

# Old Lady Barnaby

By: EL\_Refresho

Part of the Fashion Series

Tessa and Penny crouched in the brush behind Old Lady Barnaby's house, deep enough in the shadows to hide, but close enough that they could still watch the events in her living room through a glass door. The night started typically, with Barnaby sitting in her rocking chair while her toys, colorful and about a foot tall, congregated around her. Two weeks ago, Tessa discovered the gatherings, and since then the pair met to watch the living dolls in fascination. Many nights, Miss Barnaby's house became a party filled with dancing, singing, and playing. Other times, jousts on tiny steeds broke out. But tonight, the toys lounged in a semi-circle and talked amongst themselves and to the old lady.

"Pretty boring tonight," Penny said, an extra sigh in her voice. She loved the outings more than Tessa, and had begun to write stories about the dolls and the ways they behaved, hoping maybe to turn those tales into a kid's book. In her mind, the dolls had a nice home, a kind owner, and got to come alive for several hours every day. According to Penny, it didn't seem like a bad life at all.

"Yeah, it's lame when they're not doing anything."

The little toys took turns speaking, and made grand gestures with their speeches, like they were actors reciting Shakespearean soliloquies.

“The conversation seems intense, though,” Penny said. “I wonder what toys could be so passionate about.”

“So you think they’re toys?” Mrs. Barnaby said, her voice and shadow coming from behind the girls. Tessa and Penny launched themselves from their seats, but the old woman moved even faster and took each one by their ears, twisting their lobes. The pair cried in pain and sat back down without the need to be told.

“We’re sorry!” Tessa cried, “We thought your toys were so cute.”

“Yeah, we even thought about coming inside,” Penny added.

“We did?” Tessa asked, breaking her friend’s lie.

“Well, I did.”

“That’s very interesting, because we were discussing if we should invite you in,” Old Lady Barnaby said. The girls glanced at each other as best they could only by moving their eyes. Something in the woman’s grandmotherly voice wasn’t as kind as it sounded, and they both knew it.

“Tonight?” Tessa squeaked. “We, uh, have some plans already.”

“But we all would love your company. And I think you would love ours,” the woman implored, giving the slightest tug on earlobes to earn grimaced expressions.

“Hey, lady,” Penny said, trying to pull away from Miss Barnaby, “this is a free country and we’re not your toys. We’ll do what we want.”

“Bless your sweet hearts, but I can’t resist an opening like that.” As she spoke, something began to click inside Penny and Tessa while a light engulfed them.

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Tessa woke up to the twisting of a key. Nothing made sense, not the odd way she was turned to face downward, not the hardwood floor too close to her, not the colorful figures around her. How was she being held

in the air? And she especially did not understand the ticking that came from inside her. Tessa couldn't move, no matter how much force she put into her muscles. But her need to dance grew, even though she didn't know how.

That changed the moment she was set down, when mechanical ticks and precise motion became Tessa's entire life.

*Click. Click. Bend.*

*Click. Click. Straighten.*

*Click. Click. Step.*

*Click. Click. Turn.*

"Penny!" Tessa shouted, finally finding the will to move her lips, but she had no strength to stop the dance she did across the floor. There were glimpses, as she pirouetted, of a giant chair and giant grandmother sitting in it. But if the woman was giant, the girl was...

"Tessa...we're...toys...!" Penny found her voice, and she had figured it out, too.

The figures in the room, ten in all, not counting the playthings, erupted in clapping and laughter. But none of them were dolls; they were faeries. A pixie girl with glittering wings. A mushroom nymph with a spotted red cap and white freckles. A flower boy that smelled like summer. It was hard to keep track of them all, especially as they took turns playing with Tessa and Penny.

The two miniatures weren't sure what all had changed about them. But they knew they had large keys attached to their backs which controlled their every ticking step. They knew they were now half the size of the faeries who played with them. They knew they were dressed as delicate ballerinas. Penny wore white, her blonde hair in a feathery bun; and Tessa in auburn and gold. Their pointe shoes moved with mechanical grace, and their tutus bounced with every jump.

Tessa mechanically twirled across the floor, her legs and arms rising and falling in stutter-stop unison, dancing away from the mushroom and toward a gnome that laughed at her.

“Tessa’s the better toy!” He shouted.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Penny had fallen to her side. But her key kept spinning, and so she kept dancing, bending and straightening at the knees. It gave her an odd motion that made her rock and rotate, a motion she was helpless to stop. And yet her face was a brilliant ballerina smile, a frozen happiness she couldn’t possibly feel.

“Penny’s the funnier toy!” A green goblin called, and half faeries burst into laughter.

“Please...turn...us...back!” Tessa pushed out through smiling teeth while her own key forced her to make everyone happy. Everyone, except for her.

“What was that? Turn the key on your back?” A pixie asked, fluttering around Tessa.

“This...isn’t...fair!”

“We’re not fair, we’re faeries!”

Everyone laughed. The toys kept dancing. Dancing for as long as their keys turned. Standing still when they didn’t. Wound up. Wound down. Pleas to be human met with indifference, or worse, jokes and joy. They lived with a constant clicking in their minds. And most frightening of all, a growing acceptance of their fates.

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When the merriment and laughter faded and mechanical keys wound down for the last time that night, Old Lady Barnaby placed Penny and Tessa on a shelf with other knick-knacks and curios. The dolls didn’t know if any of those objects had once been human, but they fit the shelf’s theme regardless.

They were not tired, in pain, or sore, but completely still, locked in mechanical bodies just inches high, knowing that



everything would change the moment their keys were wound. Both toys feared being activated, but both toys yearned to move. They didn't feel the weight of their keys when they moved, just the way they were controlled.

"I am so glad you joined us tonight," Barnaby said, admiring her newest trinkets. "Will you be able to entertain us tomorrow?"

"Do...we...have...a...choice?" Penny asked. Her key kept her bent at the waist, forcing her to stare at the dusty shelf rather than the woman talking to her.

"I suppose you don't."

"Will...you...change...us...back?" Tessa asked. Her own key held her in a plie after a jump, and prepared her for another graceful leap.

"Not just yet. But one day, I might!" The woman laughed shortly and wickedly, waving toodles to her toys, and leaving them to contemplate all the ways their keys and impish faeries now controlled their lives.

"Next...time...keep...your...mouth...shut," Tessa said.