



*I'm Sorry You All Ended Up Here*

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I always feel surprised when I learn that someone is frightened of dolls. It could just be that I myself am so fond of them, but it seems sort of silly to imagine that a Madame Alexander ice skater could ever strike the chords of terror with any accuracy. The technical term for this particular anxiety is *pediophobia*, which stems etymologically from the Greek *paidion* and translates literally to the phrase “dread of little children.” It is maybe helpful to think of dolls as *little* little children, extra small imitations of life that simulate the general contours of the human body, but cannot help but reveal the radical totality of their emptiness (ie: deadness). It is this mortal void, I suppose, that imbues the little little child with the power to spook, and perhaps the pediophobe’s fear stems not from scaled down limbs or the unheimlich blush of a porcelain cheek, but rather from a suspicion that the static figure is afforded a lifetime of opportunities to consolidate its resentment.

People are afraid of clown dolls, they are afraid of whispering Raggedy Anns and Andys, they recoil from the pouting silicone toddlers who stare dully into the middle distance with murder on their minds. Though a wild-eyed Annabelle or the clicky-clacking jaw of an unmanned dummy might strike fear in the heart of the pediophobe, they pale in comparison to what I will suggest with great confidence is the scariest doll story in the history of America. This story comes to us not from a horror movie or the antique notebooks of a dubious paranormal investigator, but rather courtesy of a middle-aged x-ray technician who had a taste for arts and crafts and a profound misunderstanding of the word “deceased.”

It was in a Key West medical clinic in the spring of 1930 that radiologist Carl Tanzler first encountered Maria “Elena” Milagro de Hoyos, a beautiful but gravely ill young Cuban woman who had lost most of her immediate family to a particularly virulent strain of tuberculosis. Convinced that she was the physical manifestation of a vision he’d once had of his soul-mate, Tanzler immediately dedicated himself to curing her with an aggressive course of x-ray treatments. Elena’s death in 1931 came as a terrible shock to Tanzler, who suddenly found himself exiled from this unrequited fantasy, cast out of his imaginary Eden by the swinging scythe of the reaper.

Though Elena’s family likely found the intensity of Tanzler’s grief inappropriate, they agreed to allow him to pay for her funeral and accepted when he offered to build a mausoleum so that there might be a permanent site at which to remember her short life. While the careful observer may have noticed that Carl frequently visited Elena’s grave, it took nearly a decade for anyone to realize that he had actually emptied it. In



1933, Tanzler staged a late-night disinterment. He used a small wagon to transport the body to his house, where he set himself to reconstructing what was left of Elena so that the body might more closely resemble the person it had once been. Tanzler painstakingly reconnected disarticulated bones with piano wire, he stuffed her chest cavity with perfumed rags, he set a pair of glass eyes into skin made of plaster and waxed silk. Once satisfied with his handiwork, Tanzler lived quite happily with this bizarre approximation of life for nearly a decade, sleeping and dancing with the body until his indiscretions eventually resulted in his arrest.

The contemporary press coverage that was dedicated to this grim saga primarily portrayed Tanzler as a tragic romantic, and the incredible interest that the story generated likely seemed justification enough to mount a public display of the corpse at a local funeral home. It was later reported that nearly 7,000 people, scores of school children included, filed past the doll formerly known as Elena, each of them gazing at a body so strangely divorced from its humanity that it almost ceased to be a body at all. Sufficiently evacuated of all the parts we equate with life and burdened by a veneer too artificial to accommodate the uncanny, the figure presented as little more than a ghoulish souvenir, a curiously hollowed out knick-knack gleaming beneath a heavy layer of wax.

Oscillating between the roles of the surrogate and the host, the doll is, at its core, a social tool that facilitates both self-identification and the construction of the other. Perhaps the unifying characteristic that defines the doll qua doll relates directly back to the pediophobe's anxiety, that strange flux between recognition and alienation that instigates memory and dread in equal measure. It is inaccurate to identify the doll as neutral, and the Bratz Dolls and Reborns and Real Dolls of this world function primarily as vessels into which culture pours itself. It seems fitting to me that there exists at this moment a gallery full to overflow with reclaimed trinkets negated of their sentimentality and a battalion of misshapen figures too self-absorbed to recognize their own impotence. Liberated from the prison of nostalgia, the residents of *I'm Sorry You All Ended Up Here* remind us that abjection often veils itself beneath quotidian signifiers, that the clown doll only hisses if you expect it to.

- Alissa Bennett