

## Porcelain Possessions

Streetlights stretched for miles along the road and headlights from oncoming cars made lights flash in front of his eyes. The street was busier than where he came from, but Ethan expected that, being that this was Cambridge and he was from a small village. Shop after shop lined the high street, a mixture of big brands and small businesses. Restaurants were still open late at night, with their aromas filling the street, and their lights and customers were the only thing Ethan had to ward off the creeping feeling of loneliness. He had walked past the open restaurants a few seconds ago, and even now the feeling of being watched was hitting him. A laminated sheet of paper flapped in the breeze against the lamppost it was tied to. Ethan didn't look at it, but he knew it was another missing person poster. The headlines had been all about the missing people, reporting even the slightest detail. Two days ago, his friend Tom had become one of the missing.

His footsteps echoed far too loudly and a streetlight flickered, leaving him in darkness for a second, before it came back on and stabilised. The shops beside him had dark windows and unlit signs, with some being boarded up. He wouldn't have cared about the walk if Tom was with him, but his absence twisted and churned his stomach. There was something eerie about missing people in that space when speculation flew about what had happened to them. Nothing had happened to Tom, though, it was just a holiday...in the middle of exam season. The stress had made him run away, that was all.

A shop with a lit window came into view, filled with antiques and rare items. A clown marionette hung from strings, with a price tag Ethan couldn't quite see. It was one of the old-fashioned clowns, with a black and white costume. A monkey with bulging bloodshot eyes sat below. It clapped cymbals together rapidly, stopped, then flipped its body and started again.

There was a sign on the door that read closed, but the shop was lit with a soft warm light. The desk was lit up more with a desk light, which revealed an old-fashioned hand cranked sewing

machine. There was a dark corridor leading from the shop to the back and Ethan wondered if the shop owner was out there. After all, someone had wound up the monkey.

A tall lamp that had been off the entire time flickered, illuminating the corridor. Ethan got the quickest of glimpses of the corridor before it was obscured by the darkness. The light had lit up what looked like a person, leaning against the wall. The lamp flickered again, revealing the person had moved. They stood in the middle of the corridor. An arm came from the darkness and beckoned with one finger, unfolding, then curling up again, slowly and deliberately. Ethan started to turn away, a shiver rippling down his spine.

'No, please don't go!' came a muffled shout.

Ethan turned to see a woman standing by the corridor. She was small and wore a yellow flowery blouse with a grey pinafore dress over. It was her face that made Ethan stare, though. Long brown hair framed a pale, almost white face that had a deep pink blush on both cheeks. The wide toothy grin stretched out her red lips and made her eyes into slits.

A sudden roar of thunder clapped above Ethan's head and he jolted. The streetlight flickered off again and rain hurtled down on him, whacking the pavement with such a force that it bounced up and splashed his trousers. He squinted back into the shop, where the woman, presumably the shopkeeper had moved again, now standing in the middle of the shop. Next to her was a black and white husky holding one paw up. She reached out her arm again and beckoned with the same pale finger, tense, almost robotic.

'Please,' the shopkeeper said. 'My dog, he's hurt. My phone's dead. Do you have a phone?'

The rain somehow got harder, pounding on the ground and surface flooding the road. Ethan's teeth chattered as he hesitantly pushed the door open, stepping into the warmth. The woman's grin faded to a more human smile, which opened her eyes a little. Water from his drenched

clothes dripped onto the welcome mat, which had long since faded with the writing only just visible. He glanced at the still whimpering husky, then back at the woman before handing his phone to her.

‘Thank you, thank you,’ the woman cried. ‘I just need to phone the vets, then I’ll get you some dry clothes for your kindness. There’s a towel in the cabinet if you want it.’ She turned and rushed into the darkness of the corridor.

Ethan went to a cabinet at the back and opened the doors to reveal a load of porcelain dolls, their glassy eyes and pale painted faces staring for eternity. They lined the top shelf with a gap for another. A shudder ran down Ethan’s spine as he took a fluffy towel and closed the doors. He ran it over his sopping hair, wringing droplets of it out.

The dog whimpered again and he bent down to stroke it. ‘Hey, boy. It’s okay. Your mum’s getting help now.’

In his peripheral vision, something moved and he glanced back. A loud creaking and squeaking started as the cabinet doors swung open, slowly. The dolls inside stared into Ethan’s soul and he got up to close the doors. The dog whimpered again, which turned into a pitiful whine the longer he left him. Ethan sighed and went back to stroking the dog. He couldn’t close the doors, so instead, he tried to find some detail about them that he liked, to take his mind off the weird weather, the woman and the situation in general. There were five dolls, three girls and two boys. The girls wore gingham dresses of different colours with their hair tied up into two plaits each. If it wasn’t for the soulless eyes and pale painted faces, Ethan might’ve liked them. On closer inspection, one of the boys was wearing a leather jacket and deep blue jeans. The other wore a checked shirt and shorts.

A clattering cut through the silence and Ethan’s heart missed a beat as he turned. The marionette clown in the window was jiggling, flailing its arms and legs around. A breeze must’ve caught it. A sigh of relief escaped his mouth as he turned back to the dolls. The girl in the yellow dress with blond hair started to appeal to him, for some odd reason and he decided to check the

price tag. The small handwritten tag on its hand said £90. On the other side, it had a name, Alice. She looked like an Alice, Ethan decided.

Where had the woman gone? How long did it take to ring the vets? The rain outside had stopped and his house wasn't that far away, maybe fifteen minutes. Not to mention he didn't want to meet the creepy woman again. He headed for the door, but the dog got in front of him and whimpered again.

'I can't stay here forever. I have to get home. My parents will be worried if I don't message them soon.' He reached out and put his hand on the small brass handle. The dog's whimpers turned to growls and it leapt up, teeth gnashing near Ethan's arm. He let go and put his arms up, away from the suddenly vicious dog. It bared its teeth, growling with saliva dripping from its lips. Ethan backed away, further towards the dark corridor. The dog wasn't limping anymore.

'Excuse me, but your dog isn't limping anymore. I think he's feeling better,' he shouted behind. 'Please stop him snarling at me.'

The woman pushed past Ethan and took the dog by the collar. 'Quit it, Diesel!' she dragged him away and hooked his collar to a metal chain attached to the table. Straightening up, that same toothy grin was back. 'I'll get you some new clothes.'

'Well, actually, I was thinking I could have my phone back. I need to get home.'

'Oh yes. Clothes and phone. Right.'

Before he could protest, she had already disappeared into the corridor again. Diesel whimpered as he cowered against the table leg.

Ethan sighed and looked around at the other things. A shelf was lined with mirrors, intricately carved metal framing each one. He studied one, which also meant studying his face. Something moved behind him and he spun to see an empty shop. In another mirror, something moved in the reflection. Ethan frowned at it, then looked back at the shop with his eyes landing back

on the dolls. Why was he so drawn to the dolls? He went back to the cabinet and took the tag from another doll, the one with the green dress and brown hair. Her price was the same as Alice's, but her name was Laura. The next one wore a blue dress with dark black hair. Her name was Natalie.

A chill ran through Ethan. Laura and Natalie were two of the missing people. It was just coincidence, he told himself, but felt obliged to check the other tags. The boy with the checked shirt and shorts was called Josh. Dread buried itself in Ethan's stomach as he looked at the last boy. The brown-haired, blue-eyed boy dressed in a leather jacket and jeans. The same clothes that Tom had sworn by to make him look cool. He loved that leather jacket, even in the height of summer when everyone else was sweating their arses off in shorts and t-shirts, he carried it over his shoulder in the event of a sudden ice age.

Ethan took a breath and turned over the tag. Tom. Adrenaline coursed through his veins and he sprinted to the door, tugging on the handle like he was being chased by a lion. The marionette jiggled again, wriggling around and the monkey clapped the cymbals, flipping as if excited. He banged on the glass to an empty street.

'Someone help, please! I'm trapped. Let me out!'

Footsteps came from behind and he spun to face the woman, carrying folded clothes in one hand. They were too small, as if dressing a toddler. That toothy grin was back, slitting her eyes and stretching her lips. 'I got you your clothes.'

'Let me out,' Ethan demanded with as much authority as his terrified brain could manage.

The woman unfolded one of the items of clothing. A small version of the one Ethan was wearing. It had a wolf on it, howling to the moon. 'Hmm, you're going to have to be much smaller to wear these.'

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Sunlight streamed into the shop, illuminating specks of dust that hung in the air. Dust covered most items except for a cymbal clapping, somersaulting monkey in the window. The door opened, with the bell chiming to signal a customer. The man browsed around, lingering on the clown marionette in the window. He looked at the mirrors, then the sewing machine before turning his attention to some plush bears.

‘Can I help you?’

He turned to see a woman with long brown hair, brown eyes and ruby lips. Her face was as pale as death.

The man regained himself after the initial shock of her appearance. ‘Um, yeah. I don’t suppose you have any porcelain dolls?’

The woman nodded and smiled a kind reassuring smile before heading for the cabinet. Inside were five dolls, three girls and two boys. The man walked up to them, admiring them and inspecting their clothes and hair. Then he took to looking at the tags, reading their names. He sighed.

‘Have you got any others? No offence, but these are kind of generic.’

The woman nodded again and went out into the other room, leaving the man to occupy himself again. Something moved in the row of mirrors and for a second he thought he saw a person looking at him. The woman came back with a ginger haired doll, dressed in a black t-shirt with an image of a howling wolf on it, and light blue jeans. His shoes were sand coloured Converse.

The man took hold of him and inspected him as thoroughly as he had with the others. He didn’t have a tag and he looked back at the woman.

‘What’s his name?’

‘Ethan.’

The man stuck his lower lip out. ‘Ninety pounds like the others?’

The woman nodded.

He sniffed. 'Maybe not then. I'm sorry, but no doll is worth ninety these days.' He handed it back to her, then went back to the cabinet. 'What brand are these anyway?'

'No brand. They're handmade.' The woman overtook him and put the doll on the shelf in the one remaining space.

The man frowned. 'I'm sorry? You made these dolls and named them Alice, Laura, Natalie, Josh, Tom and Ethan. Why name them after missing people?'

She closed the cabinet and turned to him. 'They just remind me of them.'

2188 words

### Commentary

I wrote the story in third person limited because it gives me the option to not be in Ethan's head when he is turned into the doll. It also gives me the choice to change character POV after Ethan has become a doll. There is lots of time for description as Ethan is on his own with the dog for most of the story.

The story involves the supernatural and has gothic themes to it such as an isolated setting. The late night and dark street give it a creepy feeling from the start and then there is the knowledge that people are going missing, and no one knows where they have gone. All the other shops are closed, apart from the one that Ethan stumbles across, and even that was closed to start with. It gives the sense of isolation and that there is something wrong with the situation.

The woman's description gives a sense of uncanny valley where something looks 'normal' but is slightly off, and this is shown in the woman's facial features and how she moves. With the uncanny

valley, it is better to show less and leave the untold areas up to the readers imagination. With the uncanny woman combined with the darkness, the question arises of whether the woman is even human. In 'Writing the Uncanny' by Dan Coxon and Richard V. Hirst, the authors say: '...it's often the spaces where nothing is happening that draw our attention...' (Coxon, D. and Hirst, R.V, (2021)) In the story, there is a dark corridor and the reader does not know what is lurking in it. The readers will wonder what is in the back of the shop where the woman keeps disappearing to? There are a lot of things happening to Ethan in the forefront, with the dog and the dolls, but there is also the question of the dark space at the back. The time also makes a difference as the woman is away for a while when she is only supposed to be making a phone call and getting new clothes.

I took the setting from Cambridge's Mill Road where the shops line the road until they slowly start to thin out. After the shops are gone, there are some abandoned places and unlit houses. I have walked down that road many times in the dark, and got my inspiration from the Antique shop, which always has an array of rare and odd items. Like Ethan, I can never see the price tags from the window. Obviously, the road isn't as gothic and isolated as the story makes out, and I got the imagery from *The Woman in Black* (2012) and *Five Nights at Freddy's* (2023). Animatronic horror is a big part of *Five Nights at Freddy's*, where bright and colourful mascots of a company turn into the antagonists, usually with fatal consequences. It gives the feeling of fear as mechanical creatures should be controlled or have a routine, and when that breaks or stops, the reader/viewer is uncertain as to what happens next.

I also took inspiration from *Poppy Playtime* (2021) The game is set in an abandoned place which has unknown things living in it. Unlike *Five Nights at Freddy's*, *Poppy Playtime* comes under body horror as they are children's souls in the monsters instead of animatronics. Although the shop in my story isn't abandoned, it still has that mystery of the unknown and it is up to the reader to imagine whether the dolls contain the missing's souls, or if the missing are the dolls.

I wanted there to be a backstory of missing people, as that gives a mysterious background, and the reader isn't left wondering why Ethan was picked. There are also odd things in the shop which could trigger a reader's fear or phobia, such as clowns or animatronics. The marionette and the cymbal clapping monkey are both antique toys that were given to children in the past and are now considered creepy and 'haunted' in the modern day.

Porcelain dolls are seen by some as a vessel for souls to live in, as psychic-medium Patti Negri says, 'the idea of a doll as a vessel for spirit is as old as humanity itself.' (Article: Possessed or Precious? The Truth About Haunted Dolls, Llewellyn Worldwide, Ltd., (2025)) This gave me the idea to make a person into a doll. They are another thing that can strike fear into people and there have been many films about haunted dolls, such as Chucky and Annabelle. There are also famous stories of haunted dolls, such as Robert and Mandy, which show people have been either making up or truly believing in haunted dolls for many decades.

The speculative element comes from the woman and the shop. It asks questions about what happened to real missing people in their cases. There are so many odd cases that have gone cold purely because of lack of evidence, which is exactly what will happen to Ethan's missing person case, because the police wouldn't even suspect he is a literal doll. It is in the realms of fantasy. The 'what if?' element of the story is making people question whether there is a thing that is capable of turning living people into dolls. The woman's dog came at a later date to the rest of the story as bad weather wasn't a suitable means to get Ethan into a creepy shop. It also made a reason for the character to not have his phone to call anyone when he got stuck. The dog, Diesel, is another element that the reader feels uneasy towards. He feels like a tool first to get Ethan in the shop, and secondly to distract him from how long the woman is taking. He whimpers to pull at the character's emotions, then as soon as Ethan tries to leave, that whimpering turns to aggression. When the woman comes back, he is tied to a table leg as if he has been discarded because his 'work' of manipulating Ethan has finished.