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Youth Short Story Category – 3rd Prize 2021

DOLL

By Cadence Pang

There was something peculiar about this antique shop. Audrey could feel it, as she pushed open the creaky door. It might have been the thick blanket of dust covering the forgotten treasures on the over-crowded shelves. Or it might have been the thin fingers of light reaching into the dim, freezing room from gaps in the run-down brick walls. It might have been the overpowering stench of artificial lavender that made Audrey’s eyes water. A wrinkled woman sat hunched over a paperback book behind an ancient table at the back of the shop, turning the pages with a claw-like hand. Her beady black eyes matched the frigid atmosphere, and her dried-prune mouth was puckered into a disapproving scowl. Audrey shivered as she wedged her curvy figure through the tiny space between each shelf. Bang! A carved wooden bowl that had been on the shelf now lay on the floor, dust settling around it. The old lady’s head snapped up. Audrey gulped. “I’m sorry...I’ll just..uhh.. put this back,” Audrey stammered, as she gingerly picked up the artifact.

The woman’s piercing gaze bore into her back. “What do you want?” the lady demanded in

a menacing tone. Audrey froze with fear. "I'm....looking for...uhhh," Audrey stuttered, her palms starting to sweat like a cold drink on a warm day.

"Speak!" the lady barked, in a voice that didn't suit her small body.

"Iwaslookingforadolltogivemyneiceforherbirthday" Audrey breathed out in a rush. The elderly woman slowly shut her book, stood up, and hobbled over to another shelf.

"This is our collection of dolls. Prices are fixed." the lady said curtly, and promptly returned to her position behind her desk.

Audrey's heart thumped madly. Trembling, she inched carefully over to the dolls. There were baby dolls in faded dresses, smiling marionettes, petite porcelain figures and pale Russian nesting dolls. Audrey scanned each doll's features. None of them were what she had in mind for a gift. She sighed, in disappointment and secret relief, and began to exit the store. But something caught her eye. A chained glass cabinet with a large padlock stood in the corner. Inside sat a darling old-fashioned doll. She was wearing a red tartan dress with crimson socks and shining black shoes. Her curled eyelashes shadowed clear blue eyes. Round, pink spots highlighted the apples of both cheeks, and she had a red rosebud of a mouth. Her shining brown locks bubbled down her shoulders in tiny ringlets. But what intrigued Audrey the most was the doll's pose. The doll looked as if she was waving to someone, but with only 3 fingers up, her thumb curled delicately over the forefinger. She was beautiful. She was perfect. I have to have this doll, Audrey decided.

"Excuse me?" Audrey asked timidly, earning a cold frown from the elderly woman. "I would like to buy this doll." The lady's scowl deepened, as she snapped the book shut again, and trotted to where Audrey was standing. But when she saw the doll, her eyes widened, and her wrinkles paled. She swayed as if about to faint. Audrey was puzzled. She had not expected this reaction from the scary old lady. The woman closed her eyes. "Not Marietta. No, not Marietta. Not after what she's been through. Not after the things she's done..." The old lady mumbled. Audrey stood there, a bubble of uneasiness growing in her belly. What did the lady mean by "things"? And what had the doll been through? "Um... Miss, are you ok?" Audrey asked nervously. The woman suddenly stopped swaying, and snapped open her eyes. "Not for sale." She growled softly. Audrey felt an unusual surge of

confidence and started to protest. All the fear she felt earlier had strangely and mysteriously disappeared.

“But Miss, my niece would love this-”

“I said, not for sale!”

“But it’s in the shop, so-”

“NOT FOR SALE!” The lady roared, and Audrey shrank back. “The last owner drowned. The one before that was poisoned. And the first owner died from a house fire. This doll is cursed. It is not for sale.” The woman firmly retorted. An inexplicable wave of courage swept over Audrey. “I’ll give you one hundred dollars for the doll.”

“Not for sale.” But there was uncertainty in those frigid eyes.

“One-fifty then.”

“Three hundred, and she’s yours.” The old lady’s hesitance melted away and was replaced with greed.

“Done.” Audrey instantly replied, and the unfathomable surge of confidence slipped away like a discarded blanket. Confused, Audrey numbly walked towards the table where she counted out the cash. What had gotten into her? Audrey was always careful with spending money. Audrey shrugged and tried to ignore the growing feeling of dread. Cursed? No, a doll couldn’t be. The lady just didn’t want to sell the only antique that brought light into the abyss of a shop. In addition to that, Audrey didn’t believe in stuff like this anyway. Plus, how could an innocent-looking, gorgeous doll be cursed?

It was evening when Audrey finally unlocked the door of her small studio apartment. She clicked on the light and surveyed the room. She was met with the familiar sight of her humble home. Audrey sighed and glanced at the clock. 7.32pm! Hastily dumping her bags on the couch, she busied herself in her tiny kitchenette. She washed some vegetables for what she hoped would be a quick salad before bed time. Laying a chopping board on the countertop, she placed the dripping vegetables onto the scratched surface. Then she opened the cupboard where the knives are kept. Suddenly, Audrey screamed, and stumbled back in fright. She hit the floor with a sickening thump, but she barely felt the pain. Facing Audrey,

next to her knife block, sat Marietta. Her dress was slightly creased, and her previously neat curls now tumbled down her shoulders in an unruly mess. Her previously blissful expression was replaced with a wide mouthed, crazy grin. And her eyes, oh her eyes! Marietta's eyes had thin slits for pupils and were alive with malevolence. Her three fingers were still held up ominously. Audrey let out a dry sob. Her heart galloped like a racehorse and thoughts crashed and collided in her mind. The last owner drowned. The one before that was poisoned. The first owner...died from a house fire. This doll is cursed. Cursed. CURSED.

Could it be true? Darkness crept on the edges of Audrey's vision. No. I will not faint, she told herself. Shaking and trembling, she took deep breaths. In. Out. In. Out. Then she slowly slid closer to the motionless Marietta. Her chest heaving, she warily picked up the doll with two fingers. Audrey turned her over slowly, not sure what she was looking for. Hmm. Marietta's eyes were back to their sky blue colour. Could she have imagined it? No. Audrey was certain of what she had seen. She closed her eyes and tried not to cry. The old lady was right. Cursed. Definitely cursed. She had to get rid of this doll.

Filled with new determination, Audrey stood up, gripping Marietta's tiny arm tightly. Where could she dispose of her? Not the bin, Audrey did not want the doll to be in her home ever again. Not the op shop, she didn't want someone to become the next victim. How about throwing her off the cliff? "Do it," A tiny voice in the back of her mind said. Hopefully the hard plastic would break as soon as Marietta hit the jagged rocks at the bottom. Or maybe she would float out to sea, never to be seen again. Tugging on a heavy coat, Audrey marched out of her apartment, down the stairs, and into her car.

Harley's cliff was a huge block of rock just a few minutes drive from where Audrey lived. During the day, Harley's cliff was the ideal place to unwind and relax, with a wide expanse of lush green grass, a soothing breeze, and the calming splash of waves on the rocks far below. But when it was dark, it was the last place you wanted to be. The screaming wind tossed and threw Audrey's hair about, and violently tugged her this way and that as she boldly marched towards the edge of the cliff. The ground, usually covered with tufts of dry grass, was now a muddy mess that tried to suck Audrey down into its depths with each step. But Audrey didn't care. She wanted to get rid of Marietta as soon as possible. Firmly

pushing loose strands of hair away from her face, she wrapped her coat tighter around her body. The chill was starting to creep in.

Finally, she reached the edge of Harley's cliff. Very carefully, Audrey leaned over the waist-high fence. The old metal barrier creaked and groaned in the harsh wind. She raised her hand to throw the doll down... but something was wrong. Her hand was empty. Marietta was gone! Audrey gasped and patted her coat pockets desperately. She must have dropped her while she was rushing to the cliff. Scolding herself, Audrey was about to turn around when a high-pitched, blood-curdling laugh filled the air. She froze. Suddenly, she felt 2 small hands lift her ankles with surprising strength over the wire barrier. Audrey fell.

The next day

"Wha' a beaut day to go to the cave, eh? Gonna make some big bucks on this run!" Dave shouted over the sound of crashing waves to his friend, Mike.

"Yeah mate! Boss said a dozen packs o' pot! A dozen!" Mike grinned back, and deftly hopped over some of the jagged rocks around the cliff's base. Suddenly, he swore so loud that Dave nearly tripped. "Jeez! Tryna give me a bloody good scare, eh?" Dave yelled at Mike, and carefully stepped over to where he was standing. Then Dave saw what Mike was looking at. A woman, probably in her late twenties, lay in a bloody heap on the rocks. A look of sheer terror was frozen on her face. The heavy coat that wrapped around her broken body was soaked with dark red blood. Her limbs were splayed out at unnatural angles. So much blood. "Crikey!" Dave whispered, fear evident in his voice.

"I'm gonna call the cops." Mike croaked after a pause, and immediately pulled out his phone and started dialling. Dave snatched the phone away from Mike before he could dial the last digit.

"Are ya nuts!?!?" Dave hissed. He smacked Mike on the back of his head. "Ya want the cops to find our stash?"

Mike grimaced and rubbed his scalp. "What are we gonna do then?"

"Well," Dave gazed up at the cliff's edge thoughtfully. "The cops'd be here soon...coz she'd be reported by now... Let's just go up an' see if there's any cops around."

A gentle breeze had picked up by the time the two friends reached the top of the cliff. Mike cowered behind Dave.

“Suck it up, ya big drongo, “ Dave said, and Mike fell into step with Dave. But there was nothing on the waves of green grass. Then a big gust of wind blew apart some bunches of grass, and revealed a darling old fashioned doll. She was wearing a red tartan dress with crimson socks and shining black shoes. Her curled eyelashes shadowed clear blue eyes. Round, pink spots highlighted the apples of both cheeks, and she had a red rosebud of a mouth. Her shining brown locks bubbled down her shoulders in tiny ringlets. But what intrigued Dave the most was the doll’s pose. The doll looked as if she was waving to someone, but with 4 fingers up, her thumb curled delicately towards the pinky.