



# THE DOLLHOUSE

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I

**E**veryone was more than mildly surprised when the dollhouse appeared. It came on wheels and was set on your front lawn, crushing the grass beneath. Two stories high, the dollhouse was clearly made for a real-life princess, painted teal with white trimmings, its Victorian windows furnished with eyelet lace curtains. Esther described it as a palace complete with furniture, throw pillows, and even a faux-kitchenette used to serve Kool-aid as tea. The upstairs functioned as a playroom where your daughter would turn off the lights and lie on the carpet, making wishes on the ceiling's glow-in-the-dark stars.



After the dollhouse arrived, who in our cul-de-sac neighborhood couldn't be jealous? True, my daughter Esther had a dollhouse, but it was only half her size, and her arm barely fit through the front door. Even the ladies living in the circle expressed annoyance. Maybe they remembered their childhood: days spent forcing Barbie and Kelly into tight-fitting, outdated outfits when they couldn't have the new elusive doll couture. Maybe they felt dissatisfied with your parenting despite how much they spoiled their own children. But I can't even begin to realize how much you dealt with, how much you suffered when everyone else laughed, or how much you cried into Evelyn's silky hair.

The ringleader of the gossip, I'm afraid to admit, was your confidante Bianca. Though Bianca Rousseau never completely understood the secret you tried to conceal, she had her suspicions, suspicions she passed on to the rest of us. Whether it was the odd smell emanating from your house or simply the actions of your peculiar child, Bianca informed us with reasons why we should avoid crossing your path.

From years of experience, we both know the hell of living in our neighborhood. Even our children are trapped within the limits of the cul-de-sac, forbidden to ever play anywhere or with anyone outside the circle. And people talk, talk themselves in circles, talking about you, your family, your house, and the dollhouse that stands in the middle of the neighborhood, an island surrounded by asphalt.

Not only must it have been difficult for you, but I imagine this experience has also strained Evelyn. She usually plays alone, wrapped up in the world inside her tiny castle, not bothering anyone. Instead of social interaction, Evelyn sustains herself on a diet entirely of your love.

I am the only one in the cul-de-sac that knows, and I am still mystified by your strength, your willpower, and how utterly remarkable a child Evelyn continues to be.

## II

I'd never met Evelyn before, nor had I ever seen her in person. Somehow she always lingered inside the dollhouse, behind the curtains, staying hidden from my eyes though she used to play with Esther. Perhaps there was a sort of jinx on us; maybe we weren't allowed to meet for reasons of fate, if you believe in it. Still, I saw a vague picture of Evelyn through a mosaic of accounts from Esther, Bianca, other neighbors, and you. But if it weren't for Esther, and perhaps Esther's near-death, I might have never discovered your secret.

Esther frequently expressed her frustration with Evelyn. Seeing herself as the girl who got too little, she returned from sessions at the dollhouse incensed at how Evelyn received everything

she wanted, from dolls to dresses to angel food cakes. Oh, I'm certain my daughter is spoiled to an extent, as a middle-class American child is in comparison to a starving youth in India. Esther receives rewards now and then, not including birthdays and Christmastime, and I don't withhold anything she has earned or deserved. But I will not give Esther the world.

However, my rules seem entirely unfair to Esther. She resists my embraces and regurgitates undigested meals into my lap. She knows that when I run the bath water it isn't for me, since I normally take showers. With that knowledge, she then flees into hiding, and by the time I find her, the water has become cold. It is easier to bathe our cat than to bathe Esther. Do you have experiences like mine?

The only person who seems able to melt my daughter's frigidity is our baby sitter. When he arrives Esther suddenly is amiable, causing me to feel like a stranger oblivious to the inside-jokes of two best friends, an alien in my own home. Exactly what am I paying him for? I've considered switching baby sitters, but perhaps such an act would be vengeful. Besides, Esther is safe and happy with him. It has been difficult recently to acquire a baby sitter since many young parents these days fight over the city's shortage of bored, poor teenagers.

Possibly, Esther is going through a "stage." I know she cares for me deeply, as I for her. On the opening day of first grade I escorted Esther to school, which is only up the hill and across the street outside of the cul-de-sac. The journey was very short and safe, with fifth grade crossing guards clad in bright orange to facilitate traffic on an already slow street. But on the following day I left her outside, waving goodbye. As I watched from the window, Esther took two steps and swiftly retreated. After finding the door locked, she paraded in front of the window, red-faced and screaming for me to escort her. Again, I waved cheerfully goodbye. Eventually, she wiped her face on her jacket and plodded on to school.

Have you had experiences like these? I cannot imagine my life differently, a life like yours.

### III

Maybe if I had been raised in the same way I am raising Esther, I'd feel otherwise. Maybe I fail to understand how it feels to desperately want a toy. In a way, Evelyn and I are similar.

My parents were affluent enough to buy their only child a new doll every Sunday after church. Playmates resented my extensive collection of toys, books, dolls, and other various amusements. You might expect my "friends" to use me for my things, but instead of playing with me they gradually disappeared from my presence, playing ball in the field and failing to invite me.

Something inexplicably strange happened to me when I was five. For over a year my parents

paid my baby sitter, Jim, to be my guardian. I vaguely recall his smiles at my dribbly, Pollock-like finger paintings. *That's neat*, he'd say, doodling on the cover of a notebook. He also said a lot of things I didn't understand. One winter, Jim even traveled with my family to a ski resort where he pulled my sled around so fast I fishtailed, where we blew bubbles in the hot tub, and where he reluctantly wiped my bottom after I finished business in the bathroom. I'm not sure how much he mattered to me, but remembering him twenty-six years later, he must have meant more than a Popsicle on a hot sticky day or a few rounds of hide-and-go-seek.

Not long after my family returned from the mountains, Jim shot himself. My father helped the grieving family clean the bloody brains from the walls. But I had no tears. I sensed the feeling of shock in those around me, yet I could only sit and wonder who my replacement baby sitter would be. At the funeral, my mother gave me a doll to play with on the floor between the pews. Still, my eyes grew heavy from the weight of the eulogy, and I napped until the ceremony's end, catching phrases that hinted of Jim's reasons for suicide, such as "declined marriage proposal." *He was twenty years old and still had a baby face*, the pastor said.

Was I supposed to grieve? Should I grieve now, as I wasn't able to do at age five? I lie on my bed, wrinkling my forehead in the blankets, trying to cry, but no tears escape. Only guilt surrounds me.

This may seem beside the point, but I ask you to trust me. It will matter in the end. Both Evelyn and I misunderstand something very important.

#### IV

You remember when things in the cul-de-sac started to go wrong. Evelyn must recall the morning she found her dollhouse in disarray, left as a present from neighborhood vandals. From what Esther told me, couches and carpet were ripped and soiled from knives and footprints. In the next few days, I noticed an unmarked blue van unloading replacement upholstery.

But I wasn't the only one watching. Bianca leaned over painted fences to whisper evil to the neighbors, and eventually I was reached with the baffling and astounding news: the cul-de-sac was no longer safe. The bubble had burst.

Parents no longer let their children play outdoors unsupervised. Already many of us felt queasy since a girl was kidnapped in a nearby town as she performed somersaults on the front lawn. When the parents were busy, the children simply stayed inside. Bicycles stood untouched in the garage; jump ropes were left unjumped. One afternoon a few kids escaped the house to play a rough game of tag and were consequently grounded. My next-door neighbor, Celeste, did not blame the

grounding on the lack of safety in the cul-de-sac, for everyone now tried to avoid the subject. No one needed to voice their fears, as it could already be smelled in the air, penetrating the door cracks and into their homes. Instead, Celeste told me she'd witnessed enough near collisions. She thought that tag and other chase games ought to be banned from schools outright.

You can't blame me for feeling the same. I'd let Esther out to feed the cat, but other than that I tried to direct her attentions indoors. When she couldn't be contained, I put her in the backseat and drove her to the beach where we collected broken seashells and took them home in a plastic bag along with bits of sand.

But the smell was unavoidable. Though subtle, it was unmistakable. When I came near, your home suddenly felt as if I was in a drugstore, tasting the powdery essence of pharmacy.

One evening, my husband Paul and I decided to go out. However, Esther's usual baby sitter was taking his girlfriend to the drive-in and other sitters made themselves unavailable. So I walked to your house in the dusk to see if you would watch over another doll for a night.

For the first time, I closely observed the dollhouse, the epitome of a girlhood fantasy. I felt its allure, my eyes following the graceful lines of camellias on the wallpaper and the mini dining table's white crochet centerpiece. I suppressed the urge to be a girl again, to buckle my mary janes on the side of my ankles and suck on the split end of my hair.

I knocked on the door and you invited me in. The Langley house reflected a larger version of the dollhouse, but your house was far messier. Strewn all over the floors, stairs, and couches were Evelyn's dolls, ruffled skirts, strings of pink and turquoise pearls, plastic princess crowns and accompanying "glass" slippers. So this is how we raise our daughters. *God save the Lolita*. Is that all we ever wanted them to be?

As you led me to the living rooms, I half expected a ghost. Scattered throughout the house were Evelyn's various shells, like an abandoned snakeskin. But the princess was missing. You told me she was in the bath. I looked up the stairs and saw a door cracked open, leaking hot steam, fogging the family portraits hanging on the walls.

## V

So it was that Esther would spend an evening at the Langleys' house until Paul and I returned. In her pajamas, I left her at your house with my phone number should anything go wrong.

That evening, Paul and I had dinner and then attended the opening of an art exhibit. The gallery primarily featured the obscure works of Alphonse Mucha. I spent a few moments on the panel of *The Moon*, a portrait of a girl wrapped in an indigo dress printed with stars. Her hand

covered her mouth as if she held back a secret. Perhaps she stifled a wish she had made on one of those stars.

An art nouveau auction ensued, its bidders consisting of the *nouveau riche*. The item in question was a portrait of a girl, *Jaroslava*, lithe and ethereal in white backlighting. As the auctioneer raised his arm to point to a detail, he accidentally let his elbow graze the canvas, opening a dime-sized hole in the painting. Who'd have known she'd be so delicate?

In the crowd's pandemonium, we decided to leave. I picked up my purse at coat-check. Then I glanced at my phone, which recorded a whopping twelve missed calls, all from the Langley house.

The rest of the night is imprinted in my memory as a blur of shaky, frenzied images. I know you tried to contact me and I don't blame you directly for what happened. When I arrived at the hospital, Esther's stomach had already been pumped of an assortment of pills: *daunorubicin*, *cytarabine*, *idarubicin*, *thioguanine*, and *etoposide*.

But I didn't understand exactly how these drugs found their way into Esther. After the incident, Esther told me she had been playing house with Evelyn, and that after "dinner" Evelyn offered her several after-dinner "mints." I didn't understand why daunoruby-whatsit and thyogvano-something would simply be lying around for a six-year-old's access, regardless of what the medication was.

So I was very angry with you. But we had been neighbors for a long time, since our daughters were born, and I never planned to litigate. Though she probably wouldn't have gone near it anyway, I kept Esther away from your house, away from Evelyn.

I would have tried to keep the neighbors from hearing of the incident. However, a receptionist at the hospital named Bianca informed everyone who had ears in the cul-de-sac of that night's events. If your family was avoided before, people now went completely out of their way to keep their children from Evelyn and the dollhouse. Esther and the other kids played elsewhere—in fenced backyards under constant supervision, under the undulating heat of the summer. But Evelyn was completely alone.

I can't pretend it didn't bother me—I still had never met the child whom every parent talked about, the child who seemingly had everything, the child who almost killed my daughter.

## VI

That July, a comet came into our solar neighborhood. Esther begged and begged me to take her to your house, since yours was the only family in the neighborhood who possessed a telescope.

Paul and I took Esther to your house to see beyond the stars, though I actually thought more

of Evelyn than of fast-moving chunks of intergalactic ice. As you helped Esther and Paul set up the lens, I waited on the lawn, noticing the dim light of a lantern inside the dollhouse.

I knocked and Evelyn answered the door, dressed in an apron. She had olive skin and sharp, black eyes that matched the hue of her unusually shiny hair. A brief exchange of strange understanding passed between us. I felt as if I already knew her because of my rearing as an only child, and she seemed to feel as if she knew me since she imitated the role of a wife and mother in the dollhouse. I felt as if something had broken, like the jinx of fate had vanished now that I finally had the chance to meet her.

“Why aren’t you watching the comet tonight?” I asked.

“I’m busy feeding the children,” she replied. “Would you like to join me for a cup of tea?”

I accepted, and entered the dollhouse by stooping my head low and sliding in sideways through the very petite front door. She served me tea, or some sort of mysterious sticky brown substance that I pretended to drink. She politely asked me how “the child” was doing, referring to Esther.

“She’s doing well. Paul and Esther are outside, watching the comet and shooting stars, making plenty of wishes,” I said. “Do you have any wishes you’d like to make?”

“Oh,” she said, cocking her head. “I make tons of wishes. But not on stars. I tell them to mom and she tells the people who grant them.”

“Was the dollhouse a wish of yours?” I asked.

She nodded.

I frowned. “You know, you’re not supposed to tell anyone after you make a wish. It’s supposed to be a secret.” And then I froze, dropping my cup of tea.

It appeared as if Evelyn had been playing in the dollhouse most of the day, and though she expressed no weariness, her appearance certainly did. Her apron was stained, her nails were bitten. But what struck me as exceedingly odd was her receding hairline—her hair seemed to be slipping off the top of her head.

“Evelyn,” I put my hand on her shoulder. “Is your hair real?”

She stared blankly at me, confused. From the tone of my voice, she understood its seriousness.

Then she took her scalp with her fingers and removed her wig, leaving a white, smooth baldness. I touched her head and wetted her shoulder with my eyes. I cried not only for Evelyn but also for Jim since I hadn’t the chance to cry like I wanted to cry and grieve like I wanted to grieve. Back then I didn’t understand—but now it hurts all the same.

“What are you doing?” She blinked. “Momma always does this to me. I don’t even know you,

and you are doing it too.”

She didn't understand, and I couldn't believe it. She didn't understand. While she realized the importance of the “after-dinner mints,” she doesn't know what will happen to her in the end. And I don't know whether or not I should be relieved or sorrier for her.

I didn't tell anyone what I found out that night. Lauren Langley, if there's any wish I can grant, it's letting you know there is someone in the circle who cares. We can make wishes, but none of them really solve anything. Sometimes they make us happy temporarily, a kind of high, or make others angry or jealous. Sometimes they even confuse us. But ultimately all the people we love and cherish someday will die, and it hurts all the same, so I can't help crying. It isn't a miserable crying though, because once I have cleaned my face and the redness disappears, I feel like driving around the cul-de-sac myself.

So I drive around, watching the dollhouse, its blurred blueness goes past my window and reappears again like a flower.

