

Toothpick Girl

By Susan Hodara

“Can I have that when you’re dead?” As I point at the little wooden figure, my mother turns from her breakfast to see what I am talking about. I am visiting her shortly after my father died, helping her go through the piles of paperwork that have accumulated since things became dire.

I see a flicker of dismay at my question, quickly replaced by a half smile. I will realize much later that it is a bit of a dare, what I’m asking, forcing the focus from the hugeness of death to an inconsequential decision about an old doll.

“Why wait?” my mother says, meeting my challenge. She takes a sip of her coffee.

The figure stands about four inches tall, a handcrafted woman wearing a wide-brimmed hat whose paint is peeling off. Her body is carved in the shape of a dark blue dress that is cinched at the waist. Her stubby arms rest on the handle of a wheelbarrow whose wheels are no bigger than nickels.

I remember her from the Belmont house where she sat on the small shelves above the kitchen table. The salt and pepper shakers were there, too, and my father’s pipe and tobacco, so he could reach them easily after supper for a smoke. Year after year, she was silent witness to our meals.

Now, here in my mother’s kitchen, she looks lost beside the sugar bowl on a cluttered tray. I bring her home and place her in my own kitchen, on the windowsill over the sink. I fill her wheelbarrow with toothpicks.

I love her unassuming lines and simple roundness. She is a relic of my past, my memory made tangible.