

Dolls

“Good morning, sir,” the young cashier greeted me as she did every day, “Your usual?”

I look up at the fluorescent board displaying just about every coffee flavor you could imagine.

Caramel, white chocolate, raspberry, coconut... I stare at it for a minute as if I would get anything but my usual. “Yea, just my usual.” I reach down for my wallet.

“Perfect. Would you like to try a pump of our secret syrup in that today?” she asks.

My face burns red. Secret? Why do they have to call it “secret syrup”? That question startles me every time. What a horrible way to start my normal day. “No thanks, I’m all set.”

After I get my coffee, I drive to work. I drive the same path every day to get the same coffee and work the same old job. I’m as normal as they come. The day passes slowly. All I want to do is go home. When five finally rolls around, I get to clock out and head back to my cottage. My house is located about 25 minutes from town in a wooded area. I don’t like people. I like my secluded, cozy cottage. And of course, I like my dolls.

I arrive home and walk up the cobblestone trail. As I approach the door it opens, and I’m greeted warmly.

“Welcome home, Ken!”

Barbra is standing in the doorway with a platter filled with assorted cheeses, crackers, meats, and fruits. On the side is a coffee. Plain. No secret syrups. “Good afternoon, Barbra. You look exquisite in that dress. Is it new?” She was wearing a pale pink, calf length dress with white ruffles, and puff sleeves.

She spun in a circle and the dress floated up, “It is new! I’m glad you noticed,” she said excitedly, “Raquel made it for me yesterday.”

She set the platter down and took my coat to hang on the rack. I walked into the kitchen where the daily paper was waiting for me. I picked it up to read. Barbra came into the kitchen after me, “Thank you doll, you can head down. I’ll be there in a second.” She pulled a metal key from the ruffled pocket of her dress. I heard the lock unlatch and the click of her heels as she descended into the basement. I needed a few minutes to breathe before I greeted the rest of my precious dolls.

After I finished with my coffee, I unlocked the bolted basement door and went down. I rounded the corner to see my dolls standing in a line. I walked up to Barbra, first in the order, took her hand and lightly pressed my lips to her pale skin. “Barbra, good to see you again.” She curtsied. I went down the line, “Good afternoon, Claira...Blair....Raquel....Delia,” each bowing after the greeting, besides Delia.

My dolls are perfect. Each assigned the perfect name and set of qualities upon their arrival. They always looked flawless, just like dolls. Their hair tied back in bows with ringlets at the ends. Their dresses were modest and suited their skin tones. They were to always wear heels, nails painted and simple jewelry. But most importantly, their masks. Their masks were porcelain and hand painted by me, taking hours to make. They were made for the dolls to wear forever. “How were your days girls?” I asked.

“Fantastic, Ken,” they replied in unison, “We were hardworking, we were virtuous, we were kind to one another, we were perfect.” It was almost robotic the way they said it.

“Good my precious dolls. How about we set up dinner?” I suggested. The dolls set the table around me. I can’t imagine what life would be like without them. And I know that they couldn’t imagine life without me, as much as some of them don’t want to admit it. The dolls came from various

backgrounds, but they all had one thing in common- nobody cared about them. If I hadn't taken them, they'd still be in those situations. Some homeless, others orphaned, it would be terrible. This is why the dolls serve me. They should thank me for bringing them to this sanctuary.

The newest arrival, Delia, was still adjusting to her surroundings. To be completely honest, she was rude and ungrateful, acting as if she did not want to be here. The dolls had set the table and taken their seats. "Delia," she didn't look at me, "Delia, how about you lead us in prayer before dinner?"

"Okay," she said, "I'll lead the prayer." I was surprised she was speaking, or even listening to what I was saying. "Dear lord, bless this meal. Please get me the fuck out of this prison--"

"Delia," Barbra interrupted, "That is no way to start off our meal. We are grateful to be here. We are hardworking, kind, virtuous, and perfect. Please, apologize to Ken." The other girls just looked at Delia in silence. Their eyes begged her to apologize.

"I will never apologize to that man. He took me from my home. And my name is Jenna!" she slammed the table with her hands and shot out of her seat, "My family will find me!" she yelled.

I sat calmly, trying not to instigate the situation. She would come to her senses eventually. She continued to scream insanities and out of the corner of my eye, I saw her reach for the steak knife on the table. Before I could get to it, she had it in her hand, wielding it at me.

"Stay back!" she shouted at me.

I tried to reason with her. I really did. "Delia, we can talk about this, but I need you to put the knife down, doll."

"I am not your doll," she growled. Before I knew it, she lunged toward me. I grabbed her arm and pushed the knife upward. She wouldn't let go. She was strong for a doll.

“This is not how dolls act, Delia! You should be grateful to me!” I shouted, trying to wrestle the steak knife from her grip. Suddenly, I got it loose and in the same motion, the blade slid across her soft skin. Hot, crimson liquid poured from her neck, and she collapsed into my arms. Her gaze hardened through the porcelain mask, and her chest ceased to rise. Silence.

“Gone too soon,” I sighed, “Dolls clean her up.”

I gently set her body onto the ground. What a sweet girl. It is saddening that she couldn't be a part of our cottage. I solemnly went upstairs and showered to remove the dark stains from my skin and beneath my nails. I hate having to lay one of my dolls to rest early, but sometimes it must be done. After my shower, I headed back to the basement. The dolls would have her prepared for me.

They were standing around her, some crying, others just blank. They had put her into a deep purple gown with buttons down the front and closed her eyes below the porcelain mask. They had tied a lacey scarf around her neck where her wound had been showing. I picked her limp body up and took her to the dollhouse. All the dolls will end up here someday. The hallways were lined with boxes. Inside, each of my previous, perfect dolls. I stop at the golden plaque with the name “Delia” engraved. I place her upright on the plastic stand and buckle her lifeless body in. I close the box and take a moment to stare at my precious doll through the warped plastic. I spend some time reflecting in the dollhouse until it is time to go to bed. I hope tomorrow is another *normal* day.