

*Home.*

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Faded words were what identified me. Delicately painted ghost letters are all I have... Tattered clothing and peeling paint and the stench of rot — that's *me* now.

Why would an author write me into this world — an illustrator sketch my frame if not to render each passerby speechless? Voices stripped from their raw throats as their cheeks ballooned like that of a puffer fish. For a moment they confront this world — voiceless. My world. My world where speech sifted through air like snow in the desert.

It is eternally silent.

Comical, isn't it? Well, yes, I suppose it is, but inevitably, there comes a point when they would blink once, twice, thrice, eyes of horror squinting into ones of repulsion. They would leer. Spit and curse: '*prakeikta lèle*' — '*cursed doll*'. Back then, my ignorant mind did not comprehend those words; my consciousness dismissed the vile syllables scraping away my esteem in favour of basking in the rarely given attention I was gifted. I used to never understand the reason behind their inhumanity. I'm not *cursed*, just a little... broken. Broken things can be fixed; there is no antidote for a cursed being.

Hope would have been long gone, snatched away by those who were too blind to see the light it would bring... those who believed they needed it most — if it had not been for that song... the song my maker would sing to me every night before that flood.

*"Lights will guide you home"*

*"And ignites your bones"*

*"And I will try to fix you"*

I still cling to those words even as the moon waxes and wanes, and as the trees bloom in the mild heat of spring. Nevertheless, as time plods on, I can feel the hope slipping away from me — like that of sand falling through an hourglass. I think of how those grains of sand can never be retrieved once fallen through, think of how it will stay motionless until Time ceased to exist. But if someone turned the hourglass over, changed its direction...

The sand will flow again. Pushed into motion by the deft hand of gravity, the rough grains falling to fill the aperture it left. It will — no should — flow back to where it belongs and if could somehow change my own direction and if I could find someone to turn me around and point me in the right trajectory... Will the cavities be filled by the things I once lost? Would I, or anyone, be able to salvage any semblance of belonging? Of a *home*? For years I paid no heed to these inane dreams. These dreams of finding somewhere to call my own.

I want to go. I want to go to a place called *home*.

I yearn to see my puppeteer again and those bright, beautiful grins on children's faces. Feel my limbs flowing, following the gentle guide of the invisible strings wielded by the person who made me. Hear the bustling happenings of the adjacent street. Listen to the quiet clinking of silver falling into the upturned hat. Smell the delicious cooking of the deli across the street. Each day my puppeteer would coax me out of my wooden box, dress me in the prettiest little gown, and place me up upon the grand stage, overlooking the damp rocks embedded in the pavement.

Dancing set my mind free. I danced. Danced throughout each day under the watchful eyes of the children; I danced until the moon peeked out at me among a star-encrusted sky.

But like all good things that come to pass, they must eventually end.

The end came in the form of a great flood; the river had ripped free of its prison and flooded us. She rushed furiously through the battered streets snatching people as she barrelled through — Dūkšta, they called it. I hate Dūkšta. She took everything away from me — extinguished the glowing street lamps that lit the grand stage in the dark alleyway, tore down the hut my puppeteer and I were sheltering in.

Our little shelter, just perched on the side of the pavement, stood no chance. If I close my eyes, I can envision the picture of horror on my maker's face, his mouth opening in a silent scream... His features had relaxed. Visage frozen, unmoving — he had fallen asleep. He often does so when he works too late into the night. Late enough that the crow would start singing its lullaby... And thus, I find myself wandering the dismal, dank alleyways, devoid of any streetlights, deprived of the embers of warmth that hope gave.

My quiet musings are shattered as a boot comes down to splash into a puddle next to me. Rank, filthy, foul-smelling water envelopes me, the force of the spray pushes me against the grey-bricked wall. To others, it would seem like I had dwelled here all my life, twisted back slumped, graceful limbs frozen into sticks, shuffling my frost-bitten and stiff legs, attempting to traverse the cold streets of Vilnius.

I miss home.

Children used to beam at my appearance; they would laugh at my absurd antics, as my puppeteer twirled me around the stage like a prima, lifting so the delicate strings danced. The smile that would inevitably emerge on my face came from the *inside* — it came from all the swirling, fuzzy emotions buzzing in my heart...

I cackle at my foolishness. I don't even *have* a heart. I'm cold — a '*prakeikta lėlė*'. Broken. Rotten. Deadened. Fate had dealt me a cruel hand. As my sad frame curls in on itself, I wonder if I will ever feel that sense of belonging or have the confidence in someone to lead the way for me. I will take anything.

*Please.*

I will take anything resembling those intangible things that used to tie me to control... Just so I can prove that I'm not broken, rotten, or deadened.

But that is what I am — a marionette with cut strings.