

The snow fell clumsily through the air and she blinked and glanced down at the chalk in her hand. Then, dropping it into the snow, she pulled down the scarf which was wound tightly around her face. Her mouth was pulled upwards into a smile and her eyes were wide and proud as she looked at her name on the wall. Something suddenly distracted her. Something had changed. She blinked. Her forehead furrowed and her eyes narrowed, slightly. The smile dropped from her lips and her mouth opened as she breathed. She froze, listening. Nothing. She stared, eyes like a frightened cat, daring herself to look over her shoulder. Something behind her gave her an uneasy feeling. She turned back to look at the shop face.

The shop was different to any other she had ever seen before. It was art nouveau in style, though the harder she stared, the more its features puzzled her. A dusty, snow-laden window grimaced at her: its menacing eyes stared and its mouth lay wide open, baring its shutter teeth. Uncertainty clawed at her stomach like a cat in a bag, and yet she could feel the shop tempting her, beckoning her to move closer and get a better look at what lay inside its curious façade. It really was a most intriguing shop, and the strange thing was that she didn't remember having ever noticed it before.

*In front of me, in the near darkness, was a small wooden plinth which seemed to rise up and down, and before I knew it, I was shoved forwards, onto it. It made a loud wheeling sound then rose up so that I could see out into the street through a large window. No...not another one, I screamed in my head. Across the road, staring at the graffiti wall, I could see a little girl who looked exactly like me, and I knew only too well that her fate was now sealed. Warily, she spun on her heels to turn and face the shop: she saw me and her mouth dropped open.*

Alma ran and pressed her nose against the window. Her warm breath steamed it up. A doll stared back. Alma's jaw dropped slightly open and her eyes widened.

*Attempting to communicate the danger she was in, I stared at her through empty glass eyes.*

*Momentarily, we looked at each other, though she could not hear me urging her to step no closer. Did she not see the danger she was in?*

The girl looked down at her outfit, noticing that the doll was dressed in an identical miniature version of her own clothing; the hat, the gilet, the mittens- everything was the same. It was her! The doll was a miniature Alma. She looked back up. A small, excited smile played momentarily on her lips, but the doll was gone. It had completely disappeared. She took one glove and rubbed at the glass. Peering through several panes, she craned her neck to see whether the doll had fallen off its stand, but it was nowhere to be seen.

She raced to the door and tugged it but it was stuck fast- like something was holding it from the inside. She threw a snowball in frustration, then walked away. However, the creak of the door alerted her to the fact that, somehow, the shop was no longer closed and she turned back quickly to peer into where the door stood ajar. *Oh my!* she thought. On every wall, and on every surface, were hundreds of dolls of all shapes and sizes. Eagerly, Alma made her way to the table upon which her doll sat but was immediately distracted by a sound at her feet. Pedaling a miniature toy tricycle, rather furiously, she found a small pale-faced doll, in a black suit, which had fallen on its side. Within seconds, she had picked him up and propped him back upon three wheels and turned back to face her doll...but there was no doll. Where had she gone? Scanning the room, she noticed that the doll was now on a shelf, high up, on the back wall. Under the shelves was a dusty-looking settee and she clambered onto it to get closer to the doll, still so eager to hold it in her hands. Removing her gloves, she extended her arm slowly upwards with a mesmerized smile upon her face.

*No...don't...please RUN!* urged the doll. But Alma could not hear her.

As her finger made contact with the face of the toy, her eyes instantly moved and life poured into the doll. Alma's life. A heartbeat later and the little girl peered out from the glass eyes of the doll; they were no longer lifeless. She breathed short, sharp breaths but the only ears to hear them were those of the others around her, and she watched, in horror, as a new doll was placed in the window.