

The Chupa Doll



RONALD KELLY

CHINA DOLL

By Ronald Kelly



MACABRE INK

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For my late grandmother, Clara Nesbit Spicer
who inspired me with the tale of her own china doll,
and told me about Jesus long before I took His hand.

Introduction

My grandmother was a godly woman.

Clara Nesbit Spicer attended her small, rural church in White Bluff, Tennessee faithfully. She was there every time the sanctuary doors were open, until poor health prevented her from doing so. She read her Bible hungrily, a student of God's word until severe cataracts clouded her vision, and, even then, it remained, scripture by scripture, in her thoughts and on her tongue. She loved gospel music. I recalled, during my youth, arriving at Grandmama's house to hear the sound of the Chuck Wagon Gang or the Happy Goodmans playing from her phonograph and, later, the more modern convenience of an 8-track tape player.

Grandmama was also a storyteller. She had a natural talent for putting her past experiences and the experiences of those she grew up with into tales that broke your heart or sent a shiver down your spine. She loved to tell ghost stories, talk of her childhood in the Tennessee communities of Cumberland Furnace and Beef Range, and speak of the trials of a Depression-ridden adulthood, as well as times of grace under fire.

One of her stories concerned a china doll she possessed when she was a child, no more than six or seven years of age at the time. To prevent her rambunctious brothers from disturbing her playtime, she had set off across her father's rugged property and discovered a makeshift playhouse... in a small cave in the side of a hill. There she set up house. A cradle made from an apple crate and a tea-set constructed from hollowed-out walnut shells. And among them all was the china doll. Her prized possession; golden of hair, its porcelain face like pale alabaster and its body clad in a calico dress her mother had sewn by hand. For months, young Clara played within the privacy of the little cave, happy and unhindered by the outside world.

Then, one morning, she arrived to find that her playhouse was gone. Sometime during the night, a heavy stone slab had slid down the face of the hillside and sealed the mouth of the cave shut. All her play-pretties, along with her cherished china doll, were trapped inside. But, even in her sorrow over the loss of her toys, Clara had known that God had had a hand in it all. Since none of her family had been privy to her secret place, she knew that if she had been within the hollow of her hillside playhouse when the slab sealed it shut, she

would have perished and no one would have ever known what had become of her.

Even in her later years, as she approached the age of 100 before her passing in 1990, she spoke fondly of the china doll. Upon its recollection, she would sit in her rocker and smile warmly, and the woman who was sunken and ancient would, for a moment, transform into the exuberant, happy girl of her youth. And she would wonder if her baby doll was still there, in the dark, dry bosom of the hillside cave, intact and as beautiful as the day she had last cuddled it in her arms.

Grandmama's tale of the china doll stayed with me. Although I tend to lean toward her darker tales of Confederate ghosts roaming the lonesome Tennessee backroads and dubious folks that were "touched-in-the-head", as she put it, I believe that the story of Grandmama's lost china doll was my favorite. And it made me, too, wonder if it was still out there somewhere, sitting among its apple crate bed and walnut shell tea set, smiling benignly in the gloom, as though waiting for its mother to return.

When I, myself, reached adulthood and carried on the tradition of storytelling through the act of the written word, the tale of the china doll would come back to haunt me time and time again. That and the hardships of the Great Depression and the adverse effect it had upon rural farm families during that period in American history. Although my literary craft is anchored in tales of mystery and suspense, those hard-scrabble times of trial and tribulation, faith and family, inspired me. In the mid-90's, I sat down and, for my own enjoyment, penned *The China Doll*. I had been raised in a Christian home during my childhood and taught about the loving gift of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. I strayed from the fold for most my adult life, then returned in January of 1996. Afterward, the time to write about the tale of Grandmama's china doll – as well as her deep faith in God – seemed to be right, and so I used the basis of both for the foundation of this simple novel.

The China Doll tells of the disparity of a desperate family on the verge of losing their farm to foreclosure, as well as their long, adventurous journey across the state of Tennessee in search of a single thing that might turn tragedy into triumph; a china doll, long lost from sight, but never once forgotten.

Sometimes, while sitting alone in prayerful contemplation, I can't help but wonder if Grandmama Spicer, amid her heavenly reward, has finally located her precious china doll. And having emerged from the darkness of the cave, now plays happily in the sunshine.

Ronald Kelly
Brush Creek, Tennessee
February 2011

Chapter One

The banker was in the parlor with Grandmama Nesbit.

I sat against a porch post, scratching the ridge of my dog's back with the toes of my bare feet. I listened hard, but could only hear a faint murmur of voices from inside the house.

Anxious to find out what the banker's visit was all about, I hopped up from the gray boards of the stoop and parked myself in Grandmama's straight-back rocking chair, a good sight closer to the screen door. When I moved, Ol' Hunter glanced up at me with a hurt look in his eyes. The bluetick hound probably had a bothersome itch in the center of his spine and my nervous toes had been something of a comfort.

"You'd best stop your snooping, Jack," called my sister, Millie, from out in the yard. She knelt in the clover, pulling weeds from Grandmama's flower bed. "If 'n you don't, Grandmama will likely tan your hide."

I ignored her warning and kept right on listening.

It was warm that summer day in 1932; not broiling hot nor cool in the slightest way. June bugs buzzed through the persimmon grove at the side of the house, while a couple of sassy blue jays fought and fussed high atop a thick-leaved magnolia out next to the barn. The road beyond the front gate looked dusty and lonesome. The only car we'd seen that morning was the shiny black sedan the town banker had driven up in twenty minutes ago.

"Whatcha suppose they're talking about?" I asked Millie.

"That ain't no concern of yours, little brother," she said. "Now come help me with this weeding."

Reluctantly, I left my place in the rocking chair and jumped down off the porch. My name is Jack Alder, although a few years ago I'd mostly been known as Little Jack. Big Jack was my father; an alfalfa farmer who had lived several miles from the town of Coleman, Tennessee. But folks stopped calling me Little Jack after Big Jack left one blustery fall night and hopped a freight train heading south to Birmingham. From that time on, I was just called plain old Jack. That was fine and dandy with me. Not being referred to as Little Jack made me feel kind of like I was the man of the house now.

I dropped to the patched knees of my overalls and plucked a fistful of dandelion from the flower bed. I looked back over my shoulder to see if Hunter was coming to join us. The coonhound was much too lazy, though. He stretched and yawned on the porch steps, soaking up the morning sun. The dog eyed a