

The Porcelain Doll

A Joint-Letter Written By Tolstoy And His Wife, To His Wife's Younger Sister
In 1863

Leo Tolstoy

1863

Why Tanya, have you dried up? You don't write to me at all, and I so love receiving letters from you, and you have not yet replied to Levochka¹'s crazy epistle, of which I did not understand a word.

23rd March

There, she began to write, and suddenly stopped, because she could not continue. And do you know why, Tanya dear?

A strange thing has befallen her, and a still stranger thing has befallen me. As you know, like the rest of us, she has always been made of flesh and blood, with all the advantages and disadvantages of that condition: she breathed, was warm and sometimes hot, blew her nose (and how loud!) and so on - and above all, she had control of her limbs, which - both arms and legs - could assume different positions: in a word, she was corporeal like all of us.

Suddenly, on March 21st 1863, at ten o'clock in the evening, this extraordinary thing befell her and me. Tanya! I know you always loved her (I do not know what feeling she will arouse in you now), I know you felt a sympathetic interest in me, and I know your reasonableness, your sane view of the important affairs of life, and your love of your parents (please prepare them and inform them of this event), and so I write to tell you just how it happened.

I got up early that day and walked and rode a great deal. We lunched and dined together and had been reading (she was still able to read) and I felt tranquil and happy. At ten o'clock I said goodnight to Auntie² (Sonya was then still as usual, and said she would follow me) and I went off to bed.

Through my sleep I heard her open the door and heard her breathe as she undressed...I heard how she came out from behind the screen and approached the bed. I opened my eyes...and saw - not the Sonya you and I have known - but a porcelain Sonya! Made of that very porcelain about which your parents had a dispute. You know those porcelain dolls with bare cold shoulders, and necks and arms bent forward, but made of the same lump of porcelain as the body. They have black painted hair arranged in large waves, the paint of which gets rubbed off at the top, and

¹ A term referring to Leo

² Auntie Tatiana, Alexandrovna Ergolski (1795-1874) who brought Tolstoy up

protruding porcelain eyes that are too wide and are also painted black at the corners, and the stiff porcelain folds of their skirts are made of the same one piece of porcelain as the rest. And Sonya was like that!

I touched her arm - she was smooth, pleasant to feel, and cold porcelain. I thought I was asleep and gave myself a shake, but she remained like that and stood before me immovable. I said: Are you porcelain? And without opening her mouth (which remained as it was, with curved lips painted bright red) she replied: Yes, I am porcelain. A shiver ran down my back. I looked at her legs; they also were porcelain and (you can imagine my horror) fixed on a porcelain stand, made of one piece with herself, representing the ground and painted green to depict grass. By her left leg, a little above and at the back of the knee, there was a porcelain column, colored brown and probably representing the stump of a tree. This too was in one piece with her. I understood that without this stump she could not remain erect, and I became very sad, as you who loved her can imagine. I still did not believe my senses, and began to call her. She could not move without that stump and its base, and only rocked a little - together with the base - to fall in my direction.

I heard how the porcelain base knocked against the floor and cold porcelain. I tried to lift her hand, but could not. I touched her again, and she was all smooth, pleasant. I tried to pass a finger, or even a nail, between her elbow and her side - but it was impossible. The obstacle was the same porcelain mass, such as is made at Auerbach's, and of which sauce-boats are made. She was planned for external appearance only. I began to examine her chemise, it was all of one piece with the body, above and below. I looked more closely, and noticed that at the bottom a bit of the fold of her chemise was broken off and it showed brown. At the top of her head it showed white where the paint had come off a little. The paint had also come off a lip in one place, and a bit was chipped off one shoulder. But it was all so well made and so natural that it was still our same Sonya. And the chemise was one I knew, with lace, and there was a knot of black hair behind, but of porcelain, and the fine slender hands, and large eyes, and the lips - all were the same, but of porcelain. And the dimple in her chin and the small bones in front of her shoulders, were there too, but of porcelain. I was in a terrible state and did not know what to say or do or think. She would have been glad to help me, but what could a porcelain create do? The half-closed eyes, the eyelashes and eyebrows were all like her living self when looked at from a distance.

She did not look at me, but past me at her bed. She evidently wanted to lie down, and rocked on her pedestal all the time. I quite lost control of myself, seized her and tried to take her to her bed. My fingers made no impression on her cold porcelain body, and what surprised me yet more was that she had become as light as an empty flask. And suddenly, she seemed to shrink and became quite small, smaller than the palm of my hand, although she still looked just the same. I seized a pillow, put her in a corner of it, pressed down another corner with my fist and placed her there, then I took her nightcap, folded it in four, and covered her up to the head with it. She lay there still just the same. Then I extinguished the candle and placed her under my beard. Suddenly I heard her voice from the corner of the pillow: "Leva, why have I become porcelain?" I did not know what to reply. She said again: "Does it make any difference that I am porcelain?" I did not want to grieve her, and said it did not matter. I felt her again in the dark - she was still as before, cold and porcelain. And her stomach was the same as when she was alive, protruding upwards - rather unnatural for a porcelain doll. Then I experienced a strange feeling. I suddenly felt it pleasant that she should be as she was, and ceased to be surprised - it all seemed natural. I took her out, passed her from one hand to the other, and tucked her under my head. She liked it all. We fell asleep.

In the morning I got up and went out without looking at her. All that had happened the day before seemed so terrible. When I returned for lunch she had again become such as she always was. I did not remind her of what had happened the day before, fearing to grieve her and Auntie. I have not yet told anyone but you about it. I thought it had all passed off, but all these days, every time we are alone together, the same thing happens. She suddenly becomes small and porcelain. In the presence of others she is just as she used to be. She is not oppressed by this, nor am I. Strange as it may seem, I frankly confess that I am glad of it, and though she is porcelain we are very happy.

I write to you of all this, dear Tanya, only that you should prepare her parents for the news, and through papa should find out from the doctors what this occurrence means, and whether it will not be bad for our expected child. Now we are alone, and she is sitting under my necktie and I feel how her sharp little nose cuts into my neck. Yesterday she had been left in a room by herself. I went in and saw that Dora (our little dog) had dragged her into a corner, was playing with her and nearly broke her. I whipped Dora, put Sonya in my waistcoat pocket and took her to my study. To-day however I am expecting from Tula a small wooden box I have ordered, covered outside with morocco and lined inside with raspberry-colored velvet, with a place arranged in it for her so that she can be laid in it with her elbows, head and back all supported evenly so that she cannot break. I shall also cover it completely with chamois leather.

I had written this letter when suddenly a terrible misfortune occurred. She was standing on the table, when N.P.³ pushed against her in passing, and she fell and broke off a leg above the knee with the stump. Alexey⁴ says that it can be mended with a cement made of the white of eggs. If such a recipe is known in Moscow, please send it to me.

³ Natalya Petrovna Okhotnitskaya, an old woman who was living at Yasnaya Polyana

⁴ Alexey Stepanovich Orekhov (who died in 1882), a servant of Tolstoy's who had accompanied him to the Caucasus and to Sevastopol during the Crimean War. He was employed as steward at Yasnaya Polyana

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