



## Fiction: **Object lessons**

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### *One: The doll*

**D**o you remember the smell of a doll's plastic body and the pinkness and the hardness of the doll against your belly as you pressed yourself close to it for the comfort? Or were you the kind of girl who refused the doll, fearing its mix of the living and the dead?

When a mother first gives her girl a doll, she thinks only of the innocence of the thing: its tiny body and big eyes. She does not remember a doll's perversions. For all dolls have their darker side, the side that requires the child to punish the perfect passive body. A Barbie doll carries something in her body that is unbearable to small girls, she stirs something in them. They dress her and undress her, they press her arched feet into her shoes, they fondle and tear at the perfect hair. At dusk, they take her down to the water's edge. They do not hear their mother calling them into the light of the little fibro holiday house, calling them into the warmth. They do not see their

mother standing behind them, her long evening shadow mingling with theirs in the waters. They are entirely preoccupied with the acts they are performing on their seven Barbie dolls, dressing each one in a costume of fantastic design and lying them face down in the shallows, where they move slowly in the waters. There are seven drowned Barbies, long hair, satin and sequined tulle floating around their hard little bodies. Don't ever imagine there is tenderness in a girl for Barbie. Barbie is never loved, merely coveted. When all the dolls are dressed and drowned the two small girls see the mother's shadow and in a single move they turn up their faces towards her and smile, beatifically.

Some girls love their dolls, cherish them, find comfort and companionship in their stillness. There is Baby Doll in her hand-made satin dress with rough lace trim, and her tiny cardigans, knitted in clumsy uneven rows by a mother and grandmother sitting in their kitchen on the night before Christmas. The old woman is not

## Object lessons

fond of dolls. Her own doll stands on top of the cistern with her legs inside a toilet roll, her purple crocheted skirt over the roll like a crinoline, a startled look on her face.

For the young girl, Baby Doll lives, her body is flesh. She is beauty, perfect and complete. Only when time passes and the girl grows older does she see Baby Doll's broken eye and matted hair, her shabby dress. Then, Baby Doll returns to the status of a thing, she takes on the condition of the unloved. She can no longer breathe, or feel, or remember. Yet there hovers all around her the memory of what she used to be, the powers she once held, when the girl loved her.

### *Two: The mother's hands*

**T**he mother is wrapping the old dolls between sheets of tissue paper in a little cardboard box. As she holds each doll and tucks it between the folds of paper, pressing one doll gently against another so that no doll should feel cold or alone, she is holding the past in her hands. In the materiality of the object, the past and all its longings are brought into the palm of the hand and grasped there. The mother is holding her own small daughter again, the girl now grown away.

This mother's hands are hands that love, even when the body to which they belong pushes away

from another's touch. They are big hands that make babies secure in their hold, that can span nine keys on the piano, they are hands that, whitened with flour, leave soft marks around the kitchen. They are hands that are frequently burnt, knocked against the hot trays of the oven by a woman who is hurried and wishes the baking done; a woman who comes to the table with butter on the burns and something gripping her stomach so that she no longer wants to eat. She sits on the edge of her chair, poised as if for flight, sipping a sherry to soothe her but which only loosens the hold of her self-control, so that she starts singing old music-hall ditties, flirting with her husband, wanting something from him he will never give.

And those who love her will eat her disappointment.

### *Three: The Singer*

**T**he grandmother was used to working with needle and thread, sewing together scraps of satin and lace. She had been a seamstress since she was a girl and she was still working when she was 70, bowed over an ugly electric sewing machine, feeding the fabric towards the menace of the needle. She knew the feel of satin and lace as it slid under fast hands, turning scraps of fabric into a pretty petticoat or chemise. At home there were always materials she had

picked up cheap, the last of a bolt of pale blue gingham, a couple of yards of machine-lace from a discontinued line. She would take up these remnants with love, and on her treadle make delicate things, slowly now. For the treadle was not the machine of her bondage. She loved its delicate wrought-iron frame and the little drawer where the reels of cotton were kept amidst the tangle of a tape measure. But most of all she loved the silver paint which spelt out the machine's name –

SINGER.

They came with so little – her husband's bicycle, one small trunk, and the sewing machine. When, with her small broken feet, she would press a rhythm out of the treadle, it was as if she had set the machine to singing and was listening for the traces of an old song that might carry her back to that other time and place. *It was and it will never be again.*

#### *Four: Tutu*

**D**o you know the touch and smell of ballet shoes, their supple pink leather and straining satin? Do you know the feel of a bound foot and a tutu's stiff upturned hem?

The young girls learn to open their bodies, arching them so as to expose heart and throat, leaning into the positions of surrender. The ballet teacher takes a girl's small foot in her hands and shapes it into

a point until it mimes those moments of pleasure when the feet arch themselves in ecstasy. The mothers come to watch their daughters learning the dance, and their throats grow full and tight. They mistake their pleasure for motherlove. As the class comes to a close, the teacher beats out a polka from the old piano and the girls swing each other in wide circles, finding something in the polka's rhythm that brings out the wildness in their little bodies. The mothers move closer, encircle the girls, touch their heat and urge them into quietness.

#### *Five: Bone china*

**D**o you remember the way your mother held her teacup, cradling it in both hands for its heat? Do you have that cup still, drink from it, press its rim against your lips as once your mother pressed it against her own, a kiss which might cross the impossible time and space of your loss?

One day, or so the promise went, her mother's tea-set would come to her. But china is a fragile thing. It carries the passage of time as a gap, or a wound. In clumsy hands a cup is dropped, a fracture appears in another, dark blooms fade under milky glaze distressed by overuse. When the time came, one teacup remained. It was sweet and perfect and, by its very solitude, marked all the missing parts. For this teacup will always belong

to a set, however broken or dispersed are its parts.

### *Six: The grandfather clock*

**W**hen her grandfather died, a long wooden box arrived and was laid on the lounge room floor. Its lid was prised open and the small girl thought: *Grandpa is in there*. But it was not a man's body after all, but the body of a great clock, and it seemed no less human for that. Her father moved its huge mass upright and leant it against a wall, inserted the key and wound up the mechanism, set the pendulum into motion, and gently moved the clock's ancient hands to the correct time.

But the clock would not go, it would not take its own breath or keep up the rhythm of its own heart. It needed coaxing, her father faithfully setting and re-setting the pendulum, moving the hands again so they might briefly indicate the time of day. *Re-commence your eternal round, and make a home for me in this bloody empty land*. The clock's malady stood not only for his lost father but for all that had been left behind. And then the clock started up, and kept going without a day's rest for 40 years, until her father's thoughts turned to leaving.

*The clock is over two hundred years old*, her father said, *keeping time before Cook came to this place*. The time this clock kept was not restricted to the hours of a single day but spanned all the hours and

the days that made up two centuries. It didn't merely measure time but faithfully recorded it. It was as if the clock's mechanism, instead of driving hands around a face, had pushed a nib across the surface of its wooden casing and inscribed there all the events that made up its days. To her father, that clock was a book, its pages made of wood and ancestors' skin, its ink was time and the blood that binds.

The clock stood eight feet tall and the striations in the rosewood were like ribs in a man's chest. The young girl used to kiss the wood, kiss it in that wet, open-mouthed way children have. When her father left, he took the clock. He made a wooden box for it and when the time came for the box to be closed, his daughter kissed the clock's belly. She cried more for that clock's going than she did for her father's. It was not that she loved the clock more, but wood vibrates with the past in a way that flesh and blood cannot. As the flesh begins to vibrate with the past it becomes weary and passes away. The past is carried in less mortal things: in a teacup or an old clock, in a scrap of pink tulle and some spools of thread. ■