

People Change

# Conversation Pieces



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## About the Aqueduct Press Conversation Pieces Series

The feminist engaged with sf is passionately interested in challenging the way things are, passionately determined to understand how everything works. It is my constant sense of our feminist-sf present as a grand conversation that enables me to trace its existence into the past and from there see its trajectory extending into our future. A genealogy for feminist sf would not constitute a chart depicting direct lineages but would offer us an ever-shifting, fluid mosaic, the individual tiles of which we will probably only ever partially access. What could be more in the spirit of feminist sf than to conceptualize a genealogy that explicitly manifests our own communities across not only space but also time?

Aqueduct's small paperback series, *Conversation Pieces*, aims to both document and facilitate the "grand conversation." The *Conversation Pieces* series presents a wide variety of texts, including short fiction (which may not always be sf and may not necessarily even be feminist), essays, speeches, manifestoes, poetry, interviews, correspondence, and group discussions. Many of the texts are reprinted material, but some are new. The grand conversation reaches at least as far back as Mary Shelley and extends, in our speculations and visions, into the continually-created future. In Jonathan Goldberg's words, "To look forward to the history that will be, one must look at and retell the history that has been told." And that is what *Conversation Pieces* is all about.

L. Timmel Duchamp

Jonathan Goldberg, "The History That Will Be" in Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero, eds., *Premodern Sexualities* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996)





Conversation Pieces  
Volume 63

# People Change

by  
Gwynne Garfinkle





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*For my mother, Audrey Garfinkle*



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## In Lieu of a Thank You

The man you killed taught me a lot about Lepidoptera. Butterflies have two sets of wings, the forewings and the hindwings, all of them covered in minute scales—but you don't want to hear about that.

Of course I was afraid at first, Charles. I never said I wasn't. Rocco cut quite a menacing figure with his hatchet profile and black hood. The party at Bertie's had become tedious, so I'd left on my own when it was still twilight. Yes, I know you would have preferred that I not walk home unattended! Jimmy had offered to run me home in his Rolls, but it was such a lovely summer evening, the air caressing my skin. I suppose I was a bit tight—there'd been rather a lot of champagne at the party. I strolled aimlessly for a while, and I was loitering in front of a shop window, contemplating whether a midnight blue satin cloche with feathers might be rather nice for our honeymoon, when Rocco came up behind me and grasped my shoulder. I gave a jump, turned, and let out a pathetic squeak at the sight of him. Then he jammed the cloth soaked in chloroform over my nose and mouth.

I came to on a pallet on a stone floor, and Ernest was peering down at me. I took in his piercing gray eyes beneath wire-rimmed spectacles, his fine and lofty brow, his short pale hair that looked as if it had been touched by electricity. I became aware of a mechanical sound in the room, a purring and a whirring, and saw from the

corner of my eye flashes of light in the already harshly lit room.

“Is she awake, Master?”

Behind the slender, fair man in the lab coat loomed Rocco’s black-clad bulk. He had lowered his hood to reveal his bald, egg-shaped head and cruel blue eyes. You’ll be glad to hear that I covered.

“Don’t be frightened, Miss...” Ernest said.

I struggled to a seated position. I was briefly dizzy and nauseated, but I mastered myself. “I am Miss Grand. Vanessa Grand. And I demand to know who you are and where you have taken me, and for what purpose.”

“I’m pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Grand. I am Dr. Ernest Clive.” He seemed timid, even eager to please me. Unlike you, Ernest was ill-versed in the ways of love, hearts and flowers and everything designed to trap a woman. I *was* trapped by Ernest, of course, but there was something honest about the arrangement. “I hope my assistant Rocco hasn’t mistreated you.”

“Aside from drugging and abducting me, Rocco has been a perfect gentleman. However, I’m certain my fiancé and my father are looking for me. Is it money you’re after? I’m sure that can be arranged to everyone’s satisfaction.” A bit shakily, I scrambled to my feet and dusted off my green silk frock. “But really it would be best for all concerned if you allowed me simply to walk out of here—”

And then I saw.

The high ceiling with the skylight. The hospital bed equipped with straps and wires. The beakers bubbling with ruby and emerald liquids. The machinery softly chugging up and down. The flashes of electricity crackling in their circuits. The aquarium in which swam...

I let out a gasp. Did you see them, Charles? The canaries that swam in the aquarium? The cage full of tropical fish that flew, their scales flashing blue and green and purple? Or were you too busy rescuing me to notice such wonders?

“You needn’t be afraid, Miss Grand,” Ernest said.

“Won’t do you any good, anyway,” Rocco remarked. “Dr. Clive will do as he likes with you!”

“Be quiet, you fool,” Ernest said.

I was transfixed by the fish that seemed for all the world to breathe the air through their gills as they floated in their cage. “Dr. Clive, how is this possible?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” he muttered impatiently.

I bridled. “Because I’m a woman?”

“No, Miss Grand. Because no one does. I’m a genius, you see.” He lifted his chin and would not meet my gaze, as if to convey that genius was a proud and lonely lot.

“All this is your handiwork? Dr. Clive, it’s magnificent!” My heart pounded, but there was exhilaration mixed with the fright. In that moment, at least, I knew I was alive.

“Ain’t you going to scream?” Rocco asked dejectedly. “Usually they scream. Even Miss Georgina screamed.”

“Be silent!” Ernest said.

“Who is Miss Georgina?” I asked. I wondered how many women they had brought to the laboratory, and for what purpose.

“My fiancée,” Ernest murmured.

“I see. Have I mentioned that I have one as well? He’ll be searching for me, you know,” I repeated.

“Dr. Clive don’t have no fiancée no more,” Rocco informed me.

“Why? Did you—harm her?” I began to shiver.

“Of course not,” Ernest said. “We were to be married until she saw—all this. I thought she’d be proud of her future husband’s work. Instead she was horrified. She called me mad. Then she married my rival.”

All about us Ernest Clive’s work sparkled and flashed. “What a little idiot Miss Georgina must be,” I said.

Ernest’s glasses had slipped down his nose. He pushed them back up and stared at me. “Miss Grand, do you truly think so?”

Rocco shambled towards me, his big arms swinging. “Don’t listen to her, Master. She’s trying to talk her way ’round you.”

I backed away from Rocco until the cold stone wall stopped me. “What do you mean to do to me?”

When Ernest didn’t reply, Rocco volunteered. “Half woman, half butterfly. Well, wings on a woman, at any rate.”

My eye fell on the bed with the straps, the electrodes. On a little table next to it glinted scalpels and other instruments. I hugged myself and felt the gooseflesh on my arms. “The women who screamed—was it because you tried this procedure on them?” Then I stopped shivering. I turned to Ernest. “I say, would I be able to fly?”

Ernest gave a start. Clearly he wasn’t expecting such a response. Screams, yes, but not this.

“Shall I prepare the electrodes, Master?” Rocco asked.

Ernest appeared not to hear him. He kept staring at me as if I’d only just appeared in the room. Rocco repeated his question, and the doctor seemed to shake himself awake. “Prepare a room for Miss Grand, Rocco. She’s going to be our guest.”

“But Master—”

“Do as you’re told. The room nearest the front staircase on the second floor will be the most comfortable, I think.”

Grumbling, Rocco trudged away.

I placed my hand on Ernest’s arm. “You didn’t answer my question, Doctor,” I said. “*Will I be able to fly?*”

Don’t look at me like that, Charles! When I was a little girl, I wanted to be a doctor like my favorite uncle Anthony, but that, of course, was impossible. I was pretty and clever and would make a good match someday. By the time I met you, I was already laughing the empty laugh of the dead. Oh, it was all amusing—the foxtrots and surreptitious kisses, and knowing that my blonde waves and trim figure gave me power over a handsome man—but with Ernest, I regained the ability to be surprised. Did you really think I wanted to be a society wife pouring out endless tea and listening to endless chatter about frocks and parties and engagements? Did you think I wanted my belly distended by a squirming creature growing within? Talk of being experimented upon! I tell you, I wanted to fly.

I was given a room in Ernest’s ancestral estate, full of secret passageways and crumbling staircases. I could have spent years exploring its recesses. At first he had to chase me ’round the laboratory, I was so eager to explore. “What does this one do?” I asked, my hand poised above a lever.

He rushed to my side. “Don’t touch that lever! You’ll blow us all to kingdom come!”

How I laughed! He gazed at me as if I were the one astonishing thing left in all creation. Then he caught me about the waist and kissed me.

It's true he had tried the experiment on a couple of the village girls, grafting wings on their backs and then removing them when he saw where he'd gone wrong. But there was minimal scarring, and Ernest erased the entire episode from the girls' minds before he released them. (No, Charles, I do not believe he would have done the same to me.) He hadn't dared take another girl from the village, lest suspicion fall on him and Rocco—hence Rocco's trip to London in Ernest's battered automobile, and my abduction.

Once he got to know me, Ernest no longer wanted to go ahead with the experiment as planned. "I don't want to cause you pain, my darling," he said. "We'll find another girl. You may assist in the procedure, if you like."

"I can endure the pain," I told him. "Don't you dare give another woman this privilege. I believe with all my heart that you can give me the gift of flight."

His eyes filled with tears, and he clasped my hand and told me he would prove himself worthy of my trust.

How his long, deft fingers traced where the wings would be on my bare shoulder blades, making me shiver deliciously. The original wings had been gray and functional, but Ernest insisted on redesigning them to make them both beautiful and capable of sustaining longer, swifter flights. They were iridescent blue and orange, and they would have been my flesh and bone. Tucked beneath my clothes when I didn't use them—rather like a penis, don't you think?—but ready for me to unfurl, to fly bare-breasted and free. I even designed a chemise

with slots in the back from which the wings could protrude, in case I wished to fly more modestly attired.

I loved that Ernest wanted to improve upon the wings for me, but it delayed the experiment. If only we had not delayed! It's hard to believe I was with him for less than a month, we made so many plans. There's an island—I won't tell you where. We were going to live there and fill the place with such marvels. It would have been a second Eden, one in which the quest for knowledge went unpunished.

The morning of the experiment, Ernest and I were elated, though our joy was tinged with fear. Even Rocco seemed touched by the magnitude of what we were about to attempt. He was quiet and solemn, respectfully averting his eyes from my partial nudity. Ernest had removed my wings from the refrigeration unit and placed them—I assume you didn't notice them—on the long table beside the hospital bed on which I sat, the sheet draped around me. All seemed hushed and still, in spite of the crackling volts of power and the chugging of the machinery.

Ernest and I exchanged a last, long look. Then he prepared the syringe, and I held out my arm. He bent to administer the injection, and I held my breath, waiting for the needle's prick.

When the shot rang out, at first I didn't understand what had happened. Almost I thought it was part of the procedure, until I saw the shocked confusion in Ernest's eyes. The syringe clattered to the floor, and Ernest fell.

Then I saw you—my hero.

When Rocco made for you with a snarl, I hoped he would wrest the weapon from your hand and exact vengeance. But alas, you are an excellent shot.

I know you thought it womanly hysteria that made me struggle as you secured the sheet around me. You cared more for my modesty than for Ernest lying in his swiftly spreading blood, his face chalk white, eyes staring behind crooked spectacles, much less for Rocco dragging himself along the floor whimpering in pain. Hysteria, you thought, made me scream and kick and fight you as you slung me in your arms and carried me down the spiral staircase and outdoors. I would have run back to Ernest as soon as you set me on my feet, the mob of villagers with their rifles and scythes be damned—if not for the explosion.

“It’s all over now,” you gloated, pulling me into an entirely unwanted embrace.

You think I’m crazy, don’t you—that he was mad and infected me with his madness. Papa and Mama and my sisters and brothers understand me as little as you do. Mama begs me to be grateful for your “rescue,” to thank you for your pistol shot that laid waste to one of the greatest minds this world has known. I am lucky, she says, to be safely back in London, away from that dreadful place. She says that soon I will have forgotten everything that happened there, like a bad dream, and then you and I will marry! But I will never forgive you for dragging me away as he died on the laboratory floor, without me to hold his hand, to help him into the next world—a world, I trust, full of enough wonders to keep the most brilliant scientist happy. Here I remain, without even his creations to remember him by. Rocco must have pulled that lever, preferring death by his own hand to whatever fate others meant for him. I can’t say I blame him.



Have no fear, I shan't take my life. Ernest's work was devoured by the conflagration—gone, the birds that swam and the fish that flew, all gone, my beautiful blue and orange wings—and I have not his genius, but I do have his daring. I shall learn to pilot an aeroplane. Laugh all you want, Charles, but there are women pilots in this world, and I mean to fly. Perhaps I will fly to our island, and then I will be free of the lot of you.

## The Paper Doll Golems

(1915, The Lower East Side, New York City)

Ruthie can't sleep for the whispering of the dolls. Hildy and Margaret are talking to each other in the dark, their voices as light and thin as paper. Even the sound of Ruthie's heartbeat drowns them out, but if she lies very still and listens intently, she can hear what they are saying. They lie together on the night table in the little bed Ruthie made from tissue paper, high enough from the floor that they won't try to escape.

"I don't like it here, Hildy," Margaret says. "I want to go home. My papa and mama and everyone must be frantic with worry."

"Try not to be frightened," Hildy replies. "We must treat this like an adventure."

Brave Hildy! Ruthie had gazed at Hildy's impish, intelligent face (the expression reminding her of her sister Judith), and thought, If only she were a real girl, we would be the best of friends. Ruthie's not sure if Hildy is a real girl now.

"I think the giantess is Jewish," Margaret says, her tone scandalized. "She said her surname is Katz. My papa says one must never trust a Jew."

Ruthie inhales sharply and waits for Hildy to defend her, to defend the Jews. (That is what golems are supposed to do, defend the Jews.) Hildy says nothing. (Golems never do what they're supposed to do. Ruthie

knows this. Nothing ever goes the way Ruthie wants it to. Why did she think this time might be different?) Ruthie imagines catching Margaret in her hand and erasing the word from her forehead, despite Hildy's protests. Could she do it?

Then Hildy says, even more quietly than before, but very distinctly, "I think *she* is listening."

"Oh!" Margaret exclaims miserably, and she begins to weep. The weeping of a paper doll is a pitiful little sound, like an insect weeping.

"Don't cry, Margaret," Hildy soothes, as Ruthie had imagined her soothing her.

Paper dolls can't be golems, of course. Golems are clay. Ruthie brought the paper dolls to life, but she improvised. Perhaps if she knew Hebrew, her paper dolls would not hate the Jews. She isn't sure that Hildy feels the same way as Margaret, but her silence on the subject is disappointing.



Ruthie began to cut paper dolls from the pages of her mother's *Ladies' Monthly* when she was recovering from the influenza. Hildy Henderson was her favorite. Hildy's curls are auburn, her eyes green. She wears a white chemise, socks, and black patent leather shoes. These are drawn onto her body, part of the doll itself. Ruthie wonders if Hildy finds it odd never to be naked or even to have bare feet—or if she realizes she only has a front, and that her back is blank. Hildy has a frock of pale green and another of bright blue, and a tan coat with sable trim, all with tabs to attach them to her body. (Hildy and Margaret help each other to put on and take

off each other's clothes, though their paper hands seem to have a hard time working the tabs. Ruthie would like to help, but the dolls won't even dress or undress if they know she is watching.)

The paper dolls' clothes are new and vibrant, not like Ruthie's clothes, many of them hand-me-downs her mother had to hem because Ruthie isn't as tall as Judith was at her age. Ruthie doesn't mind wearing Judith's old clothes. She hopes wearing them might make her more like her sister, in time.

Ruthie is thirteen, too old for paper dolls, perhaps, but they've helped her to dream. The way Ben and Isaac help her to dream when they come home from the motion picture show and tell her what they saw. One time they acted out Charlie Chaplin's comical walk. Another day they described a moving picture about a golem, finishing each other's sentences the way they do. (Ruthie thinks it must be nice to be a twin. Ben and Isaac are never lonely, are they? They have each other. Ruthie's parents have each other. Judith has her anarchist comrades. Ruthie has no one.) In the motion picture, a rabbi fashioned a golem out of clay and brought him to life by writing a magic word on his forehead. The rabbi wanted the golem to save the Jews in the village from a pogrom. But the golem fell in love with a girl who rejected him, and he ended up rampaging through the town. Ben and Isaac uproariously mimicked the rampaging golem, arms outstretched, bodies lumbering as they pretended to menace Ruthie. They all collapsed in laughter—whereupon their mother told the boys not to overexcite their sister.

Being an invalid is so tedious. Ruthie wants to be Jo March, but her parents treat her like Beth. Sometimes

she wishes she were a large, lumbering, cumbersome golem to rampage through the city. Rampaging sounds like fun.

Ruthie misses her sister Judith. She and Judith used to sleep in the same bed, as Hildy and Margaret do. Her sister made the apartment so lively with her fast talk and her irrepressible laugh. It's true that when Judith lived with them, she and their father were always arguing, mostly about Emma Goldman. The apartment rang with the sound of raised voices—though if their father knew Ruthie was within earshot, he lowered his voice when they quarreled over a woman's right to plan her family. Ruthie wasn't sure what the fuss was about, though she guessed it had something to do with how babies were made (which Judith had told her about before she moved out, saying "If I don't tell you, Father and Mother never will!").

Their father is usually soft-spoken, but when he's angry, his voice booms and sneers. He can make Ruthie cry in seconds. But Judith always stands up to him. She seems fearless. Ruthie loves that about her.

No one talks about Ruthie's little brother Jacob, who died of the flu that nearly killed Ruthie last winter. Everything changed then. Their mother changed most of all, but sometimes Ruthie catches their father with a bewildered look on his face. Her parents' fear lives in the apartment with them, a low hum of distress. It ruins everything it touches.

Ruthie misses her best friend Grace Wasserman from school, and her teacher Mrs. Frank who liked to recite poetry. She misses running at full tilt and being in crowds of people. She's rarely allowed to go outside. The smoke

from a passing man's cigarette can send her into a coughing fit that terrifies her mother. She misses feeling full of energy, but she's not sure how much of her lassitude is due to being cooped up at home. She half-remembers lying in bed burning with fever, feeling too weak to move and too sick to care that she might be dying. But what followed was worse, when she recovered and wasn't allowed to resume her life. Too much of a risk, her parents insist. Too weak, too susceptible, they say. Her heart, the doctor agrees. She's not sure she believes any of them.



What would be the harm, Ruthie thought, sitting on her bed with her paper dolls one October afternoon. She dressed Hildy in her pale green frock. The dolls were a little larger than her hand, not huge like the rampaging clay golem. Her brothers were off somewhere, her father at work at the drug store, her mother doing the shopping. She reached for her pencil. She didn't want to mar Hildy's smooth forehead, but in tiny letters she wrote the word "LIVE." She didn't expect anything to happen. Nothing ever happens to Ruthie.

"Live," she whispered. "Please live."

She held the paper doll in her hand and stared intently at her face. Hildy's expression flickered like a candle. Suddenly Ruthie was not alone. The doll looked at her with a quizzical air. Then she began to struggle in Ruthie's hand. She feared the doll would tear herself. "Don't be afraid, Hildy," she said.

"How do you know my name?" Hildy asked. Ruthie had to strain to hear her.

How to tell Hildy that she had read her name in the *Ladies' Monthly*? That she was a doll Ruthie had carefully cut out and backed with heavy paper? "My name is Ruthie," she said.

Hildy tilted her head slightly to one side and frowned. "Let me down, please."

Ruthie placed her on her feet on the bed. Hildy had trouble with her footing, but she righted herself.

Then Hildy saw Margaret, lying flat on the bed. She rushed to her side. "Wake up, Margaret!" She shook Margaret's shoulder with her tiny hand. Then she looked up at Ruthie. "Why won't she wake up? She lies so still. Is she dead?" Hildy began to weep. Fortunately paper dolls don't produce tears, which would surely make them soggy.

Ruthie had wanted to bring only Hildy to life, but Hildy was so heartbroken at the sight of Margaret lying there that she took up her pencil and carefully wrote "LIVE" on Margaret's forehead. The doll stirred. "Margaret!" Hildy cried. "You're alive!"

Margaret was blonde and blue-eyed, with a pink ribbon in her hair. She was wearing her pink dress. She looked around and gave a squeak of terror at the sight of Ruthie. "It's all right, Margaret," Hildy said. "This is Ruthie. She revived you."

"But she's a giant! I'm so frightened, Hildy!" The dolls clung to each other.

Ruthie should have hidden Margaret from Hildy, instead of bringing her to life. Perhaps then Hildy would have been her friend.



The paper dolls have been alive for three days. Ruthie has barely slept. It is late afternoon, and Judith is coming for dinner. Ordinarily Ruthie would be listening for her sister's arrival. Instead she sits perched on the bed and watches the dolls. They make her feel like an interloper in her own room. They sit together on the bed and whisper, and when Ruthie tries to talk to them, they look up at her as if she were a freak of nature.

"Won't you tell me about your father's house in the country, Meg?" Ruthie asks. "And your cat named Smokey? I would like to have a cat, but my parents won't let me." Before she brought the dolls to life, she read and reread the paper doll page of the *Ladies' Monthly* and imagined going to live in the country with Margaret and Hildy, just as she had imagined living with Judith and her anarchist friends.

"Don't call me Meg! My name is Margaret."

"I'm sorry, Margaret." Ruthie had thought it would be nice to call her Meg like the Margaret in *Little Women*.

"How do you know about my father's country house?" Margaret demands. "It's none of your business, you...you nasty Jew!"

It never occurred to Ruthie when she read about Hildy Henderson and Margaret Mills in the *Ladies' Monthly* that Margaret would look down her nose at her. Ruthie's father might not own a house in the country, but he runs the drug store everyone in the neighborhood goes to. Almost everyone in the neighborhood is Jewish. Pogroms happen in other countries and in mo-



tion pictures about golems. In Ruthie's world, being Jewish was always just...being.

"I hate it here," Margaret says. "It smells of cabbage. I want to go home!"

Ruthie has always loved the smell of her mother's cooking. Margaret's words fill her with bewildered rage. "Hush, Margaret," Hildy says. "Don't provoke her." Ruthie knows Hildy doesn't care about Ruthie's feelings, but only fears what Ruthie will do if angered. She's right to be afraid. Quick as a wink, Ruthie plucks Margaret off the bed and lifts her level with her face. Margaret's arms and legs flail.

"You ought to be more polite," Ruthie whispers. "You're really very small and brittle. Brittle little paper doll! You should be grateful to me for giving you life."

Margaret tries to kick Ruthie with her patent leather shoe made of harmless paper.

"Please, Ruthie," Hildy cries. "Margaret is sorry. Please put her down."

Ruthie smiles grimly. Margaret struggles in her hand. How easy it would be to tear her to pieces. Ruthie's heart is pounding. She has felt powerless for such a long time. This is what it is to have power. It is terrifying.

"Ruthie! Dinnertime!" Her mother's voice. Ruthie puts Margaret down on the bed, and the doll hurries to Hildy's side.

"Be good while I'm gone," she tells them. She sounds like her mother—no, like her father. The dolls look at her as if they hate and fear her.



Ruthie gets to sit next to Judith at the kitchen table. Dinner is delicious chicken and cabbage soup, but Ruth-

ie is distracted by the thought of the paper dolls alone in her room—so distracted, she’s not even sure how the argument gets started. “I don’t know why you should be so scandalized,” Judith says. “You and Mother have never cared much for religion. Why should it surprise you that I don’t believe in God?”

Their father’s spoon clatters into his soup bowl. “I suppose Emma Goldman is your god,” he sneers.

Judith laughs. “Of course not! I admire her, I don’t worship her. I believe in mutual regard, not worship.”

“You believe in chaos,” their father replies, and Judith shakes her head.

Their father’s attention off them, Ben and Isaac happily jostle each other and kick each other under the table while simultaneously shoveling away their food.

“I’m not sure whether I believe in God,” Ruthie blurts out. The words hang in the air. Then they detonate.

“See the kind of influence you have on your sister!” their father shouts.

Judith smiles at Ruthie. “My sister can think for herself.”

“I don’t see why we can never have a pleasant dinner together,” their mother says, tears welling.

“Now see what you’ve done,” their father tells Judith.

She glares at him. “You behave as though you thought you were God, and we all ought to bow down to you.”

Their father gets to his feet with a scrape of chair-legs. The twins stare up at him as one. He looms down on them all. Ruthie’s heart is pounding, but she still can’t stop thinking of the dolls in her room. “How dare you speak to me like that?” he demands. “You have no respect for your father! I won’t be spoken to like that in my own home.”

Judith slowly stands. She lifts her chin and fixes him with an impudent smile. “Tyrants cannot command my respect.” Her smile fades as she sees their weeping mother. “I’m sorry, Mother,” she murmurs. She briefly hugs Ruthie’s shoulders and bestows a smile upon the twins. Then she’s gone, as usual. Their father sits and finishes his soup in silence. Their mother wipes her eyes and does the same. The twins resume their rough-housing, in a subdued fashion. Ruthie stares into her half-full bowl of soup.

Ruthie has often felt like a paper doll cut from the pages of a magazine, given a story from which she cannot deviate, given no scope, no free movement. Is it God who did that to her? If so, God cannot be just. How can Ruthie be a just god to the paper dolls?



When Ruthie finally goes back to her room, she hears the tiny screaming coming from under the door. She freezes with her hand on the knob and gasps when she looks down. Half of one of the paper dolls sticks out from under the door—the blank back of a head and torso. Her clothes must have gotten snagged. Ruthie fears that if she opens the door, she’ll tear the doll. She also worries one of her parents or brothers will see what’s going on, but she kneels and, little by little, pushes the doll back inside. Then she gets up and slowly opens the door.

Hildy is lying on her stomach, Margaret tending to her. Ruthie hurries in and shuts the door. “Are you all right?” Ruthie whispers, sitting on the floor.

Margaret helps Hildy turn onto her back. She doesn’t appear to be torn. “I think so,” Hildy says at last.

“You were trying to escape,” Ruthie says. There is no reproach in her voice.

The paper dolls look at her. “Yes,” Hildy says.

“Where would you have gone, if you’d succeeded?”

The dolls say nothing.

“I understand,” Ruthie says.



The next morning when Ruthie wakes after a brief and fitful sleep, the dolls are waiting for her on the night table. “We want you to make us what we were,” Hildy says. She and Margaret are holding hands. Hildy looks up at Ruthie with an unwavering gaze. Margaret watches Hildy.

“Are you sure?” Ruthie asks.

Hildy nods. “This isn’t really life, for us. We’re so small and powerless. I am fairly certain that if you make us what we were, we’ll return to our rightful lives.”

“You’re fairly certain? Is that enough?”

“It’s worth the risk!” Margaret blurts out.

“You’re very brave,” Ruthie says.

Margaret shakes her head. “This is no life,” she says. Her voice is tremulous, but her tiny gaze focuses squarely on Ruthie.

“I never meant to make you so unhappy,” Ruthie says. She means it, despite Margaret’s jibes about the Jews. “Do you want me to do it now?”

The dolls look at each other, then nod at Ruthie.

She picks up her pencil. “Who will go first?”

The dolls confer, then turn back to Ruthie. “Margaret will go first,” Hildy says. “I don’t want her to have to see me lifeless.”

The dolls are crying a little now. So is Ruthie. Margaret lies on her back on the bed, and Ruthie gently erases the word from her forehead. “Goodbye, Margaret,” she whispers, as Margaret returns to inert paper.

“Now it’s my turn,” Hildy says and lies flat on the bed. For a moment Ruthie considers keeping her alive against her will. Would Margaret miss Hildy, or would she simply not remember her, back in her lovely fictional world? Either way, it wouldn’t be fair.

“Goodbye, Hildy,” Ruthie says. “I hope you will be happy.”

The doll regards her. “Thank you, Ruthie.”

With tears in her eyes, Ruthie erases the word from Hildy’s forehead. Then she is alone. She gazes at the paper dolls, forever smiling as they were not when they had life. She hopes that means they’re happy, wherever they are, locked in their story. She takes the dolls and puts them at the bottom of a drawer, beneath socks and undergarments. She knows she’ll never be able to play with paper dolls again. She is more alone than ever. She wishes Judith would save her, make her free.



At the kitchen table that night, Ruthie chews pot roast without tasting it and waits for the right moment. The twins are yattering on about some adventure story they just read.

Ruthie puts down her fork. “I want to go back to school,” she says. She holds her spine straight and looks her father in the eye. Her best Judith impersonation, or perhaps her best Hildy impersonation. Inwardly she quails.

Her father looks thunderstruck. “We don’t keep you home to punish you,” he says. “It’s for your own good.”

Ruthie looks around the table. The twins look surprised but pleased. Her mother cuts a slice of potato and begins to eat. Her mother will not defend her.

“This is no life,” Ruthie says. She imagines writing the word “LIVE” on her own forehead. She braces for her father’s anger. He opens his mouth, then closes it. Will he choose to be God, or will he be just? In that moment, it almost doesn’t matter, her small rebellion feels so sweet.