

Geisha Doll

by Paul Hargreaves

It's about the only time I ever really cry. I'd learned to handle the hunger and the aching hours between scores and the rough pricks who knock you around to make themselves feel less empty inside. I could even handle the reflection in the full-length mirror my court-appointed shrink, Dr. Morgan, insists I stare into every Tuesday afternoon.

She's the one who suggested I explore creative outlets, handing me an ad for a ceramics class. Sure I said, what the hell. I imagined the cool, wet clay oozing between my fingers when I'd squeeze a tight fistful.

The bus made me late the first night. When I got to the community centre they all stopped and stared — mostly older women in oversized long-sleeved shirts that looked like they had been worn out and tossed away by their husbands. My chest tightened at the thought of the crap they'd all be laying on me.

I know these women, grew up surrounded by them in our cozy little parlour and at Dad's club, in the riding stables and in the matron's rooms of my boarding school. But none of them could touch the demoralizing sting of dear old Mama.

Like when I was eight, preparing for one of her afternoon socials, fussing over my hair and struggling in front of the mirror to make sure everything was just right.

"You don't expect to serve tea to my friends in those scuffed shoes?" It wasn't so bad when the tone was merely deflating. When the social stakes were higher, her words could lacerate.

"Wash your hands again and scrub them this time; you smell like you've been touching yourself." She even grounded me once — two weeks — for coming home ten minutes late. It wasn't my fault, I started to explain, but I had learned to read the clench of her teeth and the pitch of her eyes just before a slap.

Nothing was good enough for the stage-perfect backdrop against which Mom preened for her peers — the high society

bullshit she was insistently kneading me into. By seventeen, I'd had enough. And so the quick slide down and the "high" society I eventually hooked up with in the streets. You can imagine the rest.

So there I was in the ceramics class, with all these old broads eyeing me up and down and shoe-horning me into their tidy preconceptive moulds. Only one of them came over to say hi. Said her name was Mildred but liked Rusty better. She wore a mussed-up shock of silvered red hair and a cardigan with two tangles of crazy thread where the top buttons had once been.

Rusty showed me around while the others got busy whispering. I told her I was looking forward to getting my hands dirty, but she explained that we didn't do clay modelling. "Most of them aren't all that creative," she whispered, nodding toward the group. "This class is strictly into casting. You'll have to find a mould you like and try to work with that."

There was a closet full of them. Rusty was working on a pair of glittery lavender giraffes, part of a neon arkload she'd been assembling over the years. The others pulled out sappy childhood figurines, cutesy winged angels, a flat-faced pug, and a cheesy patriotic eagle on a stump. It felt like a garage-sale nightmare. I found a mould that suited me — a funky little geisha doll that I thought'd make a quirky-cool lamp. Rusty showed me what to do and I got into it.

It's been about a year and a half now and things are coming together for me. I'm off the streets and stuff. Even Dr. Morgan says I'm doing well. She asks me to bring in some of my pieces, but I keep putting her off. I want it to be just right, I tell her. And I sure work hard at it, rolling the tip of the paint brush on my tongue to preen the hairs just so. I carefully brush in the braids of glossy black hair. I precisely render the delicate folds of the floral hair pieces and the undulating waves of the smartly pressed tunic. I coat my geisha's tiny face cake white and delicately flick in the cupid's bows of her scarlet lips. I always save the eyes for last, carefully positioning the pupils and applying the tiniest dot of white where they catch the light.

When it comes out of the kiln, I sit back and assess the product of my efforts. Rusty tells me it looks delightful, but I instantly see the thousand things that have gone wrong and how the bits all look so clumsy together. I want so badly for that little girl to be perfect — good enough to sit under the glow of my bedside lamp. I want it so badly that my insides wring themselves into an agonizing knot of despair. And although every ounce of me screams to smash that little bitch into a zillion pieces right then and there, I always wait until I get home.

I haven't told Dr. Morgan that I've moulded and painted and fired that same figurine twenty-three times. That I've taken a hammer to it every time. That it's about the only time I ever really cry.

