

Why Wouldn't You Want to Stay in My Dollhouse?

I press my knees to my chest, my knuckles to my lips. I stare at the box delivered today, sitting on the coffee table. It's concealed but still completely embarrassing. I should hide it before Kayla gets here. But something perched on my shoulder whispers *don't move*. I saw a video a week ago explaining this is a catatonic state. I wish I hadn't watched the girl in the video explain it all the way through because having a name for something always makes it worse. I could flex my fingers if I really try. Flex my fingers, push out my legs, and stand up. But I usually lean back into that small voice and I *don't move. Don't get up. Stay here don't movedon'tmove.*

I eventually do, of course. I wander through the guest house with soft grey furniture, unopinionated white linen curtains, and snoozefest eggshell blue walls. Looking in the mirror, I run my tongue over my teeth which are yellowing by the day. It makes me miss The Decayed Woman. I'm pulled from my thoughts when the doorbell rings.

Kayla cues herself up when I open the door. "Ya' miss me? Got just what the doctor ordered."

She holds up a joint staged between her fingers and I open my mouth in a half-hearted shock. She follows me into the living room and she looks as natural as a raccoon in a penthouse. I've always been a little bit afraid she would run her hands down the length of the walls and leave black makeup smudges in her wake. She slowly slips a lighter out of her pocket.

"You still can't smoke that in here," I scold.

"Stella. Your parents literally would never know and I don't think they'd give a fuck either. Seems hypocritical with the amount of wine bottles I could probably find in their recycle bin if I went looking."

“I don’t want it to smell.”

“We used to smoke in your room all the time.”

“We’re not in my bedroom anymore.”

“How is your parents' *guest house* more restrictive than your childhood bedroom?”

I want something in my hands so I don’t feel like I have to look at her while she argues with me. But the only thing out of place is the–

“What’s in the box?”

Shit.

I pick it up with the intention of stuffing it in my closet, “Nothing.”

“Wait,” she trailed me. “You literally never order things online. Let me see.”

“It’s nothing interesting, really.”

“You’re so secretive tonight.”

She leans against the wall and I feel a tremor move through the house. My head whips up to the roof and I freeze, trying to pick fight or flight. It was nothing this time though. Kayla gives me a funny look when I straighten out.

“Sorry, I’m just–”

“Disoriented.” Her face gets squishier with a knowing smile. “It’s ok.”

I fetch a pair of scissors from my bathroom not wanting to fight and I cut open my package. Her eyes stretch in amused confusion as I hold up a plastic toy hairbrush about the size of my head.

“...Why the fuck did you buy that.”

“Art project?” I wince. “Can’t really talk about it before I’ve committed though.”

Kayla seems to approve of this reason and she goes to look at herself in the mirror. Making sure she's distracted, I rip open the chest at the foot of my bed and throw the pink brush down, into a pile of lacy, poofy dresses. I sit down on the lid in a hurry when she saunters back out.

“So where do you want to go?” She waves the joint around again. “Let me guess. The driveway?”

I feel terribly boring for a moment. Where else was there to go? She wouldn't want the park (too pervy), I wouldn't want a bar (too loud), and we both weren't about to make plans with other people.

“We could drive around first?”

She heads for her car outside. “Fine. But you owe me snacks.”

I hurry to follow her, stuffing a satin ribbon back into the chest.

She's so nice. Kayla. She always lets me start smoking before we've parked in the driveway again. And sitting in the passenger seat letting my hand play with the wind outside the window is nice too. Sometimes, I wonder if ghosts get to pick the places they haunt. I hope I just end up in my friend's car, driving at night forever. Or at least haunting the car of someone else who is steady and doesn't sing show tunes when they think they're alone.

“Did you know you're never really alone?” I ask Kayla as she pulls back into my parents' driveway. She doesn't seem to have heard me. I try again.

“Pass me the lighter, babe.”

I want to ask her again, but she blows the smoke back in my face in the middle of me trying to get my heavy tongue off the floor of my mouth. I sit back instead and she plays with the hair on my arm. I can only stand the way she touches me because it's nothing like my ex. Kayla is rough when she's gentle.

"How are your job applications?" She asks.

"Don't know."

"Was it easier when," she flexes her fingers in quotes. "You-know-who was still living here with you? Better at distracting you than me maybe. Better than Fred and Barbara's driveway."

"Well we broke up and she moved out and is probably couch-crashing with someone less boring. So."

She held her hands up in surrender. Salt already in the wound, I offer we go inside instead of demanding she leave me alone. Kayla hesitates with her fingers on the door handle.

"Sometimes I freak myself out a bit. Just wait and watch. The shadows... like I feel like if I get out of the car something's going to jump on top of me. It takes a minute when I'm by myself to go inside."

I want to squeeze my eyes shut tight. Kayla doesn't know what she's talking about. But I sit and watch too. Only I always see the things others don't. She won't notice the bloodied naked man, hunched outside the neighbors' window, chewing on bugs, waiting for them to open it so he can crawl back in. If we go to visit my mom's friend's house down the street, she won't see the old woman who lays limp in the bathtub. And she likely wouldn't fill up the bathtub when everyone else is outside, so she would not be bothered with the fact that if Ms. McConnell takes a bath, she's doing it with little chunks of flesh floating to the top each time. Even if Kayla

decided she wanted to go home right now, in her foggy, dumbbed-down state, she's going to assume the scratching in the walls are rats.

"Why would you even say that?"

Kayla opens the door but swings around to me. "Did you say something, babes?"

"Why would you say that?" I moan.

"I can't hear you when you mutter."

She walks around and opens my car door for me and we go back inside the house.

It's not long before Kayla has whomped herself down onto my mom's couch. I watch her nuzzle her black cakey face into the throw pillow I have replaced twice already. I want to tell her she's stupid but she's not and I know it. I want to cuddle with her but it would feel weird. I miss The Decayed Woman.

I met my favorite ghost in an Airbnb for an old friend's wedding. It didn't make any sense to go in the first place when we barely bothered to remind each other we were still "Doing ok!" I wasn't expecting the woman curled up in the master bedroom, sinking into the bed with a soupy decay that warned my nostrils before turning to mold over my skull. I went to pull pillows from the bed to make up the couch instead but she only balled her hands into fists and nuzzled into a more relaxed sleep when I approached. I slept next to her that night. I bought a bottle of air freshener the next day and hosed her down before it was time to go home. Haunted. Problem solved. I lived.

"Will you get me a blanket, Stel?"

"Of course." I'm being weird.

“You ok?”

“Yeah, I just miss her.”

“It’s ok, babes, relationships end. It’s like natural.”

I felt my face heat up. “Not *her*.”

“Then who?”

“No one.”

“It’s okay to talk about it. It’s healthy even. I mean, hell, you can’t mope around the guest house on your laptop and in your bed forever. If you miss Isa-”

“If you say her fucking name I will kill you!” I screamed. Kayla only scrunched her nose in confusion.

“I can’t hear you when you mumble like that. Can you get me a blanket?”

“Of course.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

When I open the door to the linen closet everything feels like it’s shaking. And I know it actually is when all the throws and towels start to fall from the shelves. I am a sailor in a storm trying to reach Kayla, who had graciously passed out before playtime. Wind pushes the smell of fertilizer into the room and I know I am not going fast enough. I see her fingernail first, sparkling against the moonlight before two gray fingers the size of my body push the window open and scratch at the painted wall.

I throw a blanket over Kayla’s body. “Don’t suffocate.”

Tremors snake up the walls and the ceiling puffs out white dust. The guest house groans quietly like it's felt this back pain hundreds of times before. Cracks splinter and etch across the walls as the top of the roof is lifted clean off.

I used to call this one The Doll Collector, but it's just Dolly now. She visits more often.

Dolly leans her gray body over the entire house. Her stubby fingers form a claw that rests in the air as she looks around. *Don't move* but she can see me even though her eyes were eaten a long time ago. The sockets still follow you around the room. The places where her pores should be, where her hair follicles are, leave moist gaps I could sit in and the mud covering her brown hair falls in giant splats onto the floor. I think there's a nest of flies or maggots somewhere inside her but I try to squeeze my eyes shut *don't move* whenever I see something moving in her skin.

My knees wobble as I go to open the trunk by the foot of the bed – my parents think I've gotten into the thrifting scene, but really I've been shopping for her. Silky baby blues and white tulle bare their teeth. I pick up the hairbrush and hold it above my head. It shakes violently in the air.

She takes it, examines it, and *don't move* picks me up in her soft hand. I lay stiff as a board as she rakes the toy through my hair. I make a mental note that I should have tried this out before giving it to her, but it really doesn't hurt and she's always been very nice to me. I wonder what her actual dolls looked like when she was alive. I really hope she wasn't born into this world giant and rotting and looking for comfort.

I can feel she's trying to take my clothes off to put on one of the dresses. Usually, I put one on before she opens the dollhouse, but I was distracted. I open my eyes to her fingernails not being able to get traction under my sleeve. I squirm and she squeezes me tighter in her grasp *don't move* I want to help her but *don't move* this is too much I need to *stop it*.

I bite down on the finger closest to my chin. She makes a heavy choking noise, like a cheap knife sunk into a tire, and drops me on the bed. Sucking at her finger, she looks like she wants to cry but her face grows more distressed when nothing comes out.

“It’s ok!” I sputter with the taste of death still in my mouth. “I’m sorry, sweet baby, I didn’t mean it. Come here. We can play. We can keep playing.”

She strokes my hair with two fingers and leaves something thicker than normal blood on my scalp. I see her get up, her raggedy dress and Mary Janes come into view. She puts the roof back onto the house. I run up to the window and I see her step over the neighborhood and disappear somewhere into the night.

Somehow after this, I must have taken a shower. Like blacking out and coming to, one moment I’m naked and filthy, then under the stream of water. I don’t bother to stop myself when I realize I’m pawing through my drawers until I find one of Isabelle’s old shirts.

I didn’t mean to scare her away. I really didn’t. Lying down in my bed, I wish The Decayed Woman was curled up next to me. It’s nice to be able to see the house is haunted.

I will always make room for the ghosts. It’s better than being alone.