

MANNEQUINS



At auction I buy two dozen mannequins and set them around the house. I give each a name and dress them in tuxedos. Gowns. Work clothes. Pajamas. I set a few in front of the television. Two at the kitchen table. A man on the toilet. A woman in the shower. Four on the lawn with croquet mallets. At night vandals arrange them in obscene positions. But I don't mind. I'm glad they're interested. Two mannequins lie naked in the spare bedroom staring up at the ceiling. One dangles by his neck from a rope in the workshop. Pull him once—the garage door opens. Pull him again—it closes. The rest are stacked in the purgatory of my closet. My neighbors think I'm a pervert. My mother doesn't believe in psychiatrists but makes an exception in this case. Last week the police searched the place and left laughing. When my lover arrives she calls them by their proper names. She brings a new hat for one. A paisley scarf for another. Then she turns the lights out and stands quite still among them. I know which one she is. But I play along with her little game.

KAFKA



I wake to find I have become Kafka. I look in the mirror, surprised at how young, how handsome I am. In my eastern European way. My pointed ears. My dark eyes. Even my gauntness becomes me. I sit at a desk and begin a story about a man in a small room waiting for someone to arrive. (It occurs to me that I might be that man.) The door to the apartment building opens. Footsteps ascend five flights of stairs. The bell rings. The man rises to open the door. That's as far as I've gotten. As you can see, I'm not used to being Kafka yet. The character could find himself standing on the other side. Or a cockroach the size of a human scuttling across the floor. Or a young woman from downstairs, desperate to find a reason to go on living. He invites her in and serves her tea. She sits on the floral couch. He sits in the overstuffed chair. All afternoon they consider her anguish. They have such a pleasant time discussing the hollowness of existence, he invites her back tomorrow. Before she leaves, she reaches up and straightens his tie.

THE NEXT VILLAGE



In the next village the bells ring at all hours. In the middle of the night when everyone is asleep. At midday when children huddle over their studies. In the evening when families bow their heads. They leave the door to the tower unlocked so that anyone can pull those ropes. When loneliness descends. When love overtakes all. They feel it is good to let others know. Even now you can hear the echoes across the valley. When lovers are involved the bells are gentle. And come in pairs. When children swing on the cords you'd think war was at hand. When the town fool has something to say he sounds the smallest bells a dozen times. The dying ring just once.