

## The Doll Family

Forbidden to wander their city neighborhood, where their parents said they might be beaten or kidnapped or chopped into tiny pieces, the three girls had no one to play with but each other. Brown-haired and plump, they were stuck together, day in, day out. Carmen, eight years old and the eldest, was bossy; the middle sister, Alice, placid; and the youngest, Bella, boisterous and loud—but those who didn't know the girls well might not be able to tell them apart. They were like bees in a hive, birds in a nest, a set of teacups.

The dollhouse was two levels, with a pitched roof, each room wallpapered, intricately furnished with rugs and framed pictures and candlesticks and even miniature bowls of fruit. The childless neighbors who'd built and decorated the dollhouse, a man and woman, accepted small glasses of brandy from the father, observed the three girls as they tentatively touched the tiny beds, the teeny rocking chair that really rocked. Then, unsmiling, they stood and said they must be getting home. "Say thank you," said their mother to the girls.

As soon as the grown-ups left, Carmen moved the dollhouse toilet into the dollhouse kitchen. Alice, who liked to climb, balanced the velveteen sofa and the dining room set

on the roof, and Bella gnawed at the miniature bowl of red apples, which were shiny and looked delicious but tasted bitter. By the time the three sisters had finished rearranging the furniture, the dining chairs had snapped to pieces, and the braid rug in the living room, reluctant to give up its position, tore and left threads and a yellowish lump of glue behind.

The girls were disappointed in the dolls that had come with the dollhouse—a family molded of rubbery plastic that included their hair and clothes, which meant the father doll had to sleep in his suit and the children to bathe in their school clothes. The mother’s apron never came off, nor did her shoes. Imagine, never being naked or barefoot. And imagine their poo and pee. The girls laughed at how disgusting the dolls probably were under their plastic clothes. They tried putting other dolls in the dollhouse, but they were too large. Barbie lay on the floor, too tall to stand up, too big to fit on any of the furniture. She scared the dollhouse family, who ripped off her head and stewed it for dinner.

The girls’ parents, thin and glamorous with coarse, flyaway hair, had no idea what their children were up to—they were too busy arguing quietly behind their locked bedroom door. The doll parents fought, too, but differently, kicking, slapping, jumping up and down on one another, shouting, “I’ve had it up to here!” But sometimes they were almost the same as the real parents. The doll mother would hum, like their own mother did, “I’m gonna wash that man right out of my hair.” The doll father lit a pipe made from a stolen match and went, “hmm,” as the flame flared up and melted his nose.

One Sunday, the family went for a drive out of the city and along the coastal highway. Their father stopped the car at a lookout. “Don’t go too close to the edge,” he said. Their mother grabbed their arms, cried out, “Watch out!

You'll kill yourselves!" None of them fell off the cliff that day, though later the dollhouse parents climbed to the roof of the dollhouse and jumped off. They were driven to it by the stress of having such awful children; couldn't wait to be dead. They jumped off the roof hundreds of times, always with the same result: dying, springing to life again. The dolls did other terrible, exciting things and had terrible, exciting things done to them—drownings, car accidents, poisonings—every terrible thing their parents warned them about.

How happy the three girls were playing with the dollhouse.

Then the girls' father became ill. He went to the hospital, came home. He lived in his pajamas and bathrobe, only one outfit, just like the dolls. The sisters were no longer allowed to roughhouse or jump around with him; his bones were too delicate. Bella tried and was punished, sent alone to the girls' bedroom. When she was let out again, she was a different person altogether—nervous, her dimples vanished. Even Alice was drifting away, too quiet, sailing alone on a boat in the middle of the ocean.

Instead of angrily hummed songs, the refrain from their mother was now, "We can't afford it." She kept the house dim so as not to waste electricity and the girls were made to take their baths all together once a week so as not to waste water. No more ballet lessons; no more ice cream or doughnuts on Sunday. The shoes that pinched and the shabby dresses must be worn just a little longer.

Carmen lay awake, certain she was to blame, because she was, as their mother so often said, the ringleader. She had a sick feeling that being mean to the dolls had caused their father's illness. Hadn't it started just after the dolls' arrival? She wanted to give them back, but the childless neighbors had moved away.

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To make amends, she created a bed out of a wool scarf for the doll family at the foot of her bed: the father with the melted nose, the mother whose apron they'd scribbled black with a felt-tip pen, the boy who had a crack in his leg, and the girl with little nicks all over her face. "Be safe," she said to them. She promised to take good care of them from now on.

In the morning, when she woke, the dolls were gone. Carmen searched under her bed. No luck. Maybe it was for the best that the dolls had vanished, but Carmen had the opposite feeling—that their disappearance meant disaster. She shook Bella and Alice awake. "What did you do with them?" Her sisters yawned, looking puzzled. She asked her mother, who stared at her blankly, as if she didn't know and didn't care.

Growing frantic, Carmen searched the apartment, the kitchen cupboards, the laundry hamper, the five chests of drawers, the fridge, even the trash can.

When their mother went out to get groceries, she even asked her father, whom they'd been told to let rest. He was lying on the couch in his wool bathrobe and drew his long, bony feet up to make room for her to sit. "What are you talking about?" he asked.

"The doll family," Carmen whispered.

"Eh, what?" He patted his pockets and drew out the mother doll. "You mean this?" There were more lumps in his pockets, the missing dolls.

Immediately, she suspected Alice or Bella, maybe both.

"A little bird brought them," her father said, winking. He walked the dolls across his flat belly and up the peak of his bent legs. "This man, Joe, is a hot air balloon operator. That was how he saved everyone in his family when the volcano exploded."

Carmen wanted to tell him that this was not how it had been with the dolls, but her father kept talking, wouldn't let

her interrupt. He showed her how the father doll parachuted from the top of the mountain down to the beach on the other side. And how, when the mother doll jumped, she was caught by the father doll with superhuman strength. The boy doll jumped and landed with a splash. The girl doll jumped, using her skirt as a parachute. The doll family had a picnic on the beach of Carmen's blue nightgown. They ate fish straight from the ocean and sand dollar cookies.

Alice and Bella had gathered around the couch by now, and Carmen, angry, wanted to swat them away, wanted her father and his stories all to herself for once. The front door opened, and their mother walked in. Suddenly, he looked tired and pale. "Go on now," he said, "go and play."

The girls did what he said and did their best to be kind to the battered dolls, though they found it kind of boring.

After their father died, they hugged their mother as she wept into her pillows, hugged her as tight as they could and stroked her feet. Then they went and fed the doll family to the garbage disposal, using plenty of running water to swirl the ground bits away. The dollhouse was harder to destroy. They tore the sandpaper off the roof and peeled the wallpaper in strips from the walls. They smashed the tiny furniture by sitting on it, poked holes in the cellophane windows.

Into this ruin, they put their troll dolls, with their crazy cotton-candy hair, arms outstretched, bulbous glass eyes open wide, stark naked except for wedding veils of Kleenex. When the trolls began their wicked dance, the three girls followed, not through the window or into the garbage disposal, but out the front door, into the forbidden neighborhood, with its car alarms and dark alleys, its broken glass and tattered plastic bags—the worst had already happened, and there was no longer any need to be afraid.