

## LIVING DOLLS

Diana Dfáz

*2022 Summer Institute Creative Writing Workshop Participant*

**My mother** planned to kill us during the summer of my tenth birthday. She had begun to suspect that Dad had a drinking problem, and she felt betrayed. To punish him, she decided to fling herself from the tenth-floor bedroom window while he was at work, so that he would run into the gruesome scene on his way home at midnight. But it occurred to her that if she killed herself, Dad would be left to raise us, so that's when she decided to kill us as well. "I was gonna take the gates off the window, wake you up and tell you to look at something pretty happening outside. When you leaned forward, I was gonna push you out. The other kids, I could just carry and throw. When I was sure everyone was dead, that's when I was going to jump." Detaching the child safety gates proved to be more difficult than she had expected, and as she struggled with the screwdriver, Dad arrived at home and asked her what she was doing. She said she wanted to be able to open the window wider because it was hot. She told me this last year through tears as we were still mourning my father, who had just died that April.

My sister was seven and my brother was five at the time of her failed attempt, and we were all unaware of mom's machinations. What I do remember of being ten years old is having to come up with "the most frightening thing that could happen" for a school assignment which, in retrospect, was a terribly insensitive assignment for kids in our Lower East Side impoverished communities. I didn't give the assignment much thought, and instead sat with Dad in the kitchen pondering an extra credit brain-teaser. Without

giving me any answers, he guided my thinking with clues and analogous stories. I physically leapt every time something clicked. And as he smirked in quiet amusement at my fascination with his cleverness, it dawned on me that my worse-case-life-scenario was losing my dad. My hands turned cold and I started trembling. I didn't know it at the time, but that was the first of countless anxiety attacks. The prospect of having to live with only my mother landed in my stomach like something terribly inedible.

My mother always played favorites. Spoiler alert: I was not her favorite. It's not that she didn't love me. She did, and was also very proud of me. It was worse—she didn't like me. She didn't like my bad hair and that I couldn't pronounce “shh” correctly before braces. She didn't like that I cried all the time. She hated that I loved books. If her curled lip didn't tip me off early on, the disdain in her voice did, the same snarl she spoke through when she saw someone not cleaning up after their perro asqueroso on the sidewalk. It was no secret; my aunts, her *sisters*, have apologized to me for her at several points in my life.

It was so contrary to what we're told a mother should feel for her child that I found myself searching for evidence that I was wrong. One day during recess, Geralyn Cortez mused “I love being home when I'm sick,” while passing around a bag of Dipsy Doodles. “My mom makes me soup and tucks me in under extra blankets.” My mother did not try to hide her annoyance at my illness. “You say you're sick, you better stay in bed. I got housework to do.” I slept under a thin sheet until she found she couldn't flip her king-sized mattress alone. She woke me up and ordered me, feverish, out of bed to help her do it. I cried and even though I wasn't looking at her, I knew her lip was curled as she shooed me back to my contagious room, after the task was completed.

I didn't want to confess that I much preferred to come to school, where expectations made sense and I was told I was smart, so I said "mine too" and pushed a corn chip into my mouth. GERALYN'S mom is a nurse, I reasoned. My mom had to quit nursing school because of her heart murmur. That's why she doesn't take out the fat blanket when I'm sick the way Dad will when he gets home. It reminds her that she wasn't allowed to take care of sick people.

No, I couldn't think of a life without Dad. I wouldn't think of it. For the school assignment, I said the worst thing that could possibly happen to me was a nuclear war.

Mom began to believe that Uncle David was right, that Dad did indeed have a drinking problem. And maybe she also couldn't envision a world without him in it. She watched for what she knew were signs: falling down, missing work, reeking of liquor. But as it turned out, Dad was a functioning alcoholic who held down a responsible job at RCA Communications and came straight home every night. He took us to school in the morning and to the park on the weekends. When my brother and sister were playing a game I had outgrown, he taught me morse code and how to tie different knots--skills he acquired in the Army, along with his introduction to alcohol.

It all seemed to work until it didn't. One day, when I was twelve years old, a loan shark came to the door demanding money and threatening to kill my brother. We were shielded from much of the fallout, but Mom gave Dad an ultimatum that night. Fortunately, RCA paid to send Dad to a detox program. My Aunt Lydia took us to visit him often, and during his time at Smither's House, I learned that alcoholism is a disease, that my dad was sick. I noticed my mother's absence from each visit, including the closing ceremony, and wondered how someone who was willing to devote herself to helping

the sick took such pleasure in turning her back on him. Dad came back to us sober and present and the summer of my thirteenth birthday seemed the best ever. We took family outings to movies and restaurants. We went to the beach more often. Dad took me on impromptu walks through Chinatown and Little Italy and I'd come back with a Chinese puzzle or a cannoli. One day Mom came to me as I watched Gidget alone in the bedroom. She said that the family was going out, but just to the park, so if I didn't want to go, I was old enough to stay home by myself until they got back. I chose the solitude of the empty apartment to watch reruns and read Judy Bloom. When they returned, my sister told me they had gone boating in Central Park and when I started tearing from having been left out, Mom said through a saccharine smile, "You said you didn't want to go." It was as if she resented him for recovering and me for being happy about it. That year, she baked a beer cake, knowing that Dad couldn't eat any and that I had given up cake for Lent.

The nuclear family scenario didn't last much beyond summer. She started having affairs with other men, and by the next summer began leaving us for weeks at a time to vacation in the Dominican Republic, which was okay, because "we were all grown." Mom's milestone for "grown" was nine years old. All of the big, family birthday parties stopped for each of us at the age of eight. In fact, she did not acknowledge my ninth birthday and I spent the day staring at the calendar and checking the date against the newspaper. Now, with my brother fast approaching his ninth, she embraced the freedom that came with grown kids. Her lack of focus on me allowed my anxiety attacks to subside, but my sister started showing suicidal tendencies and my brother started being bullied at school. All the more reasons to take her well-deserved vacations. By then, I was menstruating, and like nearly all of the women in my family, it was painful and heavy. "You should see the GYN," Mom suggested. "He'll check you and give you medicine." She gave me a name and

an address and I was able to be seen alone. Although he was kind and gentle, I had no idea what was about to happen, and the insertion of the apparatus was unexpected and painful. When I got home, I asked her why she didn't warn me and she responded through a Grinch-like smile of amusement, "You're not mature enough to talk about that stuff. What did you think was gonna happen?" I could not reconcile the contradiction of being too old to be a child but too immature to have answers about my own body whenever I had asked her prior to seeing the doctor. I watched her smile broaden as she seemed to delight in my pain and confusion, once again in my state of medical need.

When she didn't delight in my pain, she was a keen observer of it. By the time I was ready to give birth to my daughter, I had separated from her biological father. An unsavory character, to put it mildly, I remained attached to him because my mother liked him and I thought that this could be a segue to a better relationship with her. The pregnancy itself was uneventful, but the birth ended in a c-section due to back labor. Mom was with me throughout the whole process.

When I was finally wheeled into the operating room, she insisted on coming with me. The surgeons prepped me and instructed her to stay on my side of the sheet. Midway through the operation, when she saw that all of the doctors were focused, she stepped over and looked at the operation in progress. When she tells the story, she says she got to see my intestines on the table beside me. Not that she witnessed her granddaughter being born, coincidentally, on my father's birthday.

She does love babies though. Baby girls especially. "I hated playing with dolls, but I always wanted children. Ever since I was about nine years old, I wanted a baby. A brown little girl, with a lot of hair. And God gave me my wish. You

came out just like your father.” She always punctuates that last sentence by making okay signs with both hands, even through the arthritis.

She had always been in love with Dad. “He lived in the next building and he used to read by the window. I fell in love when I saw him, and asked mom ‘who is that Indio? I’m going to marry him!’ My mother yelled at me because I was only nine years old and I wasn’t supposed to be thinking about those things.” Here she giggles, the only time she ever does. “I used to send him love notes on the clothesline that connected our buildings, you know how they had in El Barrio. I didn’t think about the fact that we were on different floors, so he never got them. He didn’t pay any attention to me.” Dad left for the Army soon thereafter, and she thought about where in the world he might be and if he were ever coming back. When he did, he was unknowingly addicted to alcohol and she was eighteen and stunning. “And my mother couldn’t tell me anything anymore.”

She had four children with her Indio. The first pregnancy ended with the premature birth of my brother induced by a panic attack when a dog started barking at her suddenly. The baby miraculously lived for three minutes, born after barely four months in the womb. After that, she was under anesthesia for our births, because, according to the doctors, her heart wouldn’t be able to take much stress.

I remember her happiest when I was four, my sister was almost two, and she was pregnant with my brother. Dad was doing well at RCA, and when he came home with a state-of-the-art stereo system, Mom turned the enormous box into a dollhouse for us. She drew windows with curtains, pots of rice on a stove, and flowery wallpaper in the bedroom. For a while, we were her real-life dolls, and she dressed us accordingly in immaculate matching outfits and

labored over our hair each morning. She guarded us fiercely against all threats, both real and imagined, and held our hands tightly several yards before we approached a curb. Yes, she loved her baby girls.

I think it's the unspoiled innocence. Because of her heart murmur, she had lots of doctor's appointments as a child. She was nine years old when she was first molested by her cardiologist. He would drug her before the examination, wait a while, then return for her, instructing Grandma to stay in the waiting room. The drugs would kick in on the way up in the elevator, and Mom would feel herself slipping in and out of consciousness as he rubbed against her from behind. This happened once a month. Eventually, she got to see a new doctor, a young red-head, she told me. She liked this one, and the nurse was always friendly to her. When she was twelve years old, he came into the examining room with two of his colleagues. He bent her over, fondled her, and broke her hymen with his fingers. Afterwards, he let her know that no matter whom she told, his friends would back him up. And besides, if she dared to say anything, they would kill her mother. They left, and the nurse came back into the room. She saw the blood and asked what had happened. "I got my period," my mother lied. "That doesn't look like period blood, and you didn't have it when I prepped you ten minutes ago."

All mom could think was "that was only ten minutes?" Maybe there is something in the weakness of being ill that she blames for other people's cruelty. Maybe she's been trying to spare us from this weakness.

Toward the end of Dad's life, I moved in with my parents, ironically, to help care for my mother, whose health was failing. Obese, diabetic and arthritic, she could barely take five steps without stopping to catch her breath, and Dad, nine years her senior, was her primary caretaker. "Oh, my husband

takes me everywhere. He handles all of my doctor's appointments." Even when he could no longer take her everywhere, she beamed with pride over his ability to remember every doctor's name and address, and the dates of all of her appointments.

On my first birthday back home, she suffered a neuropathy attack and we spent the day in the hospital. She apologized and I told her not to worry, that it was a replay of my first birthday, when we were also in a hospital together. As we walked out, she informed me, "I hate to see this entrance. When I was little, as soon as I saw it, I knew I was going to be molested." I had known about her childhood traumas, but this is the first time I learned that it all took place in the same hospital where she would witness three of her grandchildren being born, and eventually, her husband dying. You can see the building from the kitchen window. "You know, a couple of years ago, I started seeing a psychiatrist about all these things. It was a lady and I liked her a lot. I trusted her, so I started telling her about all this." She waved her unaffected arm in the direction of the hospital's electronic doors. "And while I was saying how scared I was, I started crying, and then suddenly, a group of men came storming into the room. I got confused, and she told me that they were there to take me away, because I was getting too hysterical. I couldn't believe it. She hit a button under her desk and just watched me cry, then told me I had to go with them. Of course, I didn't." At least there was that, I thought. "But I really did trust that white lady. And she betrayed me." We crossed the street to the Rite Aid pharmacy, and Mom bought me a small box of Russell Stover's candy for my birthday.

A few operations and a year into Mom's widowhood, I've inherited most of Dad's duties. My niece, Sam, picks up the slack. Mom can now run small errands on her own. Last week, she ventured to Kmart to buy clothes on sale



for Sam. We sat in the kitchen over coffee as my niece tried them on, emerging from the bathroom with a pair of sleep shorts that were way too small.

“Grandma, I think you read the wrong size.” She did, and we laughed. “I think they fit me,” I said and Sam tossed them my way. Mom snatched them. “Ay que linda.” Even without looking, I knew the words were squeezed through the snarl I had almost forgotten.

“I got that for SAM.”

I felt the familiar strain behind my eyes. “Are you kidding? It’s five dollars. You’ll spend more than that just going back and forth to Kmart.”

The money math convinced her and she flung them back at me. “Here. Are you happy?”

And now, on this side of parenthood, I caught something in her tone that echoed a nine-year-old’s inflection during a playground argument, a shift triggered by an insignificant change of plans that throws an insecure child for a loop when her world suddenly doesn’t make sense, again. She needed to feel in control of something. Or someone.

Was I happy? I avoided the question and thanked her. I debated putting the shorts in the charity bag, but it slowly dawned on me that I was not just mourning the death of my father. I had lost my mother as well, years ago. I lost her to her childhood places that were supposed to be havens, by people who were supposed to heal her. My mother died when I was still a wish in her small, flawed heart. I tucked the gift in the corner of my drawer where I keep a small pot of Dad’s ashes.

