

# **DOLL**

A Short Story

by

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I leant back against the window. The Winter sun warmed my neck and shoulders; exposed the broken furniture and threadbare carpet. It was an ugly, oblong room. The dark, greasy, oil-paintings needed burning and the dust... Of course, one of us could have cleaned the mirrors. I dried my hands on the curtain and said: 'I can't understand why this room hasn't been marauded. The horse-hair in the sofa is dry enough and the landscapes would burn nice and slowly - then there's the wine-glasses in the sideboard; a good set, none broken. Above all, why has this room so little depth?'

Élise shrugged. 'Why do you bother? We're lucky to be here. That's all.'

'Yes, that's all! But I'm sick of the place. Look how the ceiling slopes down from the windows. No wonder, I've got a headache.'

'Attics are always the same.'

She could have been saying this to annoy me. 'We happen to be on the first floor,' I answered, 'And isn't it time for your... manicure?'

She laughed. 'You should see your face when you say that. It's not a medicine! And in case, didn't you notice I started half-an-hour ago and don't start on again that I do it every day because I *know* I do!'

'Shut your eyes,' I told myself, 'move carefully around her and sink into one of the armchairs.' Unless she was going out she always wore her slip and cardigan. Neither of us had eaten for two days. I wanted to touch her. 'Before the war this room was probably a florist's shop. Why else would there be three, large aluminium sinks under the windows.' Élise sighed. A sign of concentration. 'Isn't it painful?' I asked. 'Pushing the skin off your nails like that?'

'Snip, snip! Snap, snap!' she shouted, falling onto her knees and clicking the nail-scissors in front of my face. 'Whose going to catch the spiteful little birdy then?'

I grabbed her wrist. Forced her to release the scissors.

'Besides...' she said, getting to her feet and smiling, 'he likes my hands... *he's* always complimentary about my moons.'

'Two o'clock,' I said, and watched her walk over to the sideboard. I closed my eyes again; heard the bead-curtain drawn across the alcove.

'This room *could* have been a flower-shop!' she called out, suddenly. 'Don't

you and I and her...' Élise parted the curtain and pointed to the shape under the bedclothes, 'all talk in our sleep. You keep naming film-actresses. My childhood was not so sweet. I wasn't born with a silver spoon.'

Suddenly I felt happy. It was good to talk normally. 'Yes, when I was a child I was often taken to the cinema. I've been told '*Romantic Comedy*' was always my first love.'

'When you were a child,' Élise said, in disgust, 'this city was a *Romantic Comedy*! She stretched her legs. 'Should I paint my toe-nails or do you think...'

The woman under the bedclothes, screamed. I ran across and pulled off the blankets. Élise threw me a cushion. I sat the woman up against the wall, placing the pillow and cushion behind her head. 'You didn't change her night-dress! I yelled angrily at Élise. 'So much for your promises! The woman began to speak. Inventing a language; clutching Doll tightly against her stomach. This nonsense talk had a strange, babbling consistency. We guessed meanings.

At three-o'clock, pleased that I had managed to get the woman to drink a few sips of water, the rest dribbling down Doll, I sprawled in the armchair and watched Élise get ready. 'Do you realise,' I said, 'that you started your preparations at eleven-thirty this morning?' When she made no reply I went on: 'Consider, you are the only woman in this town with at least a year's supply of nail-varnish.'

She splayed her fingers. 'If I'm late, it'll be your fault.'

My cue to wave a newspaper vigorously, up and down, in front of her hands. 'Anyway, you can't eat lip-stick,' she said, nastily. 'And you can kill yourself with nail-polish.'

At that moment the woman on the bed started to sing, holding Doll out at arm's length.

Élise spoke, sharply: 'Reach up for my dress!'

As I took it off the hanger, a car drew up outside. 'It's not him,' I said. 'That neighbour only comes to visit. Usually about this time... so it's not him.'

Élise snatched the dress from me and spread it across her knees, frantically picking off imaginary pieces of fluff. 'A neighbour doesn't come to visit. A neighbour would live here.'