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The Doll-Master

And Other Tales of Terror

Written by Joyce Carol Oates

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JOYCE CAROL
OATES
THE DOLL-MASTER
AND OTHER TALES OF TERROR



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for Head of Zeus

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The Doll-Master

for Ellen Datlow

“You can hold her. But don’t drop her.”

Solemnly my little cousin Amy spoke. And solemnly Amy held out to me her beloved doll.

It was a baby-doll, in baby-clothes, a little top adorned with pink baby ducklings and on the tiny baby-doll-feet, little pink booties. And a baby-diaper, white, with a silver safety pin.

A soft fleshy baby-doll with a placid baby-face, malleable baby-fingers and fleshy little baby-arms and -legs that could be manipulated, to a degree. The baby-hair was fine and blond and curly and the baby-eyes were slate-blue marble, that opened and closed as you tilted the doll backward or forward. There is a scary ticklish sensation you feel when you see a baby close up because you think that the baby could be hurt and this is how I felt about Baby Emily though she was *only a doll* . . .

My cousin Amy was three years old which was younger than my age by eleven months. This is what we were told. A birthday is an important event in our family, our parents said.

JOYCE CAROL OATES

Amy was the daughter of my mother's younger sister who was my Aunt Jill. So, Mommy explained, Amy was my *cousin*.

I was a little jealous sometimes. Amy could talk better than I could and adults liked to talk to her marveling at her "speech skills" which made me feel bad, for nobody marveled at mine.

Amy was a little girl, shorter than me. Smaller all over than me.

It was strange—friends of our mothers thought it was "darling"—to see such a small child as Amy clutching a baby doll. Fussing and fretting over Baby Emily as Amy's mother fussed and fretted over her.

Even pretending to "nurse" Baby Emily with a tiny baby bottle filled with milk. And "changing" Baby Emily's diaper.

Between her fleshy baby-legs, Baby Emily was smooth. There was no way for Baby Emily to soil her diaper.

I did not remember ever soiling my diaper. I do not remember now. I am inclined to think that, as a baby, I did not have to wear a diaper but that is probably inaccurate, and irrational. For I was a fully normal (boy) infant, I am sure. If there were "accidents" in the night especially, in my pj's as my mother called them, I do not remember.

I do not remember "nursing," either. I think that I was "nursed" from a bottle.

All this is a very long time ago. It's natural not to remember.

You can hold her. But don't drop her—these were Amy's words which I do remember. They were an echo of an adult mother's words which you often hear.

* * *

THE DOLL-MASTER

It was a terrible surprise in the family, when Amy *passed away*.

At first they said that Amy was “going to the clinic for tests.” Then, they said that Amy would be “in the hospital for a few days.” Then, they said that Amy would “not be coming home from the hospital.”

In all this time, I was not taken to the hospital to see Amy. I was told that my cousin would be home, soon—“You can see her then, sweetie. That will be soon enough.”

And, “Your cousin is very tired right now. Your cousin needs to sleep, and rest, and get strong again.”

Afterward, I would learn that it was a rare blood sickness my cousin had. It was a kind of leukemia and very fast-acting in young children.

When they said that Amy would not be coming home, I did not say anything. I did not ask any questions. I did not cry. I was *stony faced*, I overhear my aunt saying to my mother. I wondered if to be *stony faced* was a bad thing, or a good thing. For then, people let you alone.

If you cried, they tried to comfort you. But if you were *stony faced* they let you alone.

It was around this time that I stole Baby Emily out of Amy’s room. We were often at my aunt’s house and while my mother and my aunt were crying together I went to Amy’s room and lifted Baby Emily from my cousin’s bed where the doll was lying with other, less interesting dolls and stuffed toys as if someone had flung them all down, and had not even made up the bed properly.

JOYCE CAROL OATES

I did not think that my parents knew that I'd stolen Baby Emily inside my jacket, and brought her home with me. But later, I would realize that probably they knew, as my aunt knew, and did not say anything to me; they did not discipline me.

Talk was all of Amy, for a long time. If you entered a room and adults were speaking in lowered voices, they would cease at once. Bright adult faces turned toward you: "Hello, Robbie!"

I was too young to consider whether such a rare blood sickness might be "genetic"—that is, carried in the blood from one generation to the next.

When I was older I would research *leukemia* on the Internet. But still, I would not know.

When I was alone with Baby Emily we cried because we missed Amy. I did not cry because Amy was *dead* only because Amy was *gone*.

But I had Amy's baby-doll. I snuggled with Baby Emily in my bed and that made me feel better, a little.

When I was five years old, and going to preschool, Baby Emily disappeared from my room.

I was so surprised! I looked under the bed and in the closet and in each of my bureau drawers and then I looked in all these places again as well as beneath the covers at the foot of the bed but Baby Emily was gone.

I ran to my mother, crying. I asked my mother where Baby Emily was for there was no secret about my cousin's doll-baby now. My mother told me that my father "didn't think it was a good idea" for me to be playing with a doll at my age. Dolls are

THE DOLL-MASTER

for girls, she said. Not boys. “Daddy just thought it might be better to take the doll away before you got ‘too attached’ . . .” Guiltily my mother spoke, and there was softness in her voice, but nothing I said could change her mind, no matter how I cried, or how angry I became, slapping and kicking at her and saying how I hated her, my mother did not change her mind because my father would not allow it. “He said he’d ‘indulged’ you long enough. And he blames me.”

In place of Baby Emily who was so sweet and placid and smelled of foam-rubber my father had instructed my mother to buy me an “action toy”—one of the new-model expensive ones—a U.S. Navy SEAL robot-soldier that came fully armed, and could move forward across the room, empowered by a battery.

I would never forgive either of them, I thought. But particularly, I would never forgive *him*.

The first of the *found dolls* was Mariska.

“Take her. But don’t drop her.”

My Friend spoke quietly, urgently. Glancing about to see if anyone was watching. Many times I’d walked to school, and home from school, avoiding the school bus where there were older boys who taunted me. My family’s house was at the top of Prospect Hill above the city and looking toward the river which was often wreathed in mist. The middle school was about a mile down the hill along a route I’d come to memorize. Often I took shortcuts through alleys and across backyards where I moved swiftly with the furtiveness of a wild creature. This street was

JOYCE CAROL OATES

Catamount with a narrow lane that ran parallel behind it past six-foot wooden fences beginning to rot, trash cans and piles of debris.

My Friend said *Never make eye contact. That way they don't see you, either.*

No one ever saw me. For I moved quickly and furtively. And if they saw me at a distance they saw only a boy—a young boy with a blurred face.

My Friend was very tall. Taller than my father. I had never looked directly at my Friend (who forbade it) but I had a sense that my Friend had features sharp and cunning as a fox's and his natural way of moving was agile as a fox's and so I had to half-run to keep up with my Friend who was inclined to impatience.

“Take her! No one is watching.”

Mariska was a beautiful ceramic doll very different from Baby Emily. Mariska had creamy ceramic-skin and on her cheeks two patches of rouge. She was dressed in the dirndl-costume of an Eastern European peasant—white blouse, full skirt and apron, white cotton stockings and boots. Her blond hair was braided into two plaits and she had a rosebud mouth and blue eyes with thick blond lashes. It was strange to touch Mariska's skin which was a hard and unyielding ceramic-skin except where it had been cracked and broken.

Mariska's arms were outspread in surprise, that such a prettily dressed blond girl with plaited hair and blue eyes could be allowed to topple from a porch railing into the mud, her hair soiled, her skirt soiled and torn and the white stockings filthy.

THE DOLL-MASTER

And her legs were at an odd angle to one another as if the left had been twisted at the hip.

Walking with my Friend along the lane behind Catamount Street and between the rotted boards of a fence we saw Mariska. My Friend gripped my hand tight so that the bones hurt.

She is our prize. She is the one we've been waiting for. Hurry! Take her! No one will see.

It was a thundery dark afternoon. I was shivering with cold or with excitement. For my Friend had appeared walking beside me with no warning. Often I did not see my Friend for days, or a week. Then, my Friend would appear. But I was forbidden to look at his face.

When my Friend came into my life, I am not certain. Mariska came into my life when I was in eighth grade and so it was earlier than that time.

Mariska's house was one of the ugly asphalt-sided houses down the hill. Not just one family lived in the house but several families for it was a *rental*, as my mother said.

These were people who lived *down the hill* as my mother said. They were not people who lived *on the hill* as we did.

Yet, children played here. Played and shouted and laughed here at the foot of Prospect Hill which was so very different from the crest of Prospect Hill where my family had lived for decades.

Because of the steep hill, a flight of wooden steps led down from the crude porch at the rear of Mariska's house to the rutted ground ten or fifteen feet below. But no one walked here much—the ground was covered in debris, even raw garbage.

JOYCE CAROL OATES

Mariska had fallen from the porch railing where someone had carelessly set her. I thought this must have happened.

Unless Mariska had been tossed from the porch, by someone who had tired of her rouged cheeks, rosebud mouth, colorful peasant costume.

My Friend said eagerly *She is our prize. No one else can claim her now.*

My Friend said *Lift her! And put your hand over her mouth.*

My Friend said *Inside your jacket. Walk quickly. Don't run! Take the back way.*

Mariska was heavier than you would think. A ceramic doll is a heavy doll.

Mariska's arms and legs were awkwardly spread. By force, I managed to subdue them.

I could not hide Mariska in my room where she would be found by my mother or our housekeeper. I could not hide Mariska anywhere in the house though it was a large house with three stories and many of its rooms shut off. So I brought her to the "carriage house"—which was used as a garage for my parents' vehicles and as a place for storage and where I believed the beautiful ceramic doll would be safe, wrapped in canvas many times and placed in one of the horse stalls in the cobwebby shadow.

It had been proudly recounted to me: my father's grandfather had been mayor of the capital city six miles to the south which was now a *racially troubled city with a high crime rate*. After my father's grandfather was no longer mayor he'd moved his family to Prospect Hill in this suburb of mostly white people

THE DOLL-MASTER

beside the Delaware River. In those days there'd been horses in the carriage house, in four stalls at the rear, and still you could smell the animals, a faint odor of dried manure, horse-sweat, hay. Here, I knew that Mariska would be safe. I would come to visit her when I wished. And Mariska would always, always be there, where I had left her, wrapped in canvas for safekeeping.

When my Friend did not come to me I was very lonely but if there had been horses in the stable, as there had been in my great-grandfather's time, I would not have been so lonely.

My parents had warned me not to "play" in the carriage house. The roof leaked badly and was partly rotted. There was a second floor that sagged in the middle as if the boards had become rubbery. Only the front part of the carriage house was used now for my parents' vehicles and the rest was filled with abandoned things—furniture, tires, an old broken tricycle of mine, a baby buggy, cardboard boxes. Nothing was of use any longer, but nothing was thrown away.

Hornets built their nests beneath the eaves. The buzzing was peaceful if the hornets were not disturbed.

No one had told me exactly but I knew: my father's family had been well-to-do until the early 1960s; then, the family business had gone into decline. Bitterly my father spoke of *overseas competition*.

Still, the house on Prospect Hill was one of the old, large houses envied by others. There were real estate investments that continued to yield income and my father was an accountant for a prosperous business of which he spoke with some pride. My

JOYCE CAROL OATES

father was not a distinguished man or in any way unusual except for living in one of the old, large houses on Prospect Hill which he had inherited from his father. I thought that my father might have loved me more, if he had been more successful.

“What a terrible thing! Now it’s coming *here*.”

The terrible thing was not a robbery or a burglary or an arson-set fire or a shooting-murder but a little girl missing here in our suburban town and not in the capital city six miles to the south. The news was in all the papers and on TV and radio. Such excitement, it was like dropping a lighted match into dried hay—you could not guess what would erupt from such a small act.

At our school we were ushered into assembly and announcements made by the principal and a police officer in a uniform. The little girl who was missing was in fourth grade and lived on Catamount Street and we were warned not to speak with strangers or go anywhere with strangers and if any stranger approached us, to run away as quickly as possible and notify our parents or our teachers or Mrs. Rickett who was our principal.

At the same time, it was suspected that the little girl who’d disappeared had been kidnapped by her own father who lived in New Brunswick. The father was arrested and questioned but claimed to know nothing about his daughter.

For days there was news of the missing girl. Then, news of the missing girl faded. Then, ceased.

Once a child is *gone*, she will not return. That was a truth we would learn in middle school.

THE DOLL-MASTER

Mariska was safe in her hiding place, in the farthest horse stall in the old stable at the rear of the carriage house behind our house where no one would ever look.

It was not my fault that my cousin Amy *went away* and left me.

All your life, you yearn to return to what has been. You yearn to return to those you have lost. You will do terrible things to return, which no one else can understand.

The second *found doll* was not until I was in ninth grade.

Annie was a pretty-faced girl-doll with skin like real skin to touch except some of the dye had begun to wear off and you could see the gray rubber beneath which was shivery and ugly.

Annie was a small doll, not so large and heavy as Mariska. She wore a cowgirl costume with a suede skirt, a shiny-buckled belt, a shirt with a little suede vest and a little black tie, and on her feet were cowboy boots. She had been partly broken, one of her arms was dislocated and turned too easily in its shoulder socket, and her red-orange curly hair had come out in patches to reveal the rubber scalp beneath.

What was pretty about Annie was her placid blue-violet marble eyes and the freckles on her face that made you want to smile. Her eyes, like Baby Emily's eyes, shut when you leaned her backward, and opened when you leaned her forward.

My Friend had seen Annie first, in the park near my house. Beyond the playground where children shouted and laughed swinging on the swings there was a little grove of picnic tables

JOYCE CAROL OATES

and beneath one of the tables in which initials had been carved and gouged the cowgirl-doll lay on the ground, on her back.

Here! Hurry.

My Friend shoved me forward. My Friend's hard hand on my back.

What was this, beneath the picnic table? I was very excited—I stooped to see.

A doll! A cowgirl-doll! Abandoned.

Picnic debris had been dumped onto the ground. Soda bottles, food-packages, stubs of cigarettes. It was very cruel that the cowgirl-doll with the freckled face and red-orange hair should be abandoned here.

Her arms were outstretched. Her legs were at odd angles to her body and to each other. Because she had been dropped on her back her eyes were partly closed but you could see the glassy-glisten beneath, of surprise and alarm.

Help me! Don't leave me.

Distinctly we heard this plea of Annie's, my Friend and me. Her voice was whispery and small, her chipped-scarlet lips scarcely moved.

Inside my hooded jacket, I bore Annie to safety.

My Friend guided me from the park by an obscure route.

My Friend preceded me, to see if the way was clear.

It was a quarter-mile to the carriage house and to the shadowy horse stall at the rear.

In this way in a trance of wonderment Cowgirl Annie the second *found doll* was brought home.

THE DOLL-MASTER

* * *

By this time the little fourth-grade girl who'd lived on Catamount Street was rarely spoken of. For she had *gone away*, and would not be returning.

And this new girl who'd "gone missing"—from Prospect Heights Park—when her older sister and brother who'd been supposed to be watching her at the swings had been distracted by friends—she too had *gone away*, and would not be returning.

Another time, much alarm was raised at our school. Though the missing girl was a third-grader, at another school. Though we had heard the warnings about strangers many times by now, by ninth grade. The uniformed police officer who spoke to us from the auditorium stage reassured us that "whoever took this child will be found" but these too were familiar words, some of us smiled to hear.

In the park that afternoon there'd been solitary men, always in a park near a playground there are solitary men, and some of these men have criminal records, and these were taken into custody by police, and questioned. But we knew, the little girl would never be found.

Now I was no longer taunted by the older boys on the school bus for I was not one of the younger children. In my eyes such hatred blazed for these boys, they had learned to avoid me.

I learned that to be respected you had to be steely-calm and still. Or, you had to be reckless. You could not show weakness. You could not be "nice"—you would be ground beneath the boots of the strong like a beetle.

JOYCE CAROL OATES

But now the second of the *found dolls* had come into my life, I did not care what these boys thought of me, or anyone else except my Friend.

The second of the *found dolls*. When I was fourteen.

Not soon, for my Friend cautioned me against recklessness.

Not soon but within two years, the third of the *found dolls* entered my life.

Then, after eleven months, a fourth *found doll*.

These were not local dolls. These were dolls discovered miles from Prospect Hill, in other towns.

For now I had a driver's license. I had the use of my mother's car.

At school I was a quiet student, but my teachers seemed to like me and my grades were usually high. At home, I was quiet in a way that maddened my father for it seemed to him *sullen, rebellious*.

I had a habit of grunting instead of talking, or mumbling under my breath. I had a habit of not looking at any adult including my parents for it was easier that way. My Friend did not want me to look at *him*—my Friend understood the effort such looks require. You can look into a doll's eyes without fear of the doll seeing into your soul in a way hostile to you but you can't be so careless looking at anyone else. And this too maddened my father, that I would not meet his gaze: I was *disrespectful*.

My father said *I will send him into the army—not to college. They'll straighten him out there.*

THE DOLL-MASTER

My mother pleaded *Robbie should see a therapist, I've told you. Please let me take him to a therapist.*

So it happened, on the day of my eighteenth birthday I had an appointment with Dr. G., a (psycho) therapist whose specialty was *troubled adolescents*. I sat in a chair facing Dr. G. in a trance of fear and dislike not raising my eyes to hers, but staring resolutely at the floor at her feet.

Dr. G.'s office was sparsely furnished. Dr. G. did not sit behind a desk but in a comfortable chair, so that I could see her legs, which were the legs of a stout middle-aged woman, and I thought how much preferable it was at school where our teachers sat behind desks so that you could see only the tops of their bodies mostly, and not their legs. It was easy to think of them as big ungainly dolls that way, whose jaw-hinges were always moving.

Dr. G. asked me to sit in a chair facing her, about five feet from her, and this too was a comfortable chair though I did not feel comfortable in it and knew that I must be vigilant.

"Robbie? Talk to me, please. Your mother has said that your grades are very good—you don't have trouble at school communicating, evidently—but, at home . . ." The more kindly the woman was, the less I trusted her. The more insistently she looked at my face, the less inclined I was to raise my eyes to hers. My Friend had cautioned *Don't trust! Not for an instant, you'll be finished.*

It was then I noticed a doll in a chair on the farther side of the room. Her head was large for her body and her face seemed to glow, or glare, with an arrogant sort of beauty. And her thick-lashed eyes were fixed upon *me*.