

FICTION APRIL 26 & MAY 3, 2021 ISSUE

# OLD BABES IN THE WOOD

By Margaret Atwood

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Illustration by Carson Ellis

*Audio: Margaret Atwood reads.*

“Pants or dead leaves?” Lizzie says.

“My guess is pants,” Nell says. The two of them stand on the dock in their age-inappropriate bathing suits and stare at the dark patch under the water.

An hour earlier, Nell was toasting her laundry on the dock, which was the best place to dry it: it had been the best place for seventy years. But she didn't put rocks on top of her cotton yoga pants, though she ought to have known better, and then she went back up the hill to the house, through the sighing and rustling trees. The pants are lightweight, and they seem to have blown away. Logic dictates that they must be somewhere in the lake. Other pants she might have kissed goodbye, but she's fond of these.

"I'll go in," she says.

"Maybe it's not pants," Lizzie says dubiously. Waterlogged leaves accumulate on the sandy, rocky lake bottom. Their older brother, Robbie, sometimes rakes them out as a courtesy to others, along with the tiny water weeds that grow if allowed, and puts the resulting sludge into a large zinc washtub, after which its fate is unknown to Nell. The rake and the tub are leaning against a tree, thus he must have done this recently. Though only on the other side of the dock. So it might still be leaves.

Nell sits on the edge of the dock, then gingerly eases herself down, conscious of possible splinters. She and splinters have a long history. Splinters in the bum are especially bad because you can't see to pull them out.

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Margaret Atwood on loss and memory.

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Her feet hit sand. The water is up to her waist.

"Is it cold?" Lizzie asks. She knows the answer.

"It's been colder." This is always true. Did the two of them really once hurl themselves off the end of the dock into the freezing, heart-shocking water, laughing their heads off? Did they cannonball? They did.

Nell has a flash of Lizzie at a much younger age—younger even than the cannonballing—two or three. "A pider! A big pider!" she was saying. She couldn't yet pronounce "spider." Pider. Poon. Plash. Nell herself had been what, at that time? Fifteen. A seasoned babysitter. It won't hurt you. See, it's running away. Spiders are afraid of us. It's hiding under the dock. But Lizzie was not reassured. She's remained that way: beneath every bland surface there's bound to be something with too many legs.

"Am I aimed right?" Nell asks. Her feet move tentatively, encountering soft tickles, oatmeal-textured gunk, sharp little stones, what feels like a stick. She's up to her armpits now; she can't see the dark patch because of the angle of reflection.

"More or less," Lizzie says. She slaps at her bare legs: stable flies. There's a technique to killing them—they take off backward, you have to sneak up with your hand—but it requires focus. "O.K., warmer. Warmer. A little to the right."

"I see it," Nell says. "Definitely pants." She fishes around with the toes of her left foot and brings the pants up, dripping. She can still fish things up with her toes, it seems: a minor accomplishment, but not to be sneered at. Enjoy the moment, it won't last, she comments to herself.

Tomorrow she might tackle the wide strips of gray paint, or stain, that have flaked off the dock and are lying on the lake

bottom like sinister sci-fi fungus growths. It was Lizzie who painted the dock; it was Robbie who'd wanted it painted. He thought it would preserve the planks, keep them from rotting, so they wouldn't have to rebuild the dock yet again. How many times have they done that? Three, four?

Wrong about the paint, or stain, as it turned out: the dock is peeling like a sunburn, and water gets under the remaining patches, softening the wood. Still, they may not have to rebuild the dock themselves; this one could last them out. The younger gen will have to do it, assuming they're up to it.

That was the kind of thing their mother used to say about her clothing: "I don't need another sweater. This one will last me out." Nell had hated it at the time. Parents ought not to die; it's inconsiderate.

Pants in hand, Nell wades back to the dock. She has a brief moment of wondering how she's going to clamber back up. There's a decaying makeshift step on the other side, made of two boards and covered with mossy growth, but it's a death trap and ought to be removed. A sledgehammer would do it. But then there would be a couple of lethal rusty spike heads sticking out of the huge log the step is attached to. Someone will have to go at the step with a crowbar, but it won't be Nell. All she needs is one of those spikes popping out suddenly and backward she'll go, into the shallows, and brain herself on the annoying pointed white rock they keep meaning to dig out but haven't got around to.

On second thought, better to hammer the rusty spikes in, not pull them out. Now who, exactly, is going to do that?

Nell flings her sopping-wet pants onto the dock. Then, placing her feet carefully on the slippery logs of the underwater crib that holds the dock in place and gripping the nearest wooden tie-up cleat, she hoists herself up. You old ninny, you really shouldn't be doing this, she tells herself. One of these days you'll break your neck.

"Victory," Lizzie says. "Let's have tea."

**H**aving tea is sooner said than done. To begin with, they're out of water, a problem they've anticipated by bringing a pail down the hill. Now they must wrestle with the hand pump. It's creakier than ever this year, the flow of water is diminished, and there's a pronounced iron tang, which probably means that the sand point far underground is clogging up or disintegrating. "Ask Robbie about sand point," Lizzie has written on one of the numerous lists she and Nell are endlessly making and then either losing or throwing away.

The choices are: dig the thing up, a nightmare, or sink a new point, also a nightmare. They'll end up with one of the sons, or grandsons, or two of them, being called upon to do the actual sledgehammering. No one can expect old biddies of the ages of Nell and Lizzie to do it themselves.

No one, that is, except the two of them. They'll start, then they'll injure themselves—the knees, the back, the ankles—and the younger gen will be forced to take over. They will do it wrong, of course. Of course! Tongue-biting will be in order from Lizzie and Nell. Or, better, they'll say they have headaches so they won't have to watch, then they'll wander up to the cabin and read murder mysteries. Lizzie has the family's accumulation of flyspecked and yellowing paperbacks arranged by author

on a shelf in her room, ever since a large mouse nest was discovered behind its former location.

They take turns with the pump handle. Once they've got a pailful—or a half pail, because neither one of them is up to lugging a full pail, not anymore—they stagger up the steep hill, which is inset with tripping hazards in the form of steps made of flat rocks, switching the pail back and forth until they arrive at the top, breathing heavily. Heart-attack city, here I come, Nell thinks.

"Why the fuck did he have to put it at the top of this fucking hill?" Lizzie says. "He" changes its referent depending on what they're talking about; right now, "he" is their father. "It" is the log cabin he built, with axes, crosscut saws, crowbars, drawknives, and other tools of Primitive Man.

"To discourage invaders," Nell says. This is only partly a joke. Every time they see a boat trolling unpleasantly close to them—their sandy point is a known spot for pickerel—they have the same reaction: invaders!

They make it in through the screen door of the cabin, spilling only a little of the water. "We need to do something about the front steps," Lizzie says. "They're too high. Not to mention the back steps. We've got to get a railing. I don't know what he was thinking."

"He didn't intend to get old," Nell says.

"Yeah, that was a fucking surprise," Lizzie says.

They all helped build the cabin, once upon a time. Their father did most of the work, naturally, but it was a family project, involving child labor. Now they're more or less stuck with it.

Other people don't live like this, Nell thinks. Other people's cottages have generators. They have running water. They have gas barbecues. Why are we trapped in some kind of historical-reenactment TV show?

"Remember when we could do two pails?" Lizzie says. "Each?" That wasn't so very long ago.

It's too hot to have the woodstove on, so they heat the water on the ancient two-burner propane-cylinder camping stove. It's rusting out around the intake pipe, but so far there have been no explosions. "New propane stove" is on the list. The kettle is aluminum, of a type that has surely been outlawed. Just looking at it gives Nell cancer, but an unspoken rule says that it must never be discarded. The cover will fit only if placed just right: Nell marked the position years ago, with two circles of pink nail polish, one on the lid, a corresponding one on the kettle itself, which must be stored upside down so that mice won't make their way down the spout and starve to death and make a horrible smell, plus maggots. Learn by doing, Nell thinks. There have been enough dead mice and maggots in her life.

The tea in the lidded nineteen-forties enamelled roasting pan labelled "Tea" is practically sawdust; they keep meaning to throw it out. Lizzie has come prepared, with her own tea bags in a plastic ziplock. Bags are easier to discard than soggy tea leaves, even though everyone knows that tea bags are made from floor sweepings and mud. In the days of Tig, he and Nell



had always used loose-leaf, which he bought at a little specialty shop run by a knowledgeable woman from India. Tig would have derided the tea bags.

The days of Tig. Over now.

High up on the wall, above the woodstove, hangs the flat oblong griddle that Nell and Tig bought at a farm auction forty-odd years ago, and on which jovial sourdough pancake fryings often took place, Tig doing the flipping, back when largesse and riotous living and growing children had been the order of the day. Coming up! Who’s next? She can’t look directly at this griddle—she glances up at it, then glances away—but she always knows it’s there.

My heart is broken, Nell thinks. But in our family we don’t say, “My heart is broken.” We say, “Are there any cookies?” One must eat. One must keep busy. One must distract oneself. But why? What for? For whom?

“Are there any cookies?” she manages to croak out.

“No,” Lizzie says. “But there’s chocolate. Let’s have some.” She knows that Nell’s heart is broken; she doesn’t need to be told.

They take their cups of tea and their treat—two squares of chocolate each, salted almond—and sit at the table that’s out on the little screened porch. Lizzie has brought the current list so they can update it.

“We can scratch off ‘Boots and Shoes,’ ” Lizzie says.

“Yippee for that,” Nell says.

They spent the previous day going through the plastic bags hanging from nails in Robbie’s old bedroom. Each contained an ancient pair of shoes and a mouse nest. The mice liked nesting in shoes; they filled them with chewed-up bark and wood and fabric threads they’d filched from the doorway curtains and anything else that suited their purposes. A mouse had once tried to pull out some of Lizzie’s hair during the night.

The mice had their babies inside the hung-up shoes and pooped into the bottoms of the plastic bags, when they weren’t pooping on the kitchen counter or around the sink in the washroom, leaving tiny black seeds everywhere. Lizzie and Nell habitually set a trap for them, which consisted of a tall swing-top garbage pail with a blob of peanut butter strategically placed on the cover. In theory, the mouse leaps onto the cover to get the peanut butter and falls into the pail. Usually it works, though sometimes the peanut butter is gone in the morning and there is no mouse. The trapped mice make a sound like popcorn as they jump up, hitting the top of the container. Nell and Lizzie always put some raisins in the pail and a paper towel for them to hide under, and in the mornings they canoe the mice across the lake—they’d come back otherwise, they’d seek out their nest smell—and release them on the far shore.

Robbie is more severe. He uses mousetraps. Nell and Lizzie believe that this practice is detrimental to owls, as owls prefer to

hunt live mice, but they don't say this, because Robbie would laugh at them.

Yesterday Nell and Lizzie lined up the mouse-nest shoes, plus a rubber boot with an epic nest in it, and took pictures on their phones, and sent the pictures to Robbie: Can we throw these out? He replied that they should leave all footgear until he himself came up; he would then decide what should be saved. Fair enough, they said, but no more hanging shoes in plastic bags: mouse nesting was a crime of opportunity and must be discouraged.

“Write ‘Snap-Top Container for Robbie’s Shoes’ on the list,” Nell says. Lizzie does so. Lists procreate; they give rise to other lists. Nell wonders if there’s a special therapy for excessive list-making. But if the two of them don’t make lists, how will they remember what they need? Anyway, they like crossing things off. It makes them feel that they are getting somewhere.

After supper, which is pasta—“Write ‘More Pasta,’ ” Nell says—they walk out to the sandy point, where they’ve set up two camping chairs, the folding kind with a mesh pocket in one arm to put a beer can in. One of the chairs has a hole in it, eaten by mice, but it’s not a major hole. Anything you don’t actually fall through is not a major hole. The chairs face northwest; Nell and Lizzie sit in them every evening and watch the sunset. It’s the best way of predicting the next day’s weather, better than the radio or the different Web sites on their phones. That plus the barometer, though the barometer isn’t much help because it almost always says “Change.”

“It’s a little too peach,” Lizzie says.

“At least it’s not yellow.” Yellow and gray are the worst. Pink and red are the best. Peach can go either way.

They stay out there as the clouds fade from peach to rose, and then to a truly alarming shade of red, like a forest fire in the distance.

Sure enough, when they make it back to the cabin, a trip they can both do in the dusk, which is just as well because they forgot the flashlight, the barometer has moved up slightly, from the “a” to the “n” in “Change.”

“No hurricane tomorrow,” Lizzie says.

“Hallelujah!” Nell says. “We won’t go to Oz in a tornado.”

There actually was a tornado here, in the days of Tig. It was only a little one, though it snapped off some tree trunks just like matchsticks. When was that?

Once it’s truly dark, Nell puts on her headlamp and takes a flashlight and shuffles her way to the dock. She used to walk around at night without lighting—she could see in the dark—but night vision is one of the things that go. She doesn’t want to hurtle down the hill, crippling herself on the pieces of geology that serve as steps or were stashed here and there by her father for some arcane purpose, forgotten now; nor does she want to step on any small toads. These come out at night and hop around, bent on adventures of their own, and are slippery when squashed.

She’s going to the dock to view the stars, out over the lake, with no treetops obscuring them. It’s a clear night, no moon yet, and the constellations have a depth and brilliance you’d never be able to see in the city.

Tig used to do this. He’d go down to the dock to brush his teeth and stargaze. “Amazing!” he would say. He had a great capacity for being amazed; the stars gave him such joy. There may be some falling stars: it’s August, the time of the Perseids, which always coincided with Tig’s birthday. Nell would make him a cake in the woodstove oven—scorching it on the top sometimes, but that part could be scraped off—and decorate it with cedar cones and tufts of club moss and whatever else she could find. There might even be a few strawberries, left over from the patch that had grown in what used to be the garden.

She makes it to the bottom of the hill without mishap, an achievement. But, once she’s on the dock, she can’t follow through. She’s not feeling any amazement or joy, only grief and more grief. The old griddle hanging on the wall above the stove is one thing—easy enough for the gaze to avoid it—but the stars? Will she never be able to look at the stars again?

No stars, not for you, not ever, she mourns. And in the next breath: Don’t be so fucking maudlin.

She hauls herself back up the hill, guided by the light that has now come on inside the cabin. She half expects to see Tig in the evening lamplight, uttering whoops of enthusiasm over whatever he might be reading. Not half. Less than half. Is he fading?

In the olden times, which are numerous, Nell and Lizzie and Robbie used kerosene lamps, which had to be treated with the utmost caution—the wicks or mantles were prone to flare up or carbonize—but the modern age has taken its toll and now they have a marine battery, recharged by a solar panel during the day, into which they plug an electric lamp. By the light of this lamp, Nell and Lizzie set out to do a jigsaw puzzle. It’s one they did before, thousands of years ago—a wetland with a lot of bulrushes and waterbirds and vine-infested vegetation—and, as they work on it, Nell begins to remember its fiendish intricacies: the root clumps, the patches of sky and cloud, the deceptive spikes of purple flowers.

It’s best to solve the edges first, and they do make some headway. But there are two edge pieces missing—has somebody lost them? Some member of the younger gen, invading Lizzie’s hoard of sacrosanct jigsaw puzzles? “How irritating,” they mutter to each other, though Lizzie discovers one of the keystone pieces stuck to her arm.

They give up on the puzzle, eventually—the underground clumps of roots are too daunting, after all—and Lizzie reads out loud. It’s a Conan Doyle mystery story, though not a Sherlock Holmes one, about a train that’s diverted off its tracks and into an abandoned mine by a master criminal, in order to destroy a witness and his bodyguard.

While Lizzie reads, Nell deletes photos from her computer. Many of them are pictures of Tig, taken in the last year, when they were making a valiant effort to do the things Tig wanted to do, before—Before what was not said. Nor did they know the exact timing. But they both knew that this year they were moving through with at least a minimum amount of grace was quite soon before. They didn’t think it would be two years. Nor was it.

The photos Nell is throwing out are of Tig. In them he looks lost, or empty, or sad—Tig on the wane. She doesn’t want to

remember him looking like that, or being like that. She keeps only the smiling ones: when he was pretending that nothing was wrong, that he was still his usual self. He did pull that off a lot of the time. What an effort it must have cost him. Still, they managed to squeeze in some happiness, from hour to hour.

She throws out photos until Lizzie reaches the end of the story, where the megalomaniac criminal who planned the disappearance of the train is crowing over his perfect crime: the two doomed men, stuck on a train hurtling into an abyss, their faces looking aghast out the open train windows, as they watch their fate approach, the yawning blackness of the mine's mouth, the precipitous drop, the plunge into oblivion. Nell is afraid this story will give her nightmares; it's the kind of thing that does. She's never liked heights or cliff edges.

The dream she has that night isn't a nightmare, however. Tig is in it, but he isn't empty and sad. Instead, he's quietly amused. It's a spy story of some kind, though a leisurely one; a Russian named Polly Poliakov is involved, but he isn't a woman, so his name shouldn't be Polly.

Tig isn't an action hero in this dream—he's just there—but Polly Poliakov doesn't seem to care about Tig's presence. He's very anxious, this Polly. There's something that Nell urgently needs to know, but he has no luck at all explaining what it is. As for Nell, she's happy that Tig's in the dream; that's what she's mostly focussed on. He smiles at her as if enjoying a joke they're sharing. See? It's all right. It's even funny. It's idiotic how reassured she feels, once she wakes up.

The next day, after they've found the last missing piece of jigsaw on the floor, after they've had breakfast and relocated the night's trove of mice, chewed-up paper towel, gnawed raisins, and mouse poop to a hospitable decaying log, and while they're making a pretense of going for a swim—"I've changed my mind," Lizzie says—Nell whacks one of her toes on the pointed white rock under the water. Of course she does. She was bound to injure herself sooner or later; it's part of the grieving process. Barring bloodletting and clothes-rending and ashes on the head, a person in mourning has to undergo a mutilation of some kind.

Has she cracked a toe bone, or is it only a bruise? It's not a major toe; she can still more or less walk. With a pirate Band-Aid decorated with skulls and crossbones left over from a layer of children—hers? Robbie's? grandkids?—she tapes the offended toe to its neighbor, as instructed via her cell phone. Not much else to be done, according to the Web sites.

"'Dig up white rock,'" Lizzie adds to their list. Her idea is that they will wait until autumn, when the water is lower, or else spring, when it may be lower still, and then go at it in a sort of exorcism, with shovels and pitchforks and the inevitable crowbars. The vampire white rock must go!

How many times have they made such a plan? Many.

The week proceeds. They wend their way through time as if through a labyrinth, or that is what Nell feels; Lizzie, possibly not so much. Nell's injury is good for a few distracting conversations. They both examine the victimized toe with interest: how blue, how purple, will it become? Such observations of the wounded body are cheering; you don't get

bruises or pain unless you're still alive.

“Or mosquito bites,” Lizzie says. They both know from their murder books that mosquitoes ignore dead people.

You have been mistaken in the time of death, *mon ami*. How so? There were no mosquito bites upon the corpse. Ah! Then that means . . . but surely not! I tell you it must be, my friend. The evidence is before us, it cannot be disputed.

“Small mercies,” Nell says. “You don’t have to be dead and itchy.”

“I’ll take Option B,” Lizzie says.

Others have been through this particular time labyrinth before them. The whole cabin is strewn with little ambushes in the form of the written word. In the kitchen, “Put No Fat Down Sinks”: this in their mother’s handwriting. The cookbook always kept up here has tiny remarks in pencil, also by their mother: “Good!!” Or: “More salt.” Not exactly the wisdom of the ages, but solid, practical advice. “When feeling down in the dumps”—What, exactly, were these dumps? Who still knows?—“go for a brisk walk!” This isn’t written; it just hovers in the air, in their mother’s voice. An echo.

I can’t go for a brisk walk, Nell tells her mother silently. My toe, remember? You can’t fix everything, she wants to add, but her mother is well aware of that. Sitting in the hospital while he was possibly dying—“he” again referring to Nell’s father, once of the axes, once of the crosscut saws, once of the crowbars—her mother said, “I won’t cry, because if I start I’ll never be able to stop.”

The day before Nell and Lizzie are due to leave for the city, Nell comes across a note written by Tig, long ago, when the two of them installed mosquito nets over the beds as a communal service. The mosquitoes can be thick as fur on the outsides of the screens, especially in June; they can squeeze through the tiniest cracks. Once inside, they whine. Even if you’ve got repellent on, they can ruin your night.

“Large mosquito netting: At the end of the bug season the large netting should be packed in this bag. The wooden frame, once collapsed, is inserted in the inner compartment of the green bag—Thanks.”

What green bag? she wonders. Probably it got mildew and someone discarded it. In any case, no one had ever followed these instructions of Tig’s; the mosquito netting is merely left in place and tied into a bundle when not in use.

She smooths out the piece of paper carefully and stores it away in her bag. It’s a message, left by Tig for her to find. Magical thinking, she knows that perfectly well, but she indulges in it, anyway, because it’s comforting. She’ll take this piece of paper back to the city, but what will she do with it there? What does one ever do with these cryptic messages from the dead? ♦

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*Margaret Atwood, the author of more than fifty books, is a co-winner of the 2019 Booker Prize, for her novel*

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## KATANIA

By Lara Vapnyar

October 7, 2013

When I was a child, I had a family of doll people. They lived in a red shoebox painted to look like a house, with a dark-brown roof and yellow awnings. Inside the house, there was a set of plastic toy furniture, plus some random household items: a matchbox television, a mirror crafted from a piece of foil, and a thick rug secretly cut out of my old sweater. I also had a few plastic farm animals—a cow, a pig, a goat, and a very large (larger than the cow) chicken, which lived outside the shoebox.

The family itself consisted of the following individuals:

One pretty little doll, made of soft plastic, with painted-on hair and dress, who, in my games, represented me.

One naked, bald, vaguely female doll, made of hard shiny plastic, whom I designated the mother. I made her a Greek-style tunic out of an old handkerchief and glued a lock of my own hair to her head.

Two tiny baby dolls of unidentified gender, made of hard, matte plastic, and wrapped in blankets of the same kind of plastic.

And one hedgehog with a human body, dressed in a long skirt and apron, with tight, curly hair covered with a kerchief, to whom I assigned the role of grandmother.

What my family lacked was a father, but a father doll was a true rarity. Nobody I knew had a father doll. Most of the kids I knew didn't even have fathers. I didn't have a father; mine died when I was two. My family consisted of my mother, my grandmother, and me. That was perfectly normal. Fathers had a tendency to die, or to lose themselves to alcoholism, or to simply "up and go." Our next-door neighbor up and went to the Far North one night. He announced his decision by



Photograph by Clang / Trunk Archive

screaming on the staircase, “I’m sick of you all!”

“So you’re just gonna up and go, huh? Well, good riddance!” his wife screamed back. But his three-year-old daughter cried for weeks. I could hear her through the thin walls of our apartment.

Fatherlessness was so common that even the Soviet authorities were aware of it. The Soviet authorities were famous for being protective of their citizens, so whenever a certain item was scarce they did their best to make that scarcity less conspicuous. My mother, who used to write school textbooks, was prohibited from even mentioning those scarce items. When composing a math problem, for instance, she couldn’t mention bananas, because they were impossible to get in most parts of Russia. She could use apples, but not bananas. Chicken, but not beef. Mothers, but not fathers. She was allowed to write, “A mother gave her three children six apples and asked them to divide the fruit equally,” but forbidden to write about a father asking his kids to do the same thing with bananas. She told me this when I was in my teens, and I didn’t believe her. I combed through my old textbooks to try to prove her wrong, but I couldn’t find a single mention of a father, beef, or bananas.

So imagine my surprise, my joy, when I suddenly got a father doll as a gift! My uncle had bought it for me on a business trip to Bulgaria. It was a beautiful doll, just the right size, a little shorter than the mother and the grandmother but taller than the kid. It had a hard body and a face made of soft, squeezable plastic, painted in masculine shades of brown. Brown eyes, brown lips, brown nostrils. Brown hair made out of some very hairlike material. A perpetual warm brown smile. It was dressed in what appeared to be a Bulgarian national costume of felt hat and boots, rumpled cotton pants, embroidered shirt, and a leather belt. This was exactly how I imagined an ideal father would look.

The father doll had only one imperfection—a bad hip. His left leg wouldn’t stay in place. It kept detaching from his torso and dangling in his pants. But I loved the doll so much that I didn’t see even this as a shortcoming until Tania pointed it out.

Tania and I had become friends exactly ten months before the arrival of the father doll. It was September, the first week of school, and Tania threw a tantrum during the annual Tea with Parents. We were all crowded into our small classroom, with our parents crouching over our kid-size desks. The school cafeteria provided us with hot tea, but the parents were required to bring pastries and cakes, and also a cup and a saucer for their child and themselves. Tania’s mother had apparently brought the wrong cup.

“I wanted the blue one!” Tania screamed. “The blue one with the gold rim! The blue one! The blue one!”

Her voice rose so high that I kept an eye on my cup, hoping it would break, the way cups sometimes did in movies when somebody screamed like that. But then I realized that it was far more interesting to watch Tania. She had fair skin, covered with pale freckles. She had turned tomato red, but her freckles had stayed the same color—I’d never seen anything like that. She closed her eyes, and squeezed her hands into fists, and a vein throbbed on her temple, bright blue and fat. Everybody else in the room fell silent. Our teacher was very young—barely out of college—and she had no idea what to do. But Tania’s

mother simply stood up and smiled and said that she'd go home and get the blue one. She was a tall woman, with a large soft body and a fair complexion like Tania's. Even her hair was the same color as her daughter's, only hers was fixed in a bun on the back of her head, and Tania's was plaited into a thick braid.

Tania's tantrum ended as soon as her mother was out the door. She opened her eyes and sat down, and her skin quickly faded back to pale pink. The teacher asked if she was O.K., and she nodded. Everybody started chatting, pouring tea, and cutting cake again, as if the tantrum had never happened. But I couldn't take my eyes off Tania. She noticed my admiring stare and smiled at me with a warm and very grownup expression.

"Don't you just hate it when you have to drink your tea from the wrong cup?" she said.

I nodded respectfully, as if I were very familiar with the difficulty of this situation. But what I admired was her courage. I would never have had the guts to throw a tantrum. And my mother would never have taken it so calmly. Just a few days before, she had kicked me in the ribs simply for crawling around on the floor and meowing while she was on the phone. I didn't blame her. I had tried to meow into the receiver, even though I knew that she was talking to her boss.

After that tea, Tania and I started walking home together. We lived in the same building, which was only five minutes away from school. It was nine stories high and extremely long—it looked like a skyscraper lying on its side. There were twelve entrances. I lived in No. 2. Tania lived in No. 9. Across the street from our building there was an abandoned apple orchard. We often stopped there on the way home. We'd climb one of the trees and sit swinging our legs and talking about school, about our favorite cartoons, about our dolls. But I could never stay for more than fifteen minutes or so, because my grandmother was waiting for me at home.

Once, I complained to Tania about what a pest my grandmother was. Tania said that her grandmother was dead. "She died a year ago. Her lungs didn't work. She was breathing like this." Tania did a very good impression of rhythmic wheezing.

"My grandfather died of a stroke," I said. "His whole body was paralyzed. He couldn't even go to the bathroom by himself. The nurse had to stick her hand up his butt and get the poop out."

"My grandmother's sister died of a stroke, too," Tania said. "She was in a coma. I don't think she pooped at all."

"How did your father die?" I asked.

I knew that Tania didn't have a father, and for some reason I assumed that he was dead, like mine.

"My father isn't dead!" Tania shrieked, her face turning red the way it had at the Tea with Parents. "He's away on a business trip! In America. He misses me every day!"

I was so stunned by her sudden change of mood that I couldn't process her words. I just stood there staring at her. She swung her schoolbag as if she were about to hit me on the head with it, but changed her mind and ran off toward her entrance. I went home, crying. I cried on and off for the rest of the day. My grandmother and then my mother kept asking me what was wrong, but I wouldn't say. I didn't really understand it myself. Perhaps what I was feeling was shame—not just



the mortification of having made the wrong assumption about Tania's father but the deeper, sickening humiliation of being excluded from the *élite* group of children who had fathers.

The next day at school, I tried to avoid Tania. I did my best not to look in her direction during classes; I didn't talk to her at recess; I sat at the opposite end of the table at lunch. And at the end of the day I went into the bathroom and waited there until everybody had gone home. It didn't work. When I finally came out, I saw Tania waiting for me on the school porch. I considered pretending that she wasn't there, but then decided that that would be too silly. We walked home together.

After that incident, we never talked about our families again, but we did talk about our dolls. I would boast about how many animals mine had. "A cow, a pig, a really huge chicken!"

And Tania would say, with a dismissive smile, "Mine live in a city. There is no space for farm animals. Their names are Sigrid, Amaranta, and Arabella. Amaranta and Arabella are scientists, but Sigrid is an actress."

One day Tania invited me over. I hesitated. She had a key hanging around her neck on a long blue ribbon. A lot of kids in my class had their apartment key hanging from their neck. They were supposed to go home, let themselves in, heat up their dinner, and wait for their mother to come home. They knew how to turn on a stove; they didn't worry that the match would burn down too quickly and hurt their fingers. They knew how to pour soup from the pot into their bowl without splashing it all over the floor. I couldn't imagine ever becoming that accomplished. My grandmother was always waiting for me at home. She would watch from the window, and as soon as she saw me she'd put dinner on the stove and rush to open the door. I didn't have to ring the bell, let alone unlock the door myself. I was afraid that if I went to Tania's apartment I would somehow betray my incompetence. But if I didn't go I might betray my incompetence in an even worse way.

I went. Tania unlocked the door with admirable skill. I said that I needed to call my grandmother. Tania pointed to the phone, which stood on a little shelf next to the coatrack. I called and told a complicated lie about an after-school gymnastics class. I hoped the gymnastics thing would impress my grandmother, who was always telling me that if I didn't do gymnastics I would grow up with a crooked back. The lie worked, and I turned to Tania, expecting her to be impressed with my ingenuity. What I saw instead was a cold, mocking expression.

Her apartment was smaller than ours. Only one room—we had three. The TV was smaller, and the furniture shabbier, and the dishes in the cupboard didn't gleam the way ours did.

"Do you want some of my dinner?" Tania asked.

I imagined her asking me to light a match or ladle the soup and shook my head.

"Good," she said. "I'm not hungry, either. Do you want to see my dolls?"

I did. Very much so.

Tania's dolls lived in a shoebox, too. Only her shoebox was white and

stood perched on the edge of a large dresser. “It’s a skyscraper,” she explained. “Like they have in America.” The dolls didn’t have a lot of furniture, but they had a plastic airplane placed on a little shelf by the box. A tiny ladder led from inside their “apartment” to the plane.

“They need it when they go on business trips. Or, if there is a fire in the building, they can just get in the plane and fly off.”

“Where are they now?” I asked.

“Arabella is away on a business trip, but I can show you Amaranta and Sigrid.”

Amaranta was sitting in the bathtub. She looked a lot like my mother doll, but bigger and less bald. Sigrid was still in bed. Her head rested on a tiny pillow and her body was covered with a handkerchief. She was a tiny blonde, made of polished wood. She was beautiful and thin and foreign in a way my dolls could never hope to be.

“She’s very pretty,” I said.

“She’s talented, too,” Tania said.

As I was putting on my shoes to go home, I spotted another little doll stuck behind the shoe rack. This one was plastic. She had broken arms and a smashed-in face. I figured that this was Arabella.

**T**he next time, we went to my place.

My grandmother gave us barley soup and chicken with mashed potatoes. I was a little worried that Tania wouldn’t like the food and would throw a tantrum or something, but she ate quickly and gracefully, said “Thank you,” and carried her dishes to the sink when she was done. My grandmother was delighted with her.

After dinner, I led Tania into my room. She took everything in with a quizzical expression, as if making an inspection.

“So you have your own room?” she asked.

I nodded. I was suddenly impressed by the fact that I had my own room.

“And you have a balcony?”

I said, “Yeah.”

She walked over to the rug that was hanging on the wall above my bed and yanked at its tassels.

“And you have rugs and everything,” she said.

I nodded and yanked at the tassels, too.

“You’re rich, aren’t you?”

I shrugged. I honestly didn’t know whether we were rich or not.

Tania seemed to like my dolls. She took them out of the box one by one and nodded in approval. She smiled at the grandmother. “Hedgehog! That’s clever,” she said. She petted my pig, she stroked the cow’s back. “So, they’re farmers, right? They live in a village?” she asked.

I had never thought about this. They had a barn and all those animals—so I supposed they were farmers and did live in a village.

“Listen,” Tania said. “Let’s give your animals a bath.”

But then my grandmother came in and said that it was time for Tania to go home and for me to do my homework.

“See this key?” Tania said, pointing to the key around her neck. “I can come and go as I please. But you, you’re stuck with your grandmother. You may be rich, but I have my freedom.”

Even then, at seven, I found the pathos of her words nauseating, but I was more pleased than angered. After she left, I looked around my room, at the balcony door, the rug, the nice furniture, and the red shoebox full of well-to-do farmers, and I felt enormous satisfaction. I didn’t have a key, but so what? I guess I didn’t care that much about freedom.

My newfound identity was shattered as soon as my mother got home. I asked her if we were rich. She laughed for two full minutes, then bent over and pointed to her feet. “Look at my boots,” she said. “Do they look like the boots of a rich person to you?” The boots were scuffed, discolored, and covered with brown stains.

Later that night, on my way to the bathroom, I overheard my mother and grandmother talking about Tania.

“What do you think of that girl?” my mother asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Apparently she told Katya we were rich.”

“Rich?”

Now it was my grandmother’s turn to laugh.

Then she blew her nose and said, “She seemed polite.”

“Polite! Huh! I wish you could see how she treats her mother.” And my mother told my grandmother about the Tea with Parents tantrum. After that, she started whispering. I couldn’t hear anything. Fortunately for me, my grandmother, who was partly deaf, couldn’t hear, either. My mother had to switch back to her normal volume. She said she’d heard that Tania’s

father had defected.

I heard my grandmother gasp.

“Sveta’s aunt said that he went on a business trip to the States and stayed. Just like that. Went to the authorities there and asked for refugee status or something. Can you imagine not caring about your wife and kid at all? Sveta’s aunt said that Tania’s mother was taken in for questioning. I’m sure she hadn’t even known about his plans.”

“Of course she hadn’t!” my grandmother said.

“Still, she got fired from her job.”

“That poor, poor woman.”

After that they started talking about our leaking fridge, and whether it was time to call somebody to fix it, and I tiptoed back to my room.

I didn’t entirely understand what they’d been talking about, but I gathered that what Tania’s father had done was something hateful and ugly. I felt sorry for Tania, but I also gloated a little. My father might have died, but at least he hadn’t done it on purpose.

In January, Tania proposed that we create a country for our dolls. We named it Katania—a combination of our names, Katya and Tania—and decided that it should have only two inhabited places: a village called Katushki and a city called T-City. The next step was to create a map.

We took four huge sheets of paper, taped them together, and started drawing. We painted the road from Katushki to T-City the usual brown color of roads. It meandered through the green of the woods, got almost as far as the ocean, made a loop, and returned to a bridge across the river. To make the river, we cut a wavy strip of foil from a chocolate wrapper and glued it to the map. The bridge was a simple strip of gray paper that we glued over the river. We weren’t happy with the bridge, because the yellow glue seeped out from under the edges and spilled all over the river.

“You know what it looks like?” I asked Tania, pointing to the glue stains.

“Snot!” she said, and I laughed, because that was exactly what I was thinking.

We spent months crouching over that map, drawing and redrawing the contours, changing or enhancing the colors, until our hands turned glossy and dark from all the paint. It was so much fun that I was sorry when the summer vacation started, because I knew that Tania would be going to stay with her grandfather in his village.

My own summer was uneventful, because I refused to go to camp. “But it’s free!” my mother lamented. “My office pays for it!” I was adamant. At the end of June, she took a week off to take me to Leningrad, but I came down with a fever on the train ride there and couldn’t enjoy the trip. On hot July weekends, my mother and I would take the morning

train to the countryside, where we strolled down a dirt path through a wood to a pond, and we swam and then ate hard-boiled eggs and cheese on a grassy hill that smelled like hay. We always stayed a little longer than we'd planned and had to run to the station to catch our train back to Moscow.

On weekdays, I mostly stayed in our sweltering apartment, pacing around my room, complaining that I was bored. One day, I got inspired, took four old wooden rulers, broke them into pieces, and glued them back together in the shape of a chicken coop. My huge chicken barely fit inside. Otherwise, I mostly neglected my dolls.

But then my uncle came back from Bulgaria and brought me the father doll.

I don't think I ever loved a toy so much. I spent the first week just playing with him all day long. When I noticed his bad hip, I tried to fix it with tape, but when that didn't work I decided that he was even better this way. Even more special. I would feed him and dress him (his boots were removable!) and make the other family members dote on him.

"How's your leg today, honey? Better? No? Not even a little? Well, sit down and rest, then."

And he would beam his brown smile at everything and everybody.

I loved to sit him on the sofa next to the little girl doll and a pig or a goat and have them watch my matchbox TV. They stayed like that for hours, while the babies slept, the grandmother cooked in the kitchen, and the mother either worked or pasted her hair on in the bathroom. "Isn't it a picture of happiness!" my mother exclaimed, and I didn't like her sarcasm one bit.

I couldn't wait to show my new doll to Tania. I counted the days until August 22nd, the day she was supposed to come back.

But Tania didn't come on the 22nd. Nor did she come on the 23rd. I called her a million times, and even walked by her window, looking up, hoping to catch sight of her. She called me on the 25th to say that she was sick with a stomach flu. I offered to visit her, but Tania said she'd come to my place the next day. She rang the bell at nine in the morning, as we were finishing breakfast. I got out of my chair so fast that I knocked over the soft-boiled egg on my plate, spilling the yolk onto the table.

Tania had grown about an inch over the summer; she was taller than me. She'd also lost weight and got a nice tan. Her skin was now darker than her hair. My grandmother offered her some breakfast, but she said she'd just eaten. Grandmother then urged me to come back and finish my meal. I refused—I couldn't wait any longer.

I took Tania by the elbow and dragged her toward my room. "Look, look what I've got," I kept chanting.

The whole doll family was gathered in their living room. The father and the little girl on the sofa. The mother and grandmother on the chair at the table. The twins lay on the floor, because there was no other place for them.

Tania didn't notice the father at first. She thought I was referring to the chicken coop. She approved of the chicken coop. She said, "That's clever."

"No!" I said, pointing to the father doll. "Look here. Look what I've got. It's their father!"

Now Tania saw him. She seemed to tense all over, then she reached into the box. There was a certain stiffness to her movements that made me apprehensive. She picked the father up gingerly, slowly, and brought him close to her face. For a second, I was afraid that she was going to eat him. But she just examined him, touched his hair, stroked the felt on his hat, sniffed at his leather boots.

"It's a boy doll," she said in a grave tone.

"Yeah," I said. "It's a boy doll. It's their father."

She was about to put him back when she noticed that his left leg was dangling in his pants.

"It's damaged!" she said, and I saw an expression of relief spread across her face.

"No, it's not damaged," I said.

"Yes, it is. It's a cripple," she said.

"He's not a cripple," I said, and reached to take the father back. She dodged away from me.

"He's a cripple, all right. And look at that stupid smile. Is he a retard, too?"

"He's not!" I screamed.

I tried to grab my father doll out of her hand, but she jumped away.

"Cripple and retard, cripple and retard," she started to sing, swinging the father in her hand.

"Your father is worse!" I screamed.

She stopped singing and stared at me.

I tried to remember that ugly word my mother had used. Defitted? Defetated? Effectted? I couldn't. I had to put it in the words I knew. "He ran off! He up and went!" I said. "He doesn't care about you! He hates you! He's sick of you!"

Tania's face was turning that scary beet color. I didn't care.

"He's never coming back!"

"You're lying!" Tania yelled and punched me on the shoulder. I tried to hit her back, but she ducked, then lunged for the balcony door, brandishing the father doll in her hand like a trophy.

I imagined him falling nine floors down to the pavement, his dear face destroyed just like Arabella's. I leaped at Tania, and

fell to the floor on top of her, pounding her in the chest. Her body felt firm and resilient under my fists, as if it were made of durable rubber. I'd had no idea that hitting someone could feel so good. I kept pounding, even after she had released the father and started to wail. I didn't stop until my mother and my grandmother ran into the room and pulled me off her.

My mother punished me by taking away my dolls for two months. She put all the animals into the shoebox with the people, closed the lid, and balanced it on top of the bookcase. As if it were nothing, as if it weren't a house where a family lived! I remember crying, and counting the days until I'd get them back. But when my mother finally handed me the box I was disappointed. The dolls didn't seem so interesting anymore. They led their quiet, uneventful lives in the shoebox. The children either slept or misbehaved. The grandmother snarled at them. The father nursed his bad hip. The mother kept losing her hair. By the end of the year, I had stopped playing with the dolls altogether, and my grandmother gave them to the little girl next door, the one whose father had gone to the Far North.

Tania and I didn't play together anymore. We avoided each other at school. Then, a year later, she and her mother moved, and she transferred to a different school. I didn't see her again until the end of high school, when her mother threw a going-away party for her. Tania was moving to America. Her father had arranged for her to go to college there. I didn't want to go to the party, but my mother insisted.

Tania had grown a whole head taller than me and acquired a strange, restless manner. She talked very fast, with fidgety gestures, and her eyes kept flickering from one object to another. She said that her father had got back in touch about two years earlier, but I couldn't ask her any questions, because there were so many people there—and all of them wanted to talk to Tania, or kiss her, or corner her against a wall and give her useless advice. I didn't stay at the party long, but I kept thinking about it for days. It was odd that Tania had invited me in the first place, when we hadn't spoken for years. Apparently, she needed me, of all people, to know that her father did care about her after all.

Ten years later, when my husband and I immigrated to the U.S., I tried to look her up, but couldn't find her. I assumed that she had changed her name. Another eight years passed, and then all of a sudden I got a message from her on Facebook. "Aren't you Katya V. from my old school?"

I had just finalized my divorce and changed back to my maiden name. If I hadn't done that, she wouldn't have been able to find me.

I was aching to know what had become of her, or at least what she looked like now, but her Facebook page didn't tell me much. She barely posted anything, and her face in the profile picture was half blocked by the child in her arms.

Tania said that she was spending the summer at her house in the Berkshires and invited me to visit.

She'd caught me at a strange moment in my life. I was about to start a two-week vacation—my first since the divorce and the first I would spend alone—but I had no idea what to do with it. Back when most of my friends were planning their summer, the pain of the divorce had been too great and the future too murky for me to commit to anything. I had assumed that I'd be too depressed to go anywhere. The protective layer I'd grown during my married years had been peeled off,

leaving me completely exposed.

But when the summer finally started I found that I felt better. The idea of being on my own began to excite me. I still felt exposed, but I also felt that the exposure would help me regain some long-forgotten intensity of living. With no husband's wishes to satisfy, I could go anywhere I wanted. Except that the nice vacation spots were already booked, and the affordable plane tickets were gone.

Tania's invitation gave me an idea: I'd drive up to her place, visit with her, and then continue driving north. No plan, no destination—I'd just drive as far as I wanted and find somewhere to stay. I'd never done anything like this, but I felt that it was time to do things I'd never done before.

Tania sent incredibly detailed driving directions and insisted that I turn off my G.P.S. In my years of driving in the U.S., I had become addicted to my G.P.S., and I couldn't imagine turning it off, so I decided to keep Tania's directions in mind while listening to the G.P.S., and to follow my intuition whenever they disagreed. This strategy got me lost as soon as I ventured off the highway, but I didn't really mind. The closer I got to Tania's place, the more I dreaded our initial conversation. I did want to talk about our childhood, but to get there we would need to catch up first. I'd have to tell her that my mother had died. That I probably wouldn't be able to have children. And that my husband had left me. "Up and went. Because he was sick of me." (I guess I didn't really understand the cruelty of those words until my divorce.) At least my career was on the right track. That was something.

"Recalculating," the G.P.S. informed me for the twentieth time, in the face of my disobedience. It demanded that I go back to the highway, which was clearly wrong. But Tania's directions had also stopped making sense. I decided to disregard both of them and took the prettiest road that led uphill. I realized that I hadn't visited the countryside in years. All those quaint houses, all those barns, all those animals in pastures made me feel both nostalgic and alienated. I knew that I'd never want to live in a place like this.

At some point, I came to a fork in the road. I chose to veer to the right and continue uphill. A beautiful property came into view: a meadow full of daisies, a little pond with a single duck, a cluster of lilac bushes, a few apple trees, an extensive vegetable garden, and, at the top of the hill, a house that looked remarkably like my old shoebox. It was painted red, with yellow awnings. I slowed down to admire the view, just as my G.P.S. reluctantly announced that I had reached my destination. I drove a few feet forward and saw the address printed on a little sign: "12 Berry Hill Road."

As I pulled into the driveway, the front door was opened by a large woman in a flowery sundress, her blond hair fixed in a little bun. My first thought was that Tania's mother had come to visit, but then I realized that this was Tania herself. Tania, who'd grown large and soft. When she hugged me, it felt like being smothered in a down blanket.

Within ten minutes, I understood that I needn't have worried about having to tell her all the sad things that had happened in my life. She didn't ask me any questions, and she didn't let me talk. As soon as I set foot in the house, she began a never-ending tour, up and down the stairs, in and out of doors, through rooms, across halls. She didn't even offer me a drink. I had



to ask for a glass of water, and then she gave me a bottle of Evian to drink on the go.

Tania talked faster than ever, and there was no way to protect myself from the gushes of information. Post and beam. Restored and reassembled in 1993. Hemlock timber. Wooden pegs. Dyed plaster walls. Central air. Finnish sauna off the master bedroom. Japanese toilet in the guest bathroom. (After four hours in the car, I used this with great enthusiasm.) Six bedrooms wasn't so big, she informed me. The in-laws had a twelve-bedroom in a neighboring town. Their pond was ridiculous, though. Not fit for swimming. Tania's pond was perfect, but the kids still preferred to swim in the pool. The kids were away right now. Attending a tennis day camp.

A large framed photograph of the family graced the living-room wall above a huge, obviously antique sofa. In the picture, Tania, her husband, and their two daughters sat on that same sofa, smiling. I thought that they were smiling a little too hard. I liked the look of the older girl, though. She reminded me of the Tania I'd known as a girl.

The adult Tania took a long look at the picture. "I guess we're happy," she said.

"Pretty hard not to be in a house like this," I said and bit my tongue. But, fortunately, Tania didn't hear the sarcasm in my tone. The tour was starting to wear me out. I didn't know what reaction she expected. Continuous admiration? Or a bitter acknowledgment of her wealth? Something like her reaction when I took her on a tour of my room twenty-eight years before? "So—you have six bedrooms? And you have antique sofas and everything? You're rich, aren't you?"

I was relieved when we finally left the house. But the tour wasn't over yet. Tania led me to the garden.

Keeping a garden was such a pain, she said. Row-cropping. Draining the soil. Weeding. Aphids. Maggots. Cutworms. Beetles. Did I know how difficult it was to find a decent gardener or a decent pest man? But it was beautiful, wasn't it? Peas. Carrots. Look at the kale. Five types of kale. Rows and rows of kale. They all enjoyed eating kale. Yes, the kids, too. Kale did wonders for their health. Simply wonders. As did eating eggs from their own chickens.

Tania led me to her *pièce de résistance*—a chicken coop. A spacious wooden construction that housed ten or twelve chickens. All white, all big, all well fed.

"I can't believe you have chickens!" I said, unable to contain my laughter.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

Tania had built herself an exact replica of my old doll house, down to the chicken coop, but she didn't seem to see the absurdity of the situation.

"Do you remember Katania?" I asked.

"Do I remember what?"

"Katania, our country?"

She looked at me, straining to understand what I was talking about.

“Katania,” I said, “the country that we created for our dolls. Mine lived in a village and yours lived in a city.”

“Vaguely,” she said. “I remember that we got in a big fight once.”

I nodded.

“Because you wouldn’t share your dolls.”

“Right,” I said.

“I teach my kids to share.”

“Good idea,” I said, and looked at my watch. It was time for me to go, I told her.

Tania didn’t protest. She said it was a pity that I wouldn’t meet her husband and kids, but otherwise she appeared to be satisfied with my visit.

As it happened, though, I did get to take a look at her husband. I had just pulled out of the driveway when I saw a silver Lexus pulling in. A man got out of the car, and I recognized him from the photograph above the sofa. He was wearing white linen pants and a white button-down shirt. He took a big pastry box from the passenger seat and started walking toward the house.

There was something strange about his gait, but at first I didn’t realize what it was. Then I got it: he was putting his entire weight on his right leg. He walked as if his left leg didn’t work. He walked as if it were detached at the hip. ♦

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