

Doll

By Jenna Vander Waal

The town of Mors Falls is made of roughly 3,000 residents with a school district of 500 kids planted in its dead center. The school is where Ella, Collum, and George first met. By the time summer came around and reached its peak heat, the three were inseparable, tripping over each other as they ran wild in their freedom from first grade. The thrill of adventure ran through them. And so, the old cabins squatting right outside the town's perimeter became their meeting grounds.

~~~

Ella wraps a beaded necklace around her wrist over and over again until it's taught against her skin. Just before, she had climbed up onto the sink in the bathroom, with a foot balanced on the small surface of either side. She swiped at the top shelf, and a necklace fell onto the ground with a clatter.

"Isn't it pretty," she asks Collum now, as she shoves her arm out in front of him. But he's too concentrated on a little box in his hands to pay her any attention. She waves her hand in front of his face, and he pulls himself away from the box for long enough to look at what dangles from her arm.

"Where did you find that?" he asks, tracing its beads.

"In the bathroom on the top shelf."

"Oh."

"I feel like a fancy person." She puts her hand out in front of her and bounces her arm up and down so that the beads jangle against each other. They even glisten a bit when she twists them a certain way.

George screams. And runs out from where he was in the kitchen. "There's a mouse!"

His eyes are wide and shining, his round face frozen in horror. "I want to go! Now."

Ella rolls her eyes. Her house is full of mice, and they're not that scary. They skitter across her room at night. Especially when everything is quiet, and it feels like the world is just her and her pale ceiling. Their claws click on the floor, and they squeak just like in cartoons. She decides against enlightening George of their harmlessness though. She's bored anyway, so shoving the necklace into her pocket, she agrees, "Yeah, let's go."

Ella hasn't explored anything except these three cabins, and half the summer's gone by already. Soon second grade will have her staring at scribbles on paper again. That's why every time they're together, she makes sure to let the boys know she wants to spend every second of the summer adventuring. They don't argue.

Collum is back to staring at the box, so Ella repeats herself, "Let's go!"

He looks up and nods. Then looks at the box once more. With a dramatic flourish, he opens it. Finding nothing inside, he snaps it back shut.

The three burst out onto the porch. Before they can get further, Ella spins around to look at the two boys. "Race to the falls?"

---

Ella and Collum are neck and neck all the way with George at their heels. When they get to the falls, George drapes himself over the fence trying to catch his breath.

The fence is directly above the falls. Water spills out of them in gushes. Ella steps up onto the bottom of the fence and looks over at the rocks jutting out from the cliff below her. She bends over the top of the fence, her stomach resting on it, and her hair spilling over her

face. She listens to the water rushing down the falls and the blood rushing to her ears.

When her footing stumbles. Collum pulls her down, and she collapses on him.

She shoves him away from her. "You're so stupid! Why'd you make me fall?"

Still panting heavily, George looks up, "Maybe if you weren't so clumsy, he wouldn't have to save you all the time."

"He didn't save me!"

"You should say thank you. That's what nice people say," Collum gets back on his feet.

"Well, I'm not nice people. Stuuupid."

"Whatever."

"My mom says that's a devil word," George says finally breathing normally.

"Whatever?"

"The word Ella always says," George jabs a chubby finger at her.

Ella remembers last year at preschool. It was one of the last weeks, and she was in a tiny room with stuffed animal birds sitting up high on shelves filled with books. Ella was squirming around on her chair, her heart pounding ferociously. The lady placed her hand on Ella's back, forcing her to sit back down, and stabbed her finger at the page with big bright lines and curves. Ella could've sworn she heard the woman say the word stupid. And as she looked at the blur of lines and curves and tried her best to interpret them, she realized the lady wasn't wrong. The woman also said something about "these kids" and "this damn town" but Ella doesn't quite remember how she worded it all since they were barely louder than a breath.

George's finger still jabs at her, and Ella feels the urge to reach out and snap it. "It's not a devil word. Your mom's stupid!"

"My mom's not stupid! You're stupid!" Something glistens at the corner of George's eye.

"Why are you crying? I didn't even cry when I got this." She shoves her elbow into his face. "And I fell out of a tree!"

"We should go home," Collum says.

Ella looks at the sky which has turned a bruised purple. Her mom's going to kill her for missing supper again.

---

The next day, Ella follows her brand-new flower shoes to Collum's house, staring at them all the way. Her dad came home with them last night after working late. Her mom was angry at him -- Ella remembers her saying "What the hell?" -- but it's not Ella's fault that the tennis shoes her mom got her right before first grade last year were already hashed. How was she supposed to keep them clean when there were adventures to go on?

She's still looking down at her new shoes when she reaches Collum's block. Green vines and pretty, pink petals.

Lines had creased her mother's forehead, when she tried them on and showed them off to her father last night. The words: *How much did they cost?* written all over her face. Ella knows why. They're struggling with money again. She knows because for her birthday she asked for a baby doll. Instead, she got a new winter coat. Her parents had seemed more disappointed by the gift than she did. Either way, her mother really doesn't need to worry about these shoes because Ella knew from the second her father pulled them out from behind his back that she would wear them until her death bed.

George runs up behind her and shoves her into the grass, her shoes narrowly missing a patch of mud.

She jumps up and kicks him in the shin.

“Ow. It was just a joke. I didn’t even push you that hard.”

“Push me again, and you’ll regret it.” She says, examining her shoes.

“Okay, fine.” He rubs at the splotchy pink mark on his shin.

Ella heads up to Collum’s door. She knocks loudly since there’s always a lot of screaming in the house. He’s got like 50 younger siblings all running around half-naked all the time. Ella thinks they’re all undignified. She couldn’t imagine ever being that young. She’s almost half-way to eight and a proper young lady. She puts her hands on her hips.

Soon enough she has the two boys following her through the woods.

---

“Let’s play wolves! I’m leader!” Ella yells.

George points his chubby finger at her again, “You’re always the leader.” Then looks at Collum, “She’s always the leader.”

“Well then call it first next time.”

Ella smiles. Collum always has her back.

“Head north wolf pack!” Ella commands letting out a glorious howl.

They howl back and follow her.

The wolf pack trudges around the forest sniffing around bushes and trees. Their mission for the day: to find a place to nest for the harrowing night ahead. They travel through a thick layer of branches covering the trail. The trees have been ransacked of their branches from the night before and now litter the forest floor. It turned out the bruised

purple of the sky was just a storm and not nighttime, so she hadn't even gotten yelled at for being late.

After a while of searching, an evergreen tree covers the sky before them. Ella's jaw drops. It's the biggest tree she's ever seen. She throws her arms out in front of the boys and turns her head up in a long, victorious howl.

"What now?" asks George. "That last bush was thorny."

Ignoring him, her pointy ears stand alert. She sniffs the air and nods. Yup. It's decided. The tree looked to be carved out in the center, making the perfect little den for three wolves. Collum sees it as well as her and howls alongside her. Finally, George comes to his senses and howls in return. The three prowl forward.

Collum gets distracted. He stands still, paws planted. Ella looks back at him, trying to convince him to keep moving with her beady, black eyes. But when he doesn't comply, she looks up at where he's looking.

A disheveled cabin that must have been plucked from the earth and spat back out, rests about 50 yards from the tree.

Ella gets closer to it. The boys follow at her heels. She can see two porches, one on the first floor and one above it. On the first floor there's a couch with blue cloth stretched out over it and another coach that's muddy white with one stubby leg caught on the railing. There's a pile of wood planks with ragged edges on the floor, and the door to the cabin hangs open. She can see from here, the insides aren't hollow, but filled with possessions. Ella's stomach jerks. It's like they've found a ship perfectly encapsulated beneath the sea. No one has touched it, ransacked it, changed it from a time previous. It's still a home. And it's theirs. She imagines coming here every day and it being their own place. She'd be the

mother, of course, who would ensure everything would be in order. And the boys would be her sons who'd go out and hunt for food and bring back meat and berries that she'd stir into a stew. Like pioneers.

She spins around to the boys "Wanna play house?"

They both nod. Not even George can pretend indifference.

Ella lets out a squeal and runs up the hill, blowing past the porch and into the house.

She stops and takes it all in. There's a shelf of books, and a dresser with clothes, and a basket full of toys even. Most everything has spilled out all over the floor though. They'll need to pick up.

Collum is checking out the kitchen. He opens a cupboard with shelves of pots and pans.

Ella begins picking the toys that litter the floor and putting them back in the basket.

A murky water line traces all around the inside. It's like the cabins right outside of town, but the line is much lower on the walls. For a moment, Ella is amazed that the flood her father told her about could have reached this far. The falls felt like a million miles away from here. Ella didn't know much about the flood that practically destroyed all of Mors 20 years ago, but she did know that the cabins used to be pristine. They were used by families from around the country all year long. After the flood, hardly anything was rebuilt and the cabins were abandoned. What she didn't get was why the visitors no longer liked her hometown. Mors may be rundown, but the falls are still as pretty as ever.

She picks up a stuffed bunny with droopy eyes, and laughs at its big, white buck teeth. She thrusts her arm out in George's direction. "Hey look, it's you!"

He looks up from the shelf of books, his smile disappearing. "That's not even funny!"

"Yeah, it is. Right Collum! It looks like him."

George takes a book out and throws it in her direction. The pages flap wildly, hitting the wall behind her with a thud.

"Hey!" Ella exclaims, examining the wall for a dent. "This is our home. Take care of it!"

"Alright. Sorry. I was meaning to hit you, not the wall."

"Rude," Ella mutters before dropping the bunny into the basket.

She heads up the stairs that wind up the back of the cabin. There isn't much upstairs, so she passes through it before the boys have even caught up to her. She walks onto the upstairs porch. It is bigger than what she could see from outside. She sees a chest shoved against the wood railing and steps toward it before she is pulled backward on her butt.

Her mothers' words from last night come out like the snap of a snake's head. "What the hell, Collum!"

"That's a devil word!"

"Shut up, George! Why'd you do that?"

Collum points to the rug, "There's a hole." Still confused, Collum shows her by pulling up the rug. Sure enough, there is a large gap in the center where the floor has fallen through to the bottom porch.

The three carefully step around the hole. Ella sits at the base of the chest and holds her breath. Ella opens the lid, and their three heads peek inside. There's nothing, except for blankets wrapped snuggly around a baby doll.

Ella is speechless.

Her mouth opens, but nothing comes out.

George reaches forward, but Ella swats his chubby fingers away. This is a job for a woman.

She puts her hands to her heart to settle the rapid fire of it and lets out a long breath. When she's collected herself, she reaches down and picks up the baby doll. Its eyes are glassy with long black lashes that stick to its lids. Its skin is pale and its hands tuck into plump little balls. She puts her finger in its little palm and pulls it into her lap. And rocks it as the boys watch with wide eyes.

She has never seen a baby doll so perfect.

Though she wants to stay there forever, rocking it back and forth and looking into its little glossy eyes, she feels in her maternal bosom that if it were to be their family's baby, it needs food. She gingerly places the baby doll back inside, wraps it up and closes the lid.

---

The next day she rushes to Collum's house with bread and blueberries in her pocket. George meets her on the way. His face is stone serious this time. His hands are shoved into his pockets. He pulls out one chubby fist and unwraps it to reveal a bright jewel threaded through a string.

"For the baby," he says, uncertainty in his eyes.

Ella smiles, then masks it. She nods a *thank you* and takes the homemade necklace from him. Silently, they wait for Collum outside his door. He comes out, and the three head off to the cabin. Soon enough, Ella is pulling the baby back into her arms and rocking it with the food tilted up to its lips, the necklace around its small head.

Its glassy eyes are such a soft color green, speckled through with light browns.

She can't look away. Just keeps rocking it. Back and forth. Back and forth. Her chest swelling with motherly love.

She remembers her mother when she was little, coming into her room and stopping at the edge of her bed. Ella had wished she'd come closer and lay next to her, pulling her daughter into her grasp. Her mother would sway for a second almost as if thinking it over, then she'd turn and leave. The lights would blink off and the door would close. And Ella would be in darkness.

George's chubby hands reach for the baby. She yanks away.

"Why can't I hold her?"

"Because."

Collum looks at Ella in a way she doesn't like, "Come on, Ella. Let him hold her."

*Backstabber.*

George tries to take the baby from her. So, she yanks away again, this time scrambling to her feet, the baby held firmly in her arms. Ella bursts forward, George behind her grasping for the baby. She falls through the floor.

A shriek escapes her before she lands.

When she does land, she looks around desperately for the doll, but can't find it. After a second, she notices she's on the pile of planks with a gash on her leg.

Blood leaks into her flower shoes.

She gasps, trying to stop the blood from dripping. But there's blood already smeared into her shoes. Tears burn her eyes.

She doesn't even look at the boys above her. She wants to go home. So, wincing in pain with each step, that's what she does. She leaves everything behind, following her bloody shoes as pink petals turn dark.

---

When Ella gets home, her mom demands to know what happened, but she forces past her until the door to her bedroom is slammed shut. She slumps down against it, sobs coming in thick waves that heave out from her chest. She looks at her flower shoes. Blood has soaked through the cloth. It now overcomes the pretty, pink flowers. She desperately rubs at them until her fingers ache too bad to continue.

She falls asleep against her bedroom door.

---

When she wakes up, she knows she has to go back. Without the boys. Her mother cleans the gash, flinching at the touch of her daughter more than Ella does at the pain. And though her mother asks again, Ella refuses to tell her what happened. Nothing's going to stop her from going back. She goes to her room to get her old tennis shoes on. As Ella leaves, her mother doesn't look up from her hands resting on the kitchen table.

Ella walks through the woods.

Alone it feels eerie. Her heart beats at her chest as she winds through the overgrown paths. She imagines the baby doll having landed on the muddy white couch. And it's crying. She takes a deep breath. It needs her.

At last, she sees the evergreen spread out through the sky before her.

But she hears something rotten. Dozens of footsteps and voices. Scratchy radios squealing.

She inches out from behind the evergreen and sees yellow strips hanging from the railings.

Her heart stops. The boys ratted her out. *How could they ruin everything this way? Ruin their family. Abandon their baby.*

A stretcher is pulled out from the cabin. A white cloth covering it. Beneath it lies a little lump. She looks closer, her eyes tracing the curve of its small head.

And at that moment, she knows.

She knows as she reels back behind the evergreen.