

No good crying now

I recalled that rainy Saturday when I was about eight. Mum and I had to take my china doll, Jean, to be mended at a little shop called the Dolls' Hospital, because my friend Jane had dropped her on the pavement and her head had smashed into a hundred pieces. I let out such a piercing scream that at first Mum thought I'd been knocked over, and when I saw her face as I held the broken doll in my arms, I wished I had been. I wished it was my head that was broken.

In a mad frenzy she ordered me, Jane and Ida, my other friend who was also crying, to search every square inch of the pavement outside our house until every fragment was found. Crying and crawling around on my knees, I picked up a handful here and there, and we placed the tiny jagged pieces on a tablecloth. Mum shouted at me that this was the last I'd ever see of Jean again. She threatened to put her in the dustbin and it would serve me right for allowing Jane to hold her. Hadn't she warned me time and time again not to take Jean out into the street? She was such a precious doll given to me by my father when I was still a toddler, I was supposed to play with her indoors and only upstairs in the front room where there was a carpet, so that if I should drop her she wouldn't break.

My friends scooted off to their houses for dinner, Mum tied together the four corners of the tablecloth, then slapped my legs so hard all the way up the stairs as I hugged Jean's headless body, that I still felt the sting and could see the imprints of her fingers for hours afterwards. We had waited ages in the pouring rain for a 63 bus to take us to Peckham before Mum decided we must walk there because the shop closed for dinner between one o'clock and two. "I reckon we're going on a fool's errand anyway", she kept saying as we walked over the bridge. "It looks to me as if it's broken beyond repair. Perhaps this will teach you a lesson in future. I don't say these things for nothing, you know. Jane makes sure she doesn't bring any of her dolls out to play. It's always yours she breaks, she sees to that. You are a silly little fool. And it's no good crying now, you should have thought of all this before".

[...]

In the small, dark shop various limbs hung from hooks attached to lengths of string across the low ceiling. On hearing the tinkling door bell these grisly arms and legs began to dance, swaying independently as the little old man emerged from somewhere at the back and caught them with the top of his head. His abundant auburn hair might well have been a wig since there wasn't a trace of grey, yet the rest of him looked at least eighty.

He kept wigs of different colours, black, blond and auburn in deep drawers under the wooden counter; some of them were styled wavy like his, others were curly or straight. Inside smaller drawers, glass eyeballs rattled and rolled about as he tried his best to match them, but his own eyes didn't match, for one was blue, the other brown and they stared blankly without blinking for several moments; behind gold-framed spectacles that magnified his odd-looking eyes.

He shook his head when he saw Jean. "Oh dear! Oh dear!" His voice was high-pitched as though he had swallowed one of his doll's voice boxes. "That's a very special doll, that is. I only keep a stock of average heads. I don't think I've got one big enough to fit, but I'll have a look". Dolls' heads of different sizes, fair-skinned with rosy cheeks and dark-skinned, but all with strangely smiling faces waited on shelves all around the shop for their bodies to be fitted and limbs attached. He examined each likely head with Jean's body but kept shaking his auburn locks and tutting. "No good! No good! The trouble is your doll isn't like the dolls I usually have brought to the Hospital".

"Well", – explained Mum, "she's not really a doll at all, you know, she used to model baby clothes in a shop window".

I knew that Jean was no ordinary doll. She was real. She could talk, but only to me. She listened to every word I said, but only my words. She didn't like Mum and Gran when they were cross with me, in fact she didn't care for them at all. She thought they were both miserable and should have their heads boiled for making me cry. She only liked me and we had secrets that nobody else knew about, only Jane, but I wasn't sure about Jane, now this terrible accident had happened.

"I was wondering", – Mum continued, – "whether there was any possibility of your putting it together again. I know it's a lot to ask but you're so clever, I've brought all the bits and pieces along, that

is, as many as we could find". She delved down into her shopping bag and carefully placed the tablecloth tied in a bundle on top of the counter.

The man stroked his long auburn beard that might well have been doll's hair or perhaps he used his beard hair for all the bald-headed dolls that were brought to him.

"Well", – he shrilled, – "that depends on how many bits there are and how many bits are missing. It is a very big head and it's made from very special china. I've not come across one like this before".

"They should all be here", – said Mum, untying the corners and helping to spread out all the pieces, triangles, squares and oblongs. "Like a jigsaw puzzle, isn't it? I wouldn't know where to start".

"Oh dear! Oh dear! It'll be a long job fixing all these pieces and I'll have to use some very special glue".

"I don't mind how much it costs", – said Mum, looking at me ferociously. "You'll have to go without your sweets and comics and we'll cut out going to the pictures on Saturday afternoons".

"I'll do my best", – the man squeaked, sorting out the pieces and putting them into little piles, "but it'll never be the same, you'll always see the cracks".

"I don't mind", – I said, tearfully, "so long as I can hold her. I don't mind what she looks like".

"It's such a pity", – he shook his head. "These dolls are so rare, so very rare indeed. Would be worth a lot of money. Victorian, I shouldn't wonder, but it won't be worth a light now, not now it's broken. What a pity! What a great pity! It really shouldn't have been played with".

"Didn't I tell you?" – Mum shouted, poking me in the ribs. "I told you, didn't I? How many times have I told you not to play with her out in the street? Go on, you tell the doctor, you tell him".

I burst into tears.

"No good crying now, is it"? – she said, turning white with anger and sitting down on the wooden chair beside the counter. "It's no good crying over spilt milk, is it? The damage is done. Just look at it. You should have thought of this when you defied me. I knew this would happen one day". She turned to the man, who was examining each piece in turn as though it were a precious jewel, first closing one eye, then the other. "I wouldn't have minded so much if she'd dropped it herself", – Mum went on, blowing her nose on a corner of the tablecloth. "Give her her due, she's been ever so careful with it all these years. She's had it ever since she was three. Her father bought it for her. He got killed in the war, you know. That's what makes me so bloody wild", – she beat her fist on the counter, making the china pieces jump.

"When our house was blasted out", – Mum continued, "you'd have expected the doll to have been smashed, but it wasn't. A miracle that was. To think that it survived all those war years, up and down the air-raid shelter, night after night, day after day – all through the bloody bombing because she wouldn't go down without her Jean. We were always the last ones down, but Annie, the lady who lived downstairs, always said that doll must have been a lucky mascot. We came very near to it with some of those damned doodlebugs. When you think it's been right through the blitz and it takes one of her bloody friends to drop it and do all that damage. It's really upset me", – her voice was breaking and she was screwing a corner of the tablecloth, nervously, – "I don't mind telling you. I keep seeing her father's face the day he brought it home for her. Pleased as punch he was and I told him off because I said it was too big for her to hold. I never thought then, that it would be the last we'd ever see of him ..."

The man pushed his glasses to the top of his head and now it was clear that his eyes didn't match, neither did they move together. "Such a shame", – he said. "Such a great shame."

"Soon after that, he went to fight in North Africa, then he ended up in Italy, fighting the battle of Monte Cassino. High up in those mountains, near a monastery – that's where he was wounded and left to die. We'll never really know what happened, will we? Some silly sod in the War Department sent the telegram to the wrong address; instead of it going to Trafalgar Avenue it went all round bloody Trafalgar Square. That's why I thought they might have made a mistake about the body as well. They sent me two different numbers for his grave, so I thought there might be a chance he was still alive. "Missing – presumed dead," it said. You remember the telegram coming, don't you, Valerie? On your birthday". Her voice was softer now and I nodded, watching the man deftly running his fingers over my wounded doll, imagining my father lying bleeding to death from great gashes in his body, being

trampled on by other soldiers scrambling to safety among the craggy rocks and later on the vultures swooping down to peck at his carcase.

"I thought he might turn up one day. You live in hope, you refuse to believe – then came the brown paper parcel tied up with string. Inside were all his personal belongings – photographs of us, his wallet and letters I'd sent him that he never received marked "censored" and that awful word "deceased" – then I knew for certain there was no mistake".

The man kept tutting and sighing. I didn't know whether he was expressing sorrow for my father or my doll.

"You understand why that doll means so much to me and her. He's buried in Bari in a war cemetery overlooking the Adriatic Sea – sounds a lovely place. I promised I'd take her there one day to see her father's cross, though I bet it'll take some finding, don't you? There must be thousands and thousands – I've got a photograph of it somewhere. When she's older I'll take her. The only trouble is I don't like the idea of flying and I'm not keen on the sea, so I don't know how we'll ever get there. I suppose we'll have to just wait and see. His comrades wrote me some lovely letters. One of them said he eventually died in a military hospital from deadly malaria, so I don't know what to think".

I didn't know what to think, either. I was the only one in my class whose father had been killed in the war so I used to say he was still alive but he'd lost his memory in a monastery in Italy.

[...]

I was convinced that one day there would be a loud knocking on the street door, quite unlike anybody else's knock, and Gran would shout up the stairs in great excitement, "Valerie! Valerie! Come down and see your father. He's returned home at last". And there he'd be standing, looking very tall, dark and handsome in his soldier's uniform. He'd lift me up by the waist as high as the lamp-post and swing me round giddily; then he'd put his arms round Mum and kiss her. From then on she'd smile all the time, she wouldn't shout at me or smack me – we'd all live happily ever after.

"So what's your frank opinion about this doll?" – Mum asked, standing up and folding the tablecloth now that the man had removed all the pieces and placed them carefully into heaps on a cardboard box.

He stroked his beard and squeaked, "I'll do my best, madam. I can't make any promises, but I'll do what I can".

"Well you can't be fairer than that", – said Mum, putting the tablecloth into her bag. "Thank you for all your help. Say thank you to the man, Valerie."

"Thank you", – I said.

"Leave it with me, and call back in a fortnight".

Valerie Avery