

Socks

Every time I visit Grandma Jojo,
the first thing she does
is point out everything
she doesn't like:

the pastel under my nails
the graphite smear on my pudgy cheek
my tangled curls and hairy legs
my backward paint-stained shirt.

This time, I don't even
get my shoes off
before she finds
her first complaint.

"Aren't you a bit old
for cartoon socks, Valeria?"
Jojo asks,
looking down at my feet.

As if anyone's
ever too old
for interesting things.

Back home, I have a whole drawer
for my sock collection.
This summer, I had to pick
my favorites. Only the weirdest,

best, most unique socks. Right now,
I'm wearing blue-and-yellow
narwhal socks that say:
I am strange and wonderful.

Jojo reads my socks out loud.
"Uh-huh."

"Aren't we all?"
Mom asks, smiling,
coming to my rescue.
But Jojo's lips stay

pressed
in a dark red line.

Valeria

No matter how many times I tell Jojo to stop,
she *always* calls me Valeria.

Ew.

Sounds too close to malaria.

It's just the name on my birth certificate,
not something I'm called by anyone
who *actually* knows me.

In Latin it means to be strong and brave
even though it sounds delicate
like the fancy dolls in Jojo's sitting room.

Dad says it sounds like a real artist's name
but I don't know about that.

Jojo says, "Valeria was my mother's name.
It means *elegant and dignified*,"
her eyes foggy and far away.

I'll stick with V.

Summer (Imprisonment) with Jojo

I'm used to being
a pink fairy armadillo
in a world of Jojos
but usually I have Mom and Dad
to back me up.
Usually I stay here just a week.
Not so lucky this summer.

Mom said with everything
that happened
with art class this year,
it'd be good for me to have
"a change of scenery."
Mom said it'd be "a great opportunity"
for me to get quality time with Jojo.
"You might not believe it,
but you two are more alike
than you might think."

As I (try to) draw,
I listen to Jojo tell Mom
about her expensive outfit
and how she isn't sure if she likes it or not
and I snort.
As if Jojo and I
are anything alike.

Jojo's House:

all white carpets
no stains,

the fake sweet smell
of vanilla plug-ins,

glitter-galaxy granite
no dishes in the sink,

fancy blue-and-white dishes displayed
(unused) in the corner antique,

photos of smiling kids
and grandkids

in ivory shelves
beside the living room TV,

a small photo of me in the shadow
(like she's trying to forget I exist).

Jojo asks Mom how she is
and she says fine,

because that's what
you have to say at Jojo's—

nothing can be not fine
at Jojo's.

Doll Collection

Across the hall,
in Jojo's sitting room,
there's a wall lined
with porcelain dolls
staring down at me
with their unblinking eyes
in frilly lace dresses
and perfect coiled curls.

I can almost hear them
whispering to one another—
like Em with Jordan,
except in old-timey accents:
*Look at her silly socks
and paint-covered shirt!
How uncouth!*

When I was little,
I used to ask Jojo
if I could play with her dolls
but she said they weren't for playing.

Looking at them now
with their frozen glass smiles
makes my skin crawl.
Even if Jojo offered,
I wouldn't want to hold one.

I know my superpower
is dropping things,
so I can only imagine them
in my hands
splintering
into a thousand, unfixable pieces.

I might not like Jojo
but I know how much
she loves those dolls.
I hate to think
if anything happened to them.

When Mom leaves,

I can't help it.
I cry.

Jojo pats my shoulder,
says,

"You're fine.
You're fine.
No need to cry.

It washes out
your lovely smile.

Besides,
it doesn't change
anything,
does it?"

Behind us, a dish
shatters,
making us
jump.

"Oh, must've put it
too close to the counter edge."
Jojo sighs,
turns to the closet
for a broom.
"How could I be
so clumsy?"

I hear all sorts of things,

things other people don't.
At home, Dad lets me use
his hearing protectors to defend me
from all the loud sounds in the world,
but Jojo's place is pretty quiet.
Usually.

But once Mom's gone,
I hear a knock.
I look out the front window.
No one's at the door,
and the street is empty.

It happens again
right before dinner.

Knock.
Knock.
Knock.

I know it's silly
but I could swear it sounds like
something or someone
is inside the walls.

While Jojo's busy,

I look around the house,
listening for knocks,
for something strange
and wonderful. Like maybe
I can be one of those kids
in stories who's whisked away
from their awful summer
to a magical world.

I start upstairs,
following the sounds
until they disappear,
like they're trying
to tease me.

There are so many doors,
I realize, to rooms
I've never been inside.
A couple are locked and refuse to open.
At the end of the hall,
a door with an old janky doorknob sits
half-open, like an invitation.
"Oh,
there's nothing fun up there
I'm afraid."
I jump at Jojo's voice.

She's not exactly wrong.

Jojo goes ahead of me,
closes the open door
in one firm swoosh,
her voice high and quick.
"Now, how'd you like
to go out to the park?
There's a new ice cream place
I think needs testing."
She tries to laugh.

Her words make me itchy.
If there really was nothing,
why would she slam the door so quickly?

For a second, a shadow
flashes
across the door.
A shadow of a girl.

I rub my eyes. Must be
my silhouette
in the changing light outside.