large porcelain teapot on a smudged silver salver. The china teacups were tiny and almost translucent, with faded scenes of men on horseback and jagged mountains. No milk or sugar. She set the tray on a heavy-legged table next to a tall cabinet filled with crystal glassware. “Tea,” she said.

We walked up to the table and looked at the cups. I picked one up and clutched its bowl in the palm of my hand, with my other hand holding its delicate handle, afraid that it would shatter at my touch. I notice that Cal held his that way too.

Cal looked around the room again. “Well. Mrs. Pokorny, thank you! This is a very beautiful house.” He looked all around, avoiding her face.

“Yeah,” I said. “Tea’s great. Um, we really can’t stay too long.” Neither of us had taken a sip; the tea was lukewarm, the color of a damp gray rag.

“You like the tea? Mr. Pokorny, I make tea, he won’t drink.” She looked down at her cup. “The dolls, they make him not drink.”

I thought maybe she’d said *dulls* and that he thought that tea was boring. Which it is. But I asked. “The dulls? What do you mean?”

She looked up, eyes bright. “Yes, the dolls! We have tea, but Mr. Pokorny doesn’t like.”

“Oh, the dolls!” I said. “Dolls? What do you mean?”

She popped up like a spring, and I almost dropped my cup. Since she had become our landlady four months ago, I’d tried not to look at her too closely—something about her unsettled me—but I figured she was between seventy and a hundred, give or take five years. But she’d just jumped up like a baby kangaroo.

“Yes, the dolls! Richard and Calvin, you will see the dolls! They have had tea; now they sleep.”

She set her teacup on the big table and moved toward a dark hall, gesturing for us to follow. I said, “Hey, Mrs.—” but Cal waved me off and pointed down the hall. I didn’t know he had a thing for dolls.

She turned right into a kitchen that had the most massive, ancient stove I’d ever seen—it looked like it could have been from a fortress, but it had gas burners. The refrigerator was a mere twenty-five years old or so. She pulled

at a tall, narrow door on the far side of the kitchen, leaned in, and yanked on a string, which illuminated, poorly, a narrow set of stairs down into a basement.

Now I’ve seen my share of horror films. This is the part where the crazy landlady leads us into a dank chamber and chainsaws us to death. I wasn’t enthused. But Cal, bless him, was going to sacrifice himself. He followed Mrs. Pokorny down, while I peered from above. I didn’t hear any chainsaws, but did hear Cal say, “Wow!”

“Wow, what? Are you okay?”

“You gotta come down, Rick, it’s incredible.”

He was right. The basement was set up like a bedroom, but filled with miniature furniture, except for an old, king-size bed and some dim floor lamps. There were a couple of tiny tables, some tiny overstuffed chairs, tiny bookcases, all of the old, heavy wood like upstairs. Oh, a couple of big things: candles on big brass stands on either side of the bed, both lit.

But it wasn’t the furniture that was the strange part. It was what was on it: dolls on everything, sitting on the chairs, at the tables, leaning against the bookcases, lining every shelf. And not your plastic Barbies here. These were weirdly realistic dolls, intricately clothed, scarves, gloves, leather shoes, and big, open faces with glittery eyes.

But the things that actually made my stomach jump were the ones on the bed. A couple, a boy and a girl, maybe they were supposed to be ten or eleven, child-sized, dressed in formal old clothes that no American kid would ever wear, except on Halloween. They looked liked they’d been embalmed. They were sitting up against giant gray pillows, legs out, with a silver salver between them like the one Mrs. Pokorny had served us with. Same cups, both with gray tea in them.

The tea sets for the smaller dolls at the two tables were china, but they were toy-sized. I looked at the big boy doll’s hands—it looked like he had real fingernails, but I didn’t want to get up close to really see. I only glanced at his moon face.

“The dolls. And tea. These all German, some French. You say it *bisque*, yes? These bisque dolls. Porcelain. Very old. They enjoy the tea. Then sleep.” She shook her head and grimaced. “Not like Mr. Pokorny. Sometimes I give him the sleeping pills. He has no good sleep.”

She gestured around the whole room, her face alight.

It sounded like she said *biss-cue*, but I looked it up later: *bisque*, a kind of porcelain used for dolls from the nineteenth century. But that didn’t matter. What mattered was that this was one of the stranger sights I’d seen, and I’d seen enough.

“Mrs. Pokorny,” I said, “Great dolls, really, but we both have to get going. We both have appointments, at our, uh, at our optometrists. We can’t miss them.”

It was only when I was back in the kitchen that I realized that the air down there was sour, a kind of musty, gassy smell. I hadn’t seen any windows. We gave her some quick goodbyes and did our own quick crab walks to the door.

Hustling down the sidewalk, Cal said, “Man, that was great. But pretty weird.”

“Pretty weird? That was like the keys-to-the-asylum weird! The eyes on those dolls—ugh! I couldn’t wait to get out of there. She’s stranger than I thought.”

“Yeah, but still. That was really different. No adults I know have anything like that in their basements. Hey, most adults I know don’t even have basements.”

I shook my head. “Just keep ’em in the basement. And keep them away from me,” I said.

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The next month, on the porch again with the check. Cal had convinced me to come with him, but I’d convinced him I wasn’t going in that house. Mr. Pokorny answered the door this time. He reached his hand around the screen for the check, glanced at it, and said, “Thank you, boys,” and he started to close the door.

“Thank you, Mr. Pokorny,” said Cal. “And thank Mrs. Pokorny again for the tea, and for showing us the dolls.”

“The dolls?” he said. “She showed you foolish dolls?” He also pronounced it as *dulls*, but he pronounced it much louder. He pushed the screen door open and took one step onto the crowded porch with us. Mr. Pokorny was half a foot shorter than either of us, but stocky. Every time I’d seen him he was dressed in the same old gray suit, with an old black tie.

“So, the dolls she showed you? With the tea?” He flung both his hands up so they bookcased his head, and then he wiped them on his suit like they were sweaty.

“Yeah, well, we saw them for just a minute. She gave us some tea and that brought up the dolls, kind of,” said Cal.

Mr. Pokorny held up his finger in front of Cal’s face, while I backed away on the porch as far as I could, which wasn’t very far.

“No, no more dolls. The money, the hours with the tea. The clothings. She no more dolls!” He turned like he was on a swiveling board, whipped open the screen door, and plunged into the house, slamming the door behind.

I walked to the sidewalk, but I could hear Cal in back of me. “Wow, he seemed pretty pissed. I wonder what he’s got against those dolls?”

I stopped and turned around, causing Cal to almost fall over, he was so close behind. “What he’s got against them? Cal, the doll dungeon is a nightmare! She’s probably been collecting those things for sixty years. I’m amazed he hasn’t buried them while she was out shopping.” I turned away from Cal and headed back up the sidewalk. “I’m with him,” I said. “If I lived there, it would either be the dolls or me.”

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Before I even told Cal I wasn’t going to go over with this month’s check, he told me that if I’d go, he’d buy me one of these giant ice cream sundaes they have at this place up the block from us. I love ice cream.

“Yeah, okay, but we aren’t going in. I swear if either of them invites us in, I will actually run away. I’m not kidding.”

“Sure, whatever. You don’t have to be so uptight. They’re just a strange old couple,” he said.

“Oh, you’re right about that,” I said. “Except drop the *just*. They are flat-out strange.”

When we got to the house, I hung back while Cal knocked. Nobody answered.

“Good,” I said. “Slip it under the door and let’s go.”

“God, give ’em a chance!” He knocked again, louder. He bent down to slip the check under the door, but then quickly drew back. “Do you smell that? It’s gas!”

I stepped around him and leaned toward the door. “Oh hell!” I said. I looked around. “Maybe we could go to a neighbor’s and call the cops or the gas company or something.”

“Yeah, but what if they’re *in* there! What if they need help?” He turned the door handle and pushed. The door opened, and the smell of gas was strong. “I’m going in!”

I grabbed his arm and held him back. “Cal, Cal, this

is *dangerous*.” I pulled him around by his shoulders and looked in his face. “Okay, we can run in for a second and look around, but hold your breath. Don’t breathe at all. Whatever’s in there, we’ll come right back out.”

He nodded and ran into the living room, me behind. Nothing in the big living room. Down the hall to the kitchen. Even though I was holding my breath, I gulped a little and smelled the gas. Heavy.

Cal pointed at the hose, which led from the back of the giant stove down into the basement. The basement door was wedged over the bent hose, so that it was open a couple of inches. He threw open the door and we almost ran down the narrow stairs.

We might have been in the room for fifteen seconds, maybe less, but what I saw will be with me forever. Mr. and Mrs. Pokorny were on the giant bed, lying against the pillows. Between them were the big boy and girl dolls. The boy doll was wearing an old gray suit and black tie. The girl doll had her hair up in a bun, and she was wearing a faded-print housedress. Everyone’s eyes on the bed were wide open, staring.

There was tea in all the cups on the little tables. On the bed, on the old salver, there were four cups. Mrs. Pokorny must have poured the tea right before she assumed her position next to the girl doll. Their cups were two-thirds full, undisturbed and waiting.

Before running back upstairs, I looked closely at Mrs. Pokorny. It was the first time I’d seen her smiling.

LANI IRWIN

Secrets Among Siblings, 2016

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