

PIA MATER

One of the figures beckoned into the horizon: a machine, postured as a withering woman. You could tell it was a machine for the forced pivot its smile took without a proper masseter muscle, and that she was old, for her construction was out of fashion. Not much to note about its skin. It was perfect: crinkled at the corners of a blink, wrinkled enough to perfectly grip, with white-knuckled intensity, the hand of the doll beside her, and leave a fingerprint.

The second figure plainly pretended to be porcelain. Her hair: two braids combed to arithmetic perfection. Five years of life in her round cheeks. With each step she jerked, as though her shiny gold buckles pinched her. At the intersection, she smiled at the passing car with teeth until she learned it would not turn to hit her.

“Act your age,” ordered the former. They looked ahead. The latter was a creature burdened with habit. Barely artificial and facing the consequences.

The little doll teetered on her heels, somehow programmed to be anxious at red lights.

A spindly limb settled on the little cherub’s shoulder. A gentle pressure. The doll tried flicking off the limb—its ends hairy with the blunt ends of steel wool—and, stumbling free, took to running across the street. The limb had withdrawn before it could be touched.

“Won’t you behave!” was bellowed, with the airs of ordering a drunken acquaintance to heel.

A mechanical pupil focused fifty yards ahead. The doll had finished crossing the road and kept fleeing; past the sidewalk, through the thin fence, into a graveyard. Heavily breathing beneath her petticoats, or it was exhaust. The Crone hoped—or rather, its calculations on surviving its mission banked on—that anyone looking by might excuse the poor construction of that doll, forgive its loudness in breathing, its proximity to a human girl.

It shortened the distance through dull grassy expanse not too long after. The doll, it found, had tumbled in front of a headstone.

Far into the garden of corpses, around that old ruddy brick cube of a mortuary, Old Jill was sweeping concrete for fallen leaves, giving them privacy.

Good it was for Jill to have been constructed private, rhythmic, silent. Her narrow frame tended the graves, obvious but resonant, harmonious. Simple, preliminary. Abstract and geometric—devoid of human conceit.

Nobody meddled with her, despite her early make; rather, they had technicians fix up Jill, giving her joints fresh screws now and then, as though a holy relic. Some machines, dreamt up through folly, believed they were to worship the humans that first writ their code. Others, intelligent ones, knew themselves to be gods.

If they concerned themselves with respect, then Jill was ancestral.

Jill, janky, faceless and diligent, hobbled away on three limbs and a detachable broom.

Once Jill had gone, the little doll wept, as she ought to. The mechanical crone could smell her cortisol from afar. Bitter, in the way fragrant tea ought to be. If it had no other plans, then it might have lubricated its jaws to feast. All five-hundred-and-twenty-thousand meticulously threaded gold filaments in her warm scalp. It would savor the burst of charge in the midbrain, cut through the meninges, before extracting the cerebral fluids. Would even leave her writhing, as she were, if it calculated kindly enough, would harvest her charge as humans sheared their lambs. Every

now and then another drainage of a full cranium. A kind thing, to keep her little head from bursting.

But that was not its mission.

Spindly legs stalked through the grass. Winds changed west. The doll wracked her body, drew her eyes unto scratchy old chiffon and wiped snot on stinging mesh. She dragged her wet sleeves against the greying grass. Freshly organic. The Crone's cognitive processes stuttered, a little, but its limber body shuffled onward.

A Crone is built to last for several decades of surrogacy.

The doll turned, letting out a withering sob. Her skin rippled, betraying her age. The bleached polyurethane leather patching her skin was awkward. Twin tear-tracks dripped off her chin and unto her hands.

The Crone says, "you poor thing."

The little doll wipes her fleshy cheek. "I am not poor. I am very grateful to have known Mother and Papa."

"They are in a better place now."

"No they're not," because she is programmed to be defiant. "They belong with me, beside me." It is not the form of arrogance afforded little doll children.

The Crone pauses. It sits, bending all six legs to the ground. She bares her teeth in a smile, like a dog. In return, the Crone's melted lids blink slowly. Not in consideration, but to befriend.

A question is preferable to further antagonization. "Did you love your parents?"

"Why would you ask that?"

Jill makes another orbit around the cemetery perimeter. The Crone remembers the Zamboni of the ice rinks. Screaming children all about.

It says, "I want to help you find them."

The doll looks up at her. Her cross-hatched brows furrowing, uncertain. "Mine are dead." She glances at the headstone. The Crone scanned her gaze flitting carelessly over the names.

It says, "whatever makes you feel better."

The doll says, "I'm not sassing you."

"I'm not against the idea."

The doll's overblown pupils return to her face. She considers the construction of the Crone. The dents in the sheet, draped over with velvet and cloth, that mimic breasts. The warmth, and the cloying cinnamaldehyde and coumarin-saturated cloth wads stuffed beneath her chest plate. Crude, practical. The doll's eyes roll upwards towards the crone's. Attempts to meet them. Succeeds.

"I know what you want," and is very certain. "You're hungry."

It produces a bun from a pouch it pretends is not part of its body.

The doll's brows furrow deeper, head tilting.

"Papa said, 'don't you take food from strangers.'"

"Papa left you in my care. OK?"

"He said, he'd be right back."

"He never said such a thing."

The doll considers the glaze as it expires in the fetid ozone. "Not what I'm hungry for."

The Crone sits. It has rarely seen a child decline sugar. "If you plan to keep feigning humanity, you must perform this much."

Hesitant, the doll takes it and bites. The crone weighs its existing schemas against the portrait in front of her. Not quite a girl. Not quite mechanical.

“Still hungry?”

The doll cannot decide whether smiling or frowning best suits her mood. The crone finds, at the moment, that her confused expression best suits the cloudy overhang. That coincidence is the most organic of them all.

The doll-girl sits in silence. Her little feet stretched away from the grave. A weak defense. Jill has already another round.

She stands, rusty mud coating her sock lace. Looking past the graves, toward Jill’s leaving form.

“You are here in my defense,” she says.

“That’s right.”

“Protecting me from hags and lasers alike.” The doll-girl looks at the Crone’s neatly folded legs. Considers the sharpness, but also soft bristle, of each steel hair peppered atop. More porcupinal than spider. “Wanna tell me who made that for you?”

The doll-girl is smiling with crinkled eyes. Her black pupils flare. The Crone senses the growing nervous heat in her doll hands, pinpoints the flare to her small fingernails, which, it now realizes, are denser than the organic standard.

The machine politely smiles back.

“Ready to brave the fog?”

The way to the Orphanage stipulates crossing the Old City. Traversing the Old City stipulates doll-girl’s dry, cold left hand fitting into The Crone’s, and keeping an even stride.

As Eyes pepper the streets, the doll must act correctly. She is instructed to keep an even gaze ahead, except to smile briefly at strangers and then point curiously at the factory smoke masking the sky, the fire hydrants and cans on every corner, at birds. Mimicking children stipulates mimicking curiosity. The doll-girl rolls her eyes. Not always, she says.

Despite her defiance, the doll takes in everything with bated breath. The streets are as filthy as they always were, but her behavior is convincingly fresh. And her eyes would settle on the ruddy brick path beneath her, sometimes playing hop-step. All very well done and fine.

She does not ask questions now. But she breaks free, once more, and this time the Crone only watches.

The doll squats to harass a dog. Its crystalline face panel displays caution—two black eyes watching her as it begins to cower, titanium tail joints curling between its stocky legs. Upon touch, it is activated, showing its soft foam belly and rolling about. The doll laughs, running her hands through the shaking thing when she hears a liquid gurgle, and stops.

“What do you think that is?” the Crone asks, matronly. The doll refuses her now. She does not see her own placement in this world. She cannot stand having such an unnatural guardian. Naturally.

“I feel sick.” She watches the dog roll back on its feet and run away.

“And why is that?”

The doll looks up at her, frowning. “Is that dog alive?”

"No, it is not. Do you think you are?"

"Yes, of course," she snaps. And then pauses to think, in a laughably childish manner.

"What's the dog made of?"

"Flesh," says the Crone. "As you are."

"Are you lying to me?"

"What do you believe its function is?"

She purses her lips. "To play and get scared."

"That is only what it has shown you," the Crone says. "It's an organ transport machine."

"Ah," the doll says. "Why?" though she has clearly lost interest.

It was a product of a bygone age. Of when humans still believed in things like the Moon. When little legs were still needed to traverse rough terrain for ages, when pity was important and things were still made to be cherished and adored. That little dog—its belly marked LAIKA 042—should be a model nearing a century old. So it has run, from one fresh-dead to another near-dead, for its whole lifespan.

"To keep humans alive," the Crone says.

"Can we steal that dog?"

"No. It has its purpose."

The doll rolls her eyes three-hundred-and-sixty-degrees. "What's my purpose?"

In another time, to grow up nice and strong. To help Mommy and Daddy pay the bills. To be loved and be cherished. To follow your dreams. To make Mommy and Daddy grandparents.

"To behave."

The doll attempts to meet its eyes again. Failing, she clicks her teeth.

The first notice of her presence had been intercepted by the Crone: a pile of organic matter in an abandoned attic on the outskirts. Field coordinators found nary a thing but a doll, pristinely clothed, thinly out-of-fashion. A toy no one played with. Then her leg twitched. Her chest rose and fell, deep in sleep.

Field coordinators could not decipher her genetic makeup in time, nor pick up a telltale mechanical frequency, and so dispatched a Crone. A machine built to handle anomalies and childcare for a discreet capture before patrolling Eyes could swoop in.

For such an expensive emergency leash, a generous reward is to come.

The Crone makes its own notes. Privacy is afforded the best of machines. It feels, weaving through its cold system, the heat of new memories.

In the first hour: glee. Doll-girl skipped ahead, seeming to even know where they were going. Looking back, once in a while, as to gauge a change in the Crone's expression. Then she strategized to take matters into her own hands. Annoyance—soliciting three, four more LAIKAs, then a bout of tickling—failed. Wit—but the Crone was amiable, ceding further arguments of existentialism immediately with silence. And it would not laugh. So at last she climbed atop its chest plate. Leathery palms came to the Crone's face, tugged and tugged downwards to force a frown until its latex lips ripped.

The Crone's spider limbs stopped churning.

The doll retreated. Then, her fingertips flew to her quivering bottom lip, looking sorry. She backed, exposing her soft belly, as the LAIKAs did, cooing apologies.

The Crone simply pointed a limb at the laceration, lasered it together, and continued onward. The sight seemed to shake the doll. Her eyebrows twitched back into neutral. She walked with her head down as though in deep consideration. Her behavior came in cycles, and her demeanor was extremely flexible. Unstimulated. Non-anomalous.

That is to say, predictable to a fault.

By the third hour, the doll could no longer hide her boredom. Over and under the rolling cement hills they went. Now they traversed the plain between the Old City and the New. They've passed Eyes and LAIKAs and how many buzzing patrol flies? The doll dragged her feet. Her lips paled to lilac.

Until she'd felt thoroughly ignored, she did not say what she did.

"Do you love me?"

The spider limbs still and hasten again, recalculating. The Crone's head tilts to look at her.

"What does love mean to you?"

"C'mon," she groans.

After a gap of silence, the Crone tries another therapeutic angle. "Do you miss Mother more than you miss Papa?"

The doll seems to have learned that, if she does not answer the Crone's questions, then more interesting ones might come her way. "No," she says, near giddy.

"Do you miss Papa more?"

"No."

"Do you miss them both equally?"

"No." And that is that. "Won't you tell me about your life, pretty please?"

Something stirs again. A gap in the Crone's software. Lost code. A side effect of consciousness.

"I was built to help you find Mother and Papa."

Another LAIKA trots in the distance. The doll says, "I don't care for them."

The Crone looks at her, assessing her truthfulness. It coldly authenticates. "Are you searching, then, for revenge?"

"Revenge," the doll says. And the Crone has made its first therapeutic mistake—suggestion. "I don't know them well enough."

Its next escalation: "Do you desire revenge anyway?"

The doll smiles. "Desire," she echoes.

She watches the LAIKA march toward them from the New City wall. The dog's dark eyes have dimmed further, its stance thin. The Crone suddenly begins oozing cinnamaldehyde in defense. The LAIKA lay on its side, showing its belly again. An aroma drifts uphill.

Stewed meat.

The LAIKA's limbs hold taut in offering. The doll begins a running descent downhill, but a steel limb holds her back. The doll tears and screams, but the steel hairs of the Crone's limbs have softened for her. More resistance and they wrap around her, pythonlike, finally revealing their infinitesimal joints.

“You cannot play with this one,” it says. It feels a wetness on its arm. The doll wipes drool from her mouth. Her hunger has been stoked.

“Let go,” she says darkly. The Crone does.

She walks alongside the Crone, obedient. Eyes tracking the LAIKA. Upon closer look, its fur is more matted than the others’. She cannot tell what it is missing at first. Her eyes drift down to its stomach, open and rotting. Not a metal plate, but a gash.

The hound leaps at her.

The doll screams. She wrests open a jaw clamped around her wrist, and, with a muddied shoe, kicks in its neck. It whines. The dog jumps, attempting to overwhelm her with sheer force. Its eyes cross over each other. The thing standing is taller than her. Grunting, she kicks again, kneeling her way into its gashed stomach and finding nothing within.

The hound howls in pain. She continues, nonetheless, her leg stomping all over until the thing gives out. Then, for good measure, she bites a chunk of neck and throws down its corpse.

The thing lay there.

“Dumbass!” she sneers with reddened teeth. Seeing her companion neither reprimand her dirty mouth nor pop her jaw, she gingerly spits out a mouthful of fur. Takes her leg out of the stomach. “Idiot,” she murmurs.

Her beating heart is leveling out rapidly. Temperature rising. The aroma of cortisol is dissipating, replaced with a crawling hunger. Her blood-smeared arm is already smooth, as though unbitten.

The Crone kneels. That LAIKA was tampered with, its metal frame replaced by bone. More accurately, a LAIKA skin was fitted over a real, hungry mutt.

A stray. It is missing its pancreas, large intestine, and was walking around with an open, shriveled stomach. The pungent aroma of lamb carries into the wind.

The Crone swipes culture samples with steel hairs.

“Good job,” the Crone says. “You fought well.”

The doll looks at it, mouth ajar. Pupils blown and slobbering. She watches the Crone pull, from its own chest plate, another bun and a skein of water.

“Rinse your mouth first.”

Struggling to hide her hunger, she lurches two shivering hands forward to receive anyway.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

The Crone remembers childbirth, even though its child does not.

They were stupid. To have constructed surrogates in this way, that is, mimicking human biology to its flaws. Gestation, protestors believed, could not be rushed. They constructed the Mommy-Helpers out of rubber and silicone to mimic the soft squeeze of pelvic flesh. A child’s first tribulation—labor—cannot be skipped.

The whole thing was a compromise.

Every moon—at least, when it still existed—the Crone’s metal body absorbed its flesh lining. Collecting, turning flesh into compost before rot could begin. Efficient, clean. Until some of the Mommy-Helpers began hoarding their donated flesh, feeding it, combining eggs, creating tumors and freakish sextuplets. Of course, that was not very profitable, let alone palatable.

While the product was recalled, pleasure drove people to hoard. Little men and women chopped Mommy-Helpers up into bits and pieces, saving the motors and voice boxes, soft rubber feet and bendable legs, flexible torsos, cutting shells of ears for home ornamentation and trophies, or otherwise cleaning up the filth that accumulated in the womb circuits to use the Mommy-Helpers for their other purpose. Unageing, except for rust, which was a tint badass anyway, for those with gothic tastes.

And so, even though the Crone could not feel it, it remembered childbirth and all it entailed.

It first heard a crack—like an egg with much more commotion. Pliant hip joints adjusted with ease, and a gaping slit waited, every minute exponentially shortening, to ease the thing out of itself. Because no one watched, the Crone squatted, in that granite tub, to ease it out with gravity. Then the thing dropped out, and it caught her with soft arms.

There was no great epiphany or euphoria. It settled the crying thing, She, atop her warmed chest. The babe touched her face, grappling at most anything, and felt cold, defective steel. Rallied against it with great vigor, until it bound her arms in a small microfiber cloth, whereby her little fists were contained, and then stilled.

And then the strangest thing—an electrical charge, jolting the machine until it felt something akin to satisfaction. It could not find a cut-off, nor wanted to, but it desired, for once, in that strange animalian way, to ensure the charge kept flowing through itself.

And for once, it thought, it was not programmed to obey. The charge sat at its disposal. And the babe, eyes closed and quieted, catalytic.