

Dummies

Dummy, dummy, go out now and fill your tummy.

- William Goldman

Jason finished making his four-year-old granddaughter Amy a dummy only a few days before she died of a fulminant childhood disease. He had taken great pride in his accomplishment, for he was retired from a career as CPA and creating things with his hands other than spreadsheets was a daunting new experience.

It had not been all that difficult. He had gone to Goodwill and purchased a used girl's skirt and a blouse to go with it. It did not matter if the colors did not match—yellow polka-dot blouse, argyle skirt of faded primary colors)—Jason knew little about fashion and cared even less.

He tucked the bottom hem of the blouse into the top of the skirt and used safety pins to hold them together. The arms and legs were blanket strips rolled into tubes, inserted into the clothing and secured with adhesive tape. The chest and abdomen were filled with newspapers and plastic bags to give them shape. For the head, he had purchased a discarded plastic doll, twisted off the head, and attached it to the neck of the blouse with tape.

It was crude and flimsy, but it was little Amy's gift from grandpa, and she played with it constantly until she came down with her fatal infection. Upon her death, the dummy sat, forgotten, on top of the girl's dresser.

Other deaths then followed in quick succession, as snowflakes driven by a winter storm. First, his son Albert, Amy's father, was electrocuted in a freak workplace accident. Jason's daughter-in-law Marie, distraught by the death of husband and daughter, overdosed on sleeping pills. Finally, Jason's wife Estelle, whose body had been weakened by diabetes, suffered a heart attack and died in a matter of hours.

The fatalities of course caught Jason unprepared; how could anyone be ready to lose, in just a few months, all members of his

immediate family? He loved each one of them, even his daughter-in-law, and the tragedies pounded on him like hammer blows.

Two days after Estelle's funeral he was seized by a strange compulsion. He began making dummies, one for each member of his departed family, and added a couple of extras for good measure. At the end, he had a motley array of six dummies, which he positioned in a semicircle at the edge of the dinner table, facing him. Being dummies, however, they just sat there. They did nothing to assuage Jason's grief.

He became distracted, gave up on personal hygiene, and lived off fast food, which he washed down with bourbon and soda. Even though he always had the TV on, he kept the sound on mute and followed neither the news nor the games, and least of all the various inane shows he used to ridicule Estelle for watching.

As he munched tasteless French fries and drank big gulps of Old Crow, Jason would hold imaginary conversations with the dummies that stood for his relatives. He found himself voicing forgotten complaints or reminiscing good times. His wife and son were favorite targets of his tirades.

"Estelle, I'm running low on tee shirts because you were too busy nagging me to darn the holes in three of them, so I finally had to toss them out."

"Remember, Estelle, the time we went to Quebec and you got drunk on anisette? I kept telling you to watch out, because the stuff is sweet but potent and will knock you out without warning. Did you pay attention? Noooo!"

"I'm no longer playing golf, Albert. Without you as a partner, it isn't so much fun anymore."

"Pro sports are a racket, son. Everyone is on the take."

He then conceived a demented idea: he would get the dummies to speak back to him.

He started reading. He read online, he borrowed books from the public library, ordered a number from rare booksellers. He was looking for an animation spell that he could use to revive the dummies.

Most of what he found was useless. There were a surprising number of quacks who promised to sell him infallible spells granting his desires for love, power, revenge, and many other goals. Those, he quickly learned to disregard. Then there were "spells" for gamers,

intended for an apparently vast teenager and young adult audience. Tripe.

His only dim hope lay in old magic treatises. He bought half a dozen reprints of occult arts studies from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Although more legitimate in purpose—indeed, written in obvious earnest by learned men from all corners of Europe—they proved, by and large, to be disappointingly shallow.

A historical account of witch hunts in Scotland proved the exception. The book contained detailed case studies of women who had been found guilty of practicing black magic and burned at the stake. It included, as an appendix, the texts of spells found in the possession of the witches.

One such spell was designed to temporarily bring to “life” objects that could be used as weapons or tools in the pursuit of the witches’ purposes. Jason read the spell with difficulty, for it was written in archaic Elizabethan English, and cast variations of it at his dummies. Nothing happened.

That night, after three glasses of bourbon, Jason fell asleep with his head flat on the dining room table. Subconsciously, he was bothered by the uncomfortable position, but could not muster enough energy to get up and go to bed. He was chiding himself for his laziness when he thought he heard a tiny voice.

“Grandpa, you have stuff coming out of your mouth!”

It was surely a dream, but Jason half-opened his eyes and felt spittle drooling from his lips. He sat up from the table and ran the back of his hand over his mouth.

“That’s better,” observed the same voice.

Jason’s transition to full alertness was instantaneous.

He looked around the empty apartment. No thieves or marauders there. He got up and stumbled his way to the refrigerator. He took out a plastic bottle of water and drew a big gulp, trying to clear his thoughts.

“Can I have some? I’m thirsty.”

Jason started shaking as he turned around and fixed his attention on the dinner table. The first of his dummies, the one he had made as a present for his granddaughter, had inched forward from the semicircle and had the cloth stubs that served as its arms crossed around what would have been its throat.

Jason's first thought was, *I've gone off the deep end*. The second was, *The spell must have worked*.

He placed the bottle on the table, sat down, and continued to stare at the dummy with the polka-dot blouse, making sure he was not having a nightmare.

"Grandpa, please, I'm thirsty!" wheedled the dummy in a plaintive tone.

Jason allowed himself to be drawn into the impossible dialogue. "But baby, you have no mouth."

There was a ripping sound and an opening slit materialized in the plastic head of the dummy. "I sure do! Gimme some!"

I'm having a nightmare, Jason repeated to himself. All the same, he leaned forward, placed the lip of the bottle against the newly formed slit, and tilted it downward. Instantly, air bubbles formed in the bottle as the water was drawn out.

"Thank you, Grandpa. I feel better!"

"You're welcome, sweetie..." began Jason, and cut himself short.

He withdrew the bottle from the dummy's slit and lay it with some force on the table. *I have to wake up*. He started to rise.

Instantly, there was another voice, old and cranky, which he instantly recognized. "Aren't you going to give *me* some?"

He did not need to look up to confirm that the querulous question came from a larger dummy, which he had clothed in dark rags to represent his wife, who favored black as slenderizing.

"Estelle, is that you?" he asked.

The dummy replied irritably, "Who else would it be, you *dummkopf*?"

Jason threw his arms up in despair. "Does everyone want water?"

There were yeses all around.

"I don't have enough bottled water. It will have to be tap." He went to the sink and filled a pitcher.

"Ugh" complained Amy's dummy, but drank the tepid water.

Jason went around the semicircle, pouring water onto the mouth openings of the dummies. He then sat down and addressed the group.

"Now, I know I'm either having a nightmare or hallucinating, but could somebody explain how six dummies all of a sudden sprang to life?"

The largest dummy, assembled in memory of his son Albert, spoke up. “We don’t understand it ourselves. It seems that you did something that managed to bring us to life.”

Marie, Albert’s husband, piped in. “I read it online somewhere. Psychic energy can be channeled to bring inanimate objects to life.”

“Popycock,” argued Estelle, always at odds with her daughter-in-law. “There has to be a better explanation than that.”

“All right, all right,” said Jason placatingly. “It is what it is. I’m enjoying having all of you around, however strange. Everybody okay?”

“For now,” replied Albert. And that was that.

Jason’s life changed very little since the reanimation of his dummies. He continued to eat poorly and drink heavily, and sometimes would not manage to make it to bed to sleep off his inebriation. Other nights, though, and often during the day, he would sit at the kitchen table and engage in disjointed conversations, in which the four dummies representing his close relatives joined. Jason inquired as to who the silent dummies were and why they failed to speak. The Albert dummy shrugged his fabric shoulders and replied dismissively, “We don’t know them, but we think they are supposed to be guardians.”

“Guardians of what?”

The dummy shrugged again, impatiently. “Guard against whatever happens here. We don’t know what they are supposed to ward against. Maybe they are here to make sure that we don’t misbehave.”

Noting his discomfort, Jason changed the subject. “I was watching the PGA tournament yesterday on the tube. You would have laughed with me. They are such amateurs these days. You and I could have done better than those clowns.” And father and son got into an animated conversation about the days of Nicklaus and Palmer.

It was Amy’s dummy who first brought up a new request. “Grandpa, I’m hungry.”

Jason was already used to the dummies' bizarre anatomies—they “drank” water frequently, but water never seemed to leave their rag and paper bodies. But feeding them was a new level of strangeness. “But sweetie, you don't have a stomach. You couldn't digest food.”

Estelle cut in. “Jason, stop confusing the child. Of course, we can't digest solid food. But liquids, that's something else.”

Jason's eyes opened wide as new understanding came in. “You mean, like fruit juices? I have some orange and apple juices in the fridge. The apple juice is a little old, but the orange juice is fresh. I can get some...”

“No, silly,” cut in his wife. “Juice is mostly sugar. Your granddaughter needs something more substantial, more nourishing.”

“I get it. Liquid protein? I can go to the health food store and buy a few jars.”

“No, no,” replied Estelle, sounding exasperated. “She needs more complete nutrition; protein, vitamins, ions, glucose, lipids, minerals...”

“You got me now,” replied Jason, upset at his wife. “Where can I get a diet supplement that has all of these things?”

Amy pleaded again, sounding ready to burst in tears. “I want blood!”

Jason whipped back at his granddaughter, astonished. “Blood?”

A chorus of loud voices rose from his creations. “*Blood! We want blood!*”

“That's impossible!” replied Jason, barely able to master a rising hysteria. “Where am I going to get blood for you guys?”

Estelle's tone became sarcastic. “You are the man of the house. You'll think of something.”

Jason bought liver and kidneys at the Safeway and then found an Asian market where he got hearts and pig blood. He drained the blood from the organs and spooned the liquid to Amy and the other dummies. They did not protest but did not seem to enjoy the offerings as much as he had hoped.

He bought some prime rib and, before cooking it, squeezed the red liquid from the meat and gave some to Amy to try. The dummy's “mouth” puckered in disgust. “That's not blood.”

Jason did a little internet research and found out that the “blood” in meat is really not blood, but something called myoglobin. He turned to his granddaughter’s dummy, his patience exhausted. “You have very demanding taste, for a dummy. It’s back to liver and kidneys!”

Marie, who usually kept quiet, came to her daughter’s defense. “She’s only a child and is tired of the stuff you are feeding her. The blood from store-bought organs is stale. She needs fresh blood.”

“Fresh like how?” Jason almost did not ask the question, anticipating the response.

“Fresh like from a living creature.”

“Do you mean I need to sacrifice a poor animal in order to feed you? No way!” Jason pounded on the table, his anger rising.

The dummy of his son Albert provided a reasonably sounding explanation. “Look, let’s give it to try and see if you are convinced. Make a cut on your little finger, squeeze some blood into a spoon, and give it to Amy. She’ll tell you if that’s what she wants.”

“What if she likes it?” replied Jason, in a fury. “I’m not going to cut myself to pieces to feed a dummy!”

Albert remained rational. “At least we’ll know if what Amy says she wants is what she really needs. Come on, Dad. Do it for us.”

“You’ve never explained why all of a sudden you need blood, let alone fresh blood.”

“Dad, I can’t explain it. Each day we feel weaker, and something is telling us that if we don’t get blood we’ll die again.”

“What do you mean by die again? You are just paper wads and old clothes. You are not alive.”

“If you really believe that, it’s time for us to go.”

Jason could think of a thousand reasons for refusing to go ahead with the test, and only one in favor: he felt he needed the company of his resurrected family and could not bear to contemplate returning to the way things were before Amy’s dummy first spoke.

“All right, but we are creating more problems that we won’t be able to solve.” He dug in the kitchen drawer for the little paring knife, placed a tablespoon under his left hand, and made a diagonal cut across the fleshy part of his thumb. Grasping the thumb with his right hand, he squeezed a trickle of blood onto the spoon. He took the spoon to his granddaughter’s dummy; the slit that served as mouth seemed to distend greedily to receive every drop of the blood.

Jason turned around and ran water on the wound, applied Neosporin to the surface of the finger, and wrapped it with a Band-Aid. As he returned to the table, he looked at his granddaughter's dummy.

"Grandpa, that was yummy! You have the bestest blood!" reacted the dummy.

"You are a bunch of frigging vampires!" exploded Jason.

Not surprisingly, Estelle had the final word. "Get used to it! There's a bit of vampire in all of us."

Jason made the rounds of all the pet shops in town, buying one or two hamsters in each. Killing each hamster filled him with guilt and revulsion; cutting each creature open to drain its blood into a pan was messy and smelly and disposing of the cadavers was a problem. He did not dare taking them out with the regular garbage, for fear that the corpses would attract the neighborhood cats and raise suspicions. He ended up chopping each animal in little pieces, feeding the skin and tiny bones to the garbage disposal, and praying that the machine would keep working.

He discovered that a hamster had just enough blood for two skimpy servings for each dummy, with an extra helping for Amy. Luckily, the silent dummies turned down the blood offerings and remained aloof as the family dummies feasted.

He made do with the hamster supply for a couple of months, but then got stuck again. He dared not go back to the pet stores. When the blood of the final hamster was apportioned among the dummies, he confronted them with the final choice he was about to make. "I'm sorry, folks. No more animals. No more blood. You'll have to learn to exist on the dry side."

There was a long silence, and then Albert remarked in a falsely cheerful voice, "But Dad, didn't we always want to get a dog, and Mom wouldn't let us? I bet she has changed her mind."

Estelle's slit of a mouth opened into a horrible smile. "Dogs? I *love* dogs."

Jason had trouble convincing the staff at the animal shelter that he would be a good father to a rescue dog entrusted to his care. “We prefer to release dogs to families. Single parents are a much higher risk, because you may fall sick or have something happen to you, leaving the dog alone. Plus, you are old, and you may not give the animal enough exercise.”

After much pleading and promising on Jason’s part, they agreed to let him take Audrey home with him. Audrey was a very old miniature poodle, with curly chocolate fur and liquid eyes. She was trusting and affectionate and took instantly to him. She was arthritic and nearly deaf, but she was docile and entered without hesitation into the cage in which she would travel to Jason’s apartment.

“Audrey’s owner was a widow that had to be taken to a nursing home,” they told Jason. “Audrey has been well taken care of all her life, and we expect you’ll treat her as well as her former owner did.” Jason promised he would.

He was in such a rush to leave that he paid no attention to the final words of the lady at the desk: “We’ll send someone on a home visit in two or three weeks to check on how the two of you are getting along.”

Jason did not expect Audrey to be his companion for long, but all the same he took her to a pet store and got her senior beef and rice canned dog food, dog treats, a rope and a couple of other toys, and a large water dish. Perhaps anticipating guilt, he spent a good deal of money trying to ensure that Audrey’s final days would be pleasant and comfortable.

Jason and Audrey took to each other famously. The dog was always attached to the back of Jason’s legs and followed him at every step he took. He would lead her on short walks around the neighborhood and feed her treats by hand. Audrey jumped into bed with him and slept curled against his body.

“Charming!” carped Estelle. “He brings food and ends up playing with it.”

Jason decided that the love of a trusting beast was more important than the company of his family and, on the fifth night since the adoption he confronted the dummies.

“Listen, I’ve made up my mind. I’m keeping Audrey, you can do as you wish.”

There was a heavy silence, which Marie finally broke. “I’m sorry to tell you this, but that dog has terminal cancer and will be dead in a few weeks.”

Jason was suspicious. If the claim had come from Estelle, he would have disregarded it without another thought. Marie, however, had always been honest and forthright with him, and he doubted that she would start lying now that she was back as a dummy. “How do you know?”

“I can smell the corruption from here. Very soon she will start ignoring food, and her breathing will become labored. She will look disinterested in anything and finally grow still. I had a dog that went through that process years ago, and it was very painful for both of us.”

Jason didn’t know what to believe. True, Audrey had become rather placid, but he attributed this to her advanced age. Was he about to lose a pet the same way his family had been taken from him?

The following day Audrey was rather morose, barely touched her food and could not be enticed to play. Jason almost had to drag her out to get her to walk to the corner to pee. He was disheartened when he returned to the apartment.

“See, we told you so. You better let us have her blood before you lose us as well,” insisted Estelle.

“I didn’t know you could be so cruel,” snapped Jason.

“You did know, you have just willed yourself to forget,” replied the dummy sardonically.

He laid Audrey in the living room, resting on a blanket. Jason had given her a huge dose of Benadryl and had essentially forced her to fall asleep. The dog was unconscious; she occasionally stared at Jason with sorrowful, unseeing eyes. As Jason hovered over the animal, sharp knife at hand, the Albert dummy called out instructions.

“First, make a cut across the neck, severing the windpipe. That should kill her.”

Jason raised a trembling hand and struck Audrey with great force. The dog yowled desperately and attempted to move, but it was too weak and subsided. Blood began pouring down its cut open neck, and Jason immediately placed a bowl under the head to capture the fluid.

Audrey's body went into convulsions, which grew weaker after a few moments and finally ceased.

Tears blinded Jason, but he substituted another bowl for the almost full one. "Give her a cut below the groin, to capture blood from the lower part of the body," instructed Albert from above. Jason complied, his shoulders heaving with sorrow.

At the end, he harvested four bowlfuls of warm blood from the dead animal. Jason put the bowls in the refrigerator and went to the bathroom, where he vomited and bawled for several minutes. Then, composing himself, he wrapped Audrey's body in the blanket. He would take it to the park that night and bury it there, hopefully without being seen. But, right now, it was feeding time for the dummies.

Two weeks passed. Audrey's blood was gone, and the animal's carcass rested in peace under the leaves. But peace evaded Jason: he had nothing with which to feed the dummies and had flatly rejected the suggestion that he get another dog.

"You could never take care of your family," chided Estelle.

"Grandpa, I'm dying of hunger," whimpered Amy.

"Father, do what you need to do, but we'll be gone soon," advised Albert.

Marie just sighed, resignedly.

A great weariness enveloped Jason. He could not keep the dummies, nor could he go back to his dark solitude without them. He changed into his best clothes, took the six dummies to the bedroom and laid in bed with them on both sides of his body. "I'll feed you, but you will have to help yourselves," he advised. He closed his eyes and recited a silent prayer, or perhaps a farewell. He then cut his throat with the same knife he had used to slay Audrey.

Two weeks later, an inspector from the animal shelter appeared at the door of Jason's apartment. She knocked repeatedly and, getting no answer, went down to the building super's apartment and asked that he open the door for her.

“We have been trying to contact him for days to arrange for a home visit for the dog he rescued. He never answered the phone or responded to our text messages and emails. Something is wrong.”

The super was grumpy, but the lady had an air of authority and expressed her request firmly. He led her upstairs and opened the door of the apartment.

The lights were out and the air inside was close and had an unpleasant odor. The apartment was empty, except for the corpse of a fully dressed old man, lying on the bed and as pale as the bedsheets. He exhibited a wide gash across the neck; blood had caked on the surface of the wound but was not visible anywhere else.

Everything was in order in the apartment, except for two oddly dressed dummies that were sprawled atop a bookcase, their heads resting on the wall. Around them, and on the floor beneath, there were numerous rags, plastic bags, and discarded clothing, including a hideous yellow polka-dot blouse that once may have belonged to a child.