

VERAN†S

Story by: Nasir Williams

Pottsville, Pennsylvania — 1950

“Would anyone like some tea?” the girl asked, looking around at the four toy dolls seated across the small pink tea table.

She turned to the doll in her hands. “Dolly, do you think Peggy over there deserves some tea for going missing today?”

The girl stared at her doll for a few seconds before murmuring another word, but a deafening crack of thunder roared through the house. She quickly clutched Dolly tightly against her chest, shaking as her heart began to race.

“Grace.”

The girl spun around, still gripping the doll.

“Yes, Mother?”

“Time for dinner, dear.”

Grace got up and slowly walked over to her mother, clutching Dolly tightly in her arms. She didn’t look back at the windows or her other dolls. Taking her mother’s hand, the two made their way down the long, dark hallway, passing the four bedrooms before heading downstairs.

Once downstairs, Grace saw a worn brown table set with two plates of meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and gravy. Sitting at the center of the table was a man with black hair, a thick mustache, and pale skin. He looked to be in his early thirties.

“Daddy!”

Grace ran toward him and wrapped her arms around him, still holding onto Dolly. The man bent down to hug her as her mother stood back and smiled.

He looked at Grace and gently rubbed her hair, golden locks falling around her face.

“I’ve missed seeing those big green eyes of yours,” he said with a smile. “You look just like your beautiful mother. Now, let’s eat.”

The family took their seats at the table, and Grace carefully placed Dolly beside her.

“Are you leading prayer, Edward?” Margaret asked.

Edward looked at her. “Yes, Margaret. Bow your heads.”

Both Margaret and Grace bowed their heads. Edward closed his eyes.

“Lord, thank You for this food and for the blessings You’ve given us. Watch over this family and keep us safe. Amen.”

The family raised their heads, and everyone began to eat.

Margaret looked at Edward. “How was work, dear?”

Edward cut into his meatloaf and forced a small smile.

“Oh, it was all right. Same as always.”

“Long day?”

“Long enough,” he said. “Got a few extra hours in. Can’t complain.”

Edward then looked at Grace. “How was your day, hon?”

Grace pushed her food around on her plate, disappointment written across her face.

“Well, I was having a good day until I lost Peggy.”

Edward quickly looked up, surprise crossing his face. “Oh no, not Peggy.”

“But then I found her. She was under my pillow the whole time,” Grace said, a smile returning to her face.

“Well, that’s a relief,” Edward said before taking another bite of food.

A moment later, Dolly slipped from Grace’s hands and fell to the floor. Grace hurried to pick her up, accidentally spilling gravy onto her white dress.

She stared down at the stain. “Oh no.”

“It’s going to be all right, baby,” Margaret said.

Grace climbed down from her chair, picked up Dolly, and walked toward the bathroom.

Edward smirked and looked at Margaret. “Sounds like she had herself quite a day.”

Thunder rumbled outside as Margaret smiled faintly.

“Yes, she surely did.”

Edward’s smile slowly faded.

“I don’t know how we’re going to make it through winter.”

“It’s not—,” Margaret said.

“But it’s not enough,” Edward finished, lowering his head into his hands. He looked up at her, worry written across his face.

“The pay ain’t enough, Margaret. By the time we buy food, pay the bills, and put coal in the stove, there’s hardly anything left.”

He glanced toward Grace, who was walking out of the bathroom.

“She needs new shoes, too. I just... I don’t know how we’re going to make it through.”

Margaret reached across the table and gently took Edward’s hand.

“We’ll manage, Edward. We always do.”

Later that night, Margaret and Edward stood in Grace’s room as she got ready for bed. Grace climbed beneath the covers, holding Dolly tightly against her chest.

Her father leaned down and kissed her on the forehead.

“Goodnight, hon. Keep a close eye on Peggy.”

He gave her a smile before walking out of the room.

Thunder continued to rumble outside.

“Mommy, I’m scared,” Grace said, her voice small.

Margaret picked up Peggy and handed the doll to Grace.

“Look at that. Two dolls you get to sleep with tonight.”

She bent down beside the bed.

“You’re a brave girl. Goodnight, hon.”

Margaret kissed Grace on the forehead, walked over to the lamp, and turned off the light.

The moment darkness filled the room, Grace quickly sat up and switched on her nightlight. Moments later—what felt like hours to Grace—she still couldn’t sleep.

She stared up at the ceiling, quietly humming to herself.

“Wynken, Blynken, and Nod...”

She stopped. It wasn’t helping.

Grace turned onto her side and looked at her dolls for a few seconds.

A violent flash of lightning suddenly lit up her bedroom. The nightlight went dark.

Grace gasped and immediately pulled the covers over her head. Her room fell into darkness, with only the pale moonlight shining through the windows.

For a few moments, she stayed beneath the covers, clutching Dolly against her chest.

Finally, Grace slowly peeked out.

She climbed from the bed, taking Dolly with her, and walked over to the nightlight. She flicked the switch.

Nothing.

She tried again.

Nothing.

Grace tightened her arms around Dolly and looked toward her bedroom door.

Slowly, she walked over and pulled it open. The door creaked into the pitch-black hallway.

Grace stepped out.

The wooden floorboards creaked beneath her feet as she made her way toward her parents’ bedroom. She hadn’t gone far when she stopped.

A light was coming from the study.

Grace stared at it for a moment before slowly making her way toward the room. As she got closer, she heard her father's voice through the closed door.

"No... no... no..."

Grace stopped.

"I can't," Edward said.

His voice sounded different now. Unsteady.

"Not her."

Grace's grip tightened around Dolly.

She crept closer and pressed her ear toward the door.

"NO!"

Edward's scream tore through the hallway.

Grace jumped with a small gasp and stumbled backward, falling onto the floor. The old floorboards let out a sharp creak beneath her.

Everything went silent.

Grace didn't move.

Then—

THUD.

A heavy footstep came from inside the study.

THUD.

Another.

Grace stared at the door.

The footsteps grew closer.

THUD.

Then they stopped.

Right on the other side of the door.

Grace slowly pushed herself from the floor and picked up Dolly.

“Daddy?” she whispered.

Nothing.

She took a small step toward the study and reached for the doorknob—

It suddenly began shaking violently.

Grace snatched her hand back.

The knob rattled harder, twisting back and forth as though someone on the other side were desperately trying to get out.

Grace ran.

She raced down the hallway, rushed into her bedroom, and slammed the door behind her. She scrambled onto the bed and disappeared beneath the covers, squeezing Dolly against her chest.

Then her bedroom doorknob began to shake.

Grace froze.

The rattling grew more violent.

BANG.

Grace whimpered beneath the covers.

BANG.

She squeezed her eyes shut as tears rolled down her cheeks.

BANG.

Grace buried her face against Dolly and didn’t dare look toward the door.

Then—

Nothing.

The house went silent.

The Next Morning

.