

is *dangerous*.” I pulled him around by his shoulders and looked in his face. “Okay, we can run in for a second and look around, but hold your breath. Don’t breathe at all. Whatever’s in there, we’ll come right back out.”

He nodded and ran into the living room, me behind. Nothing in the big living room. Down the hall to the kitchen. Even though I was holding my breath, I gulped a little and smelled the gas. Heavy.

Cal pointed at the hose, which led from the back of the giant stove down into the basement. The basement door was wedged over the bent hose, so that it was open a couple of inches. He threw open the door and we almost ran down the narrow stairs.

We might have been in the room for fifteen seconds, maybe less, but what I saw will be with me forever. Mr. and Mrs. Pokorny were on the giant bed, lying against the pillows. Between them were the big boy and girl dolls. The boy doll was wearing an old gray suit and black tie. The girl doll had her hair up in a bun, and she was wearing a faded-print housedress. Everyone’s eyes on the bed were wide open, staring.

There was tea in all the cups on the little tables. On the bed, on the old salver, there were four cups. Mrs. Pokorny must have poured the tea right before she assumed her position next to the girl doll. Their cups were two-thirds full, undisturbed and waiting.

Before running back upstairs, I looked closely at Mrs. Pokorny. It was the first time I’d seen her smile.

Tom Bentley is a business writer and editor, an essayist, and a fiction writer. (He does not play banjo.) He’s published hundreds of freelance pieces—ranging from first-person essays to travel pieces to more journalistic subjects—in newspapers, magazines, and online. His small-press short story collection, *Flowering and Other Stories*, was published in the spring of 2012. His self-published book on finding and cultivating your writer’s voice, *Think Like a Writer: How to Write the Stories You See*, came out in June of 2015. He would like you to pour him a manhattan right at five.

LANI IRWIN

Secrets Among Siblings, 2012–2013
Oil on linen, 46 x 38 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST