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4000 words

## **Dummies**

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*Dummy, dummy, go out now and fill your tummy.*  
William Goldman

Jason finished making his four-year-old granddaughter Amy a dummy only a few days before she died of a fulminant childhood disease. He had taken great pride in his accomplishment, for he had worked for many years as a CPA and creating things with his hands (other than spreadsheets) was a daunting new experience.

It had proved not too difficult after all. He had purchased at Goodwill a faded girl's skirt and a tattered blouse to go with it. It did not matter to him that the colors did not match (yellow polka-dot blouse, argyle skirt of several primary colors); Jason knew little about fashion and cared even less.

He tucked the bottom hem of the blouse into the top of the skirt and used safety pins and mailing tape to hold them together. The arms and legs were blanket strips rolled into tubes, inserted into the clothing and secured with adhesive tape. The chest and abdomen were filled with newspapers and plastic bags to give them shape. For the head, he had purchased a discarded plastic doll, twisted off the head, and attached it to the neck of the blouse with tape.

It was crude and flimsy, but for little Amy it was a gift from grandpa and she played with the dummy constantly until she came down with her fatal infection. Upon her death, the dummy sat, forgotten, on top of the girl's dresser.

Other family deaths then followed in quick succession, as snowflakes driven by a winter storm. First, his son Albert, Amy's father, was electrocuted in a freak workplace accident. Jason's daughter-in-law Marie, distraught by the death of husband and daughter, overdosed on sleeping pills. Finally, Jason's wife Estelle, whose body had already been weakened by diabetes, suffered a heart attack from grief and died in a matter of hours.

The fatalities of course caught Jason unprepared; how could anyone be ready to lose, in just a few months, all members of one's immediate family? Jason loved each one of them, even his quiet daughter-in-law and his bitchy wife, and the tragedies pounded on him like hammer blows.

Two days after Estelle's funeral he was seized by a strange compulsion. He began making dummies, one for each member of his departed family, and added a couple of extras for good measure. At the end, he had made a motley array of six dummies of different sizes and shapes, imitating each departed member of the family. He then had positioned the dummies in a semicircle at the edge of the dinner table, facing him.

As he was left alone, he became distracted, gave up on personal hygiene, and lived off fast food, which he washed down with bourbon and soda. He stopped reading and, even though he always had the TV on, he followed neither the news nor the football games, and least of all the various inane shows he used to ridicule Estelle for watching.

As he munched tasteless French fries and drank big gulps of Old Crow, Jason would hold imaginary conversations with the dummies that stood for his relatives. He found himself voicing

forgotten complaints or reminiscing good times. His wife and son were favorite targets of his tirades:

“Estelle, I’m running low on tee shirts because you were too busy nagging me to darn the holes in three of them, so I finally had to toss them out.”

“Remember, Estelle, the time we went to Quebec and you got drunk on anisette? I kept telling you to watch out, because the stuff is sweet but potent and will knock you out without warning. Did you pay attention? Nooooo!”

“I’m no longer playing golf, Albert. Without you as a partner, it isn’t so much fun anymore.”

“Pro sports are a racket, son. Everyone is on the take.”

“Marie, I wish you had taken better care of Amy’s health. Perhaps she would still be alive and we would have been spared having to go through this.”

One night, after three glasses of bourbon, Jason fell asleep with his head flat on the dining room table. Subconsciously, he was bothered by the uncomfortable position, but could not muster enough energy to get up and go to bed. He was chiding himself for his laziness when he thought he heard a tiny voice. “Grandpa, you have stuff coming out of your mouth!”

It was surely a dream, but Jason half-opened his eyes and felt spittle drooling from his lips. He sat up from the table and ran the back of his hand over his mouth.

“That’s better” observed the same voice.

Jason’s transition to full alertness was instantaneous.

He looked around the empty apartment. No thieves or marauders anywhere. He got up and stumbled his way to the refrigerator. He took out a plastic bottle of mineral water and drew a big gulp, trying to clear his thoughts.

“Can I have some? I’m thirsty.”

Jason started shaking, as he turned around and fixed his attention on the dinner table. The first of his dummies, the one he had made as a present for his granddaughter, had inched forward from the semicircle and had the cloth stubs that served as its arms crossed around what would have been its throat.

Jason’s first thought was “*I’ve gone off the deep end.*” He placed the bottle on the table, sat down, and continued to stare at the dummy with the polka-dot blouse, trying to figure out what was going on.

“Grandpa, please, I’m thirsty!!” wheedled the dummy in a plaintive tone.

Jason allowed himself to be drawn into the impossible dialogue. “But baby, you have no mouth.”

There was a ripping sound and an opening slit materialized in the plastic head of the dummy. “I sure do! Gimme some water!”

“*I’m having a nightmare*” Jason told himself. All the same, he leaned forward, placed the lip of the bottle against the newly formed slit, and tilted it downward. Instantly, air bubbles formed in the bottle as the water was drawn out.

“Thank you, grandpa. I feel better now!”

“You’re welcome, sweetie…” began Jason, and cut himself short.

He withdrew the bottle from the dummy’s slit and lay it with some force on the table. “*I just have to wake up.*” He started to rise.

Instantly, there was another voice, old and cranky, which he instantly recognized: “Aren’t you going to give *me* some?”

He did not need to look up to confirm that the querulous question came from a larger dummy, which he had clothed in dark rags to represent his wife, who favored black clothes as slenderizing.

“Estelle, is that you?” he asked.

The dummy replied irritably: “Who else would it be, you dummkopf?”

Jason threw his arms up in despair. “Does everyone want water?”

There were “yeses” all around.

“I don’t have enough bottled water. It will have to come from the tap.” He went to the sink and filled a pitcher.

“Ugh” complained Amy’s dummy, but drank the tepid water anyway.

Jason went around the semicircle, pouring water onto the mouth openings of the dummies. He then sat down and addressed the group:

“Now, I know I’m either having a nightmare or hallucinating, but could somebody explain how could six dummies all of a sudden spring to life.”

The largest dummy, assembled in memory of his son Albert, spoke up:

“We don’t understand it ourselves. It seems that you are so much in need of love and company that you have managed to bring us to life.”

Marie, Albert’s husband, piped in: “I read it online somewhere. Psychic energy can be channeled to bring inanimate objects to life.”

“Poppycock” argued Estelle, always at odds with her daughter-in-law. “There has to be a better explanation than that.” But she offered none.

“Alright, alright,” said Jason placatingly. “It is what it is. I’m enjoying having all of you around, however strange it may be. Everybody OK?”

“For now,” replied Albert. And that was that.

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Jason’s daily routine changed very little since the reanimation of his dummies. He continued to eat poorly and drink heavily, and sometimes was unable to make it to bed to sleep off his inebriation. Other nights, though, and often during the day, he would sit at the kitchen table and engage in disjointed conversations, in which the four dummies representing his close relatives were the only ones who spoke. Jason inquired as to who the silent dummies were and why they remained silent. The Albert dummy shrugged his fabric shoulders and replied, dismissively: “We don’t know them, but they are supposed to be here as guardians.”

“Guardians of what?”

Albert’s dummy shrugged again, impatiently. “Guard against whatever happens here. We don’t know what they are supposed to ward against. Maybe they are here to make sure that we don’t misbehave and do inappropriate things.”

Noting his discomfort, Jason changed the subject: “I was watching the PGA tournament yesterday on the tube. You would have laughed with me. Pro golfers are such amateurs these days. You and I could have done better than those clowns.” And father and son got into an animated conversation about the days of Nicklaus and Palmer.

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It was again Amy’s dummy the one that first brought up a new request. “Grandpa, I’m hungry.”

Jason was already used to the dummies’ bizarre constitutions – they “drank” water frequently, but water never seemed to leave their rag and paper bodies. Yet, giving them food

was a new level of strangeness. “But sweetie, you don’t have a stomach. You couldn’t digest food.”

Estelle cut in: “Jason, stop trying to confuse the child. Of course, we can’t digest solid food. But liquids, that’s something else.”

Jason’s eyes opened wide as new understanding came in. “You mean, like fruit juices? I have some orange and apple juices in the fridge. The apple juice is a little old, but the orange juice is fresh. I can get some...”

“No, silly” cut in his wife’s dummy. “Juice is mostly sugar and water. Your granddaughter needs something more substantial, more nourishing.”

“I get it. Liquid protein? I can go to the health food store and buy a few cans.”

“No, no” replied Estelle, sounding exasperated. “She needs a more complete nutrition; protein, vitamins, ions, glucose, lipids, minerals....”

“You got me now” replied Jason, upset at his wife. “Where can I find a diet supplement that has all of these things?”

Amy pleaded again, sounding ready to burst in tears: “I want blood!”

Jason whipped back at his granddaughter, astonished: “Blood?”

A chorus of loud voices rose from his creations: “BLOOD! We want BLOOD!”

“That’s impossible!” replied Jason, barely able to master his rising hysteria. “Where am I going to get blood to give to you guys?”

Estelle’s tone became sarcastic. “You are the man of the house. You’ll think of something.”

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Jason bought liver and kidneys at the Safeway and then found an Asian market where he got beef hearts and pigs' blood. He drained the blood from the organs and spooned the liquid to Amy and the other dummies. They did not protest, but did not seem to enjoy the offerings as much as he had hoped.

He bought some prime rib and, before cooking it, squeezed the red liquid from the meat and gave some to Amy to try. The dummy's "mouth" puckered in disgust. "That's not blood."

Jason did a little internet research and found out that the "blood" in meat is really not blood but something called myoglobin. He turned to his granddaughter's dummy, his patience exhausted. "You have very demanding taste, for a dummy. It's back to liver and kidneys!"

Marie, who usually kept quiet, came to her daughter's defense. "She's only a child, and is tired of the stuff you are feeding her. The blood from store-bought organs is stale and has lost most of its nutritional value. She needs *fresh* blood."

"Fresh like how?" Jason almost did not ask the question, anticipating the response.

"Fresh like from a living animal."

"Do you mean I need to sacrifice a poor animal in order to feed you? No way!!" Jason pounded on the table, his frustration rising.

The dummy of his son Albert suggested a reasonably sounding way to clear matters. "Look, let's give Amy some fresh blood to try and see if you are convinced. Make a cut on your little finger, squeeze some blood into a spoon, and give it to Amy. She'll tell you if that's what she wants."

"What if she likes it?" replied Jason, in a fury. "I'm not going to cut myself to pieces to feed a dummy!"



Albert remained rational. “At least we’ll know if what Amy says she wants is what she really needs. Come on, Dad. Do it for us. We’ll figure out the next steps later.”

“You’ve never explained why all of a sudden you need blood, let alone the fresh blood that you now demand.”

“Dad, I can’t explain it. Each day we feel weaker, and something is telling us that if we don’t get blood we’ll die again.”

“What do you mean by die again? You are just paper wads and old clothes. You’ve never been alive.”

“If you really believe that’s all we are, it’s time for us to go.”

Jason could think of a thousand reasons for refusing to go ahead with the test, and only one in favor: he felt he needed the company of his resurrected family, and could not bear to contemplate returning to the way things were before Amy’s dummy first spoke.

“Alright, but we are creating new problems that we won’t be able to solve.” He dug in the kitchen drawer for the little paring knife, placed a tablespoon under his left hand, and made a diagonal cut across the fleshy part of his thumb. Grasping the thumb with his right hand, he squeezed a trickle of blood onto the spoon. He took the spoon to his granddaughter’s dummy; the slit that served as mouth seemed to distend greedily to receive every drop of the blood.

Jason turned around and ran water on the wound, applied Neosporin to the surface of the finger, and wrapped it with a Band-Aid. As he returned to the table, he looked at his granddaughter’s dummy for its reaction.

“Grandpa, that was yummy! You have the bestest blood!” enthused the dummy.

“You are a bunch of frigging vampires!” exploded Jason.

Not surprisingly, Estelle had the final word: “Get used to it! There’s a bit of vampire in all of us.”

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Jason made the rounds of all the pet shops in town, buying one or two hamsters in each. Killing each hamster filled him with guilt and revulsion; cutting each creature open to drain its blood into a pan was messy and smelly and disposing of the cadavers was a problem. He did not dare taking them out with the regular garbage, for fear that the bodies would attract the neighborhood cats and raise suspicions. He ended up chopping the body of each animal in little pieces, feeding the skin and tiny bones to the garbage disposal, and praying that the machine would keep working.

He discovered that a hamster had just enough blood for two skimpy servings for each dummy, with a little extra helping for Amy. Luckily, the silent dummies turned down the blood offerings and remained aloof as the family dummies feasted.

He made do with the hamster supply for a couple of months, but then got stuck again. He dared not go back to the pet stores. When the blood of the final hamster was apportioned among the dummies, he confronted them with the final choice he was about to make. “I’m sorry, folks. No more animals. No more blood. You’ll have to learn to exist without it.”

There was a long silence, and then Albert remarked in a falsely cheerful voice: “But Dad, didn’t we always want to get a dog, and Mom wouldn’t let us? I bet she has changed her mind.”

Estelle’s slit of a mouth opened into a horrible smile. “Dogs? I *love* dogs.”

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Jason had trouble convincing the staff at the animal shelter that he would be a good father to a rescue dog entrusted to his care. “We prefer to release dogs to families. Single parents are a

much higher risk, because you may fall sick or have something happen to you, leaving the dog alone. Plus, you are old and you may not give the animal enough attention and exercise.”

After much pleading and promising on Jason’s part, they agreed to let him take Audrey home with him. Audrey was a very old miniature poodle with curly chocolate fur and liquid eyes. She was trusting and affectionate and took instantly to him. She was arthritic and nearly deaf, but she was docile and entered without hesitation into the cage in which she would travel to Jason’s apartment. “Audrey’s owner was a widow that had to be taken to a nursing home” they told Jason. “Audrey has been well taken care of all her life, and we expect you’ll treat her as well as her former owner did.” Jason promised he would.

He was in such a rush to leave that he paid no attention to the final words of the lady at the desk: “We’ll send someone on a home visit in two or three weeks to check on how the two of you are getting along.”

Jason did not expect Audrey to be his companion for long, but all the same he took her to a pet store and got her senior beef and rice canned dog food; dog treats; a rope and a couple of other toys; and a large water dish. Perhaps anticipating guilt, he spent a good deal of money trying to ensure that Audrey’s final days would be pleasant and comfortable.

Jason and Audrey took to each other famously. The dog was always attached to the back of Jason’s legs and followed him at every step he took. He would lead her on short walks around the neighborhood and would feed her treats by hand. Audrey jumped into bed with him and slept curled against his body.

“Charming!” carped Estelle. “He brings us food and ends up playing with it.”

Jason decided that the love of a trusting beast was more important than the company of his family and, on the fifth night since the adoption, he confronted the dummies:

“Listen, I’ve made up my mind. I’m keeping Audrey, you can do as you wish.”

There was a heavy silence, which Marie finally broke: “I’m sorry to tell you this, but that dog has terminal cancer and will be dead in a few weeks.”

Jason was suspicious. If the claim had come from Estelle, he would have disregarded it without another thought. Marie, however, had always been honest and forthright with him, and he doubted that she would start lying now that she was back as a dummy. “How do you know?”

“I can smell the corruption from here. Very soon she will start ignoring food, and her breathing will become labored. She will look disinterested in anything and finally grow still. I had a dog that went through that process years ago, and it was very painful for both of us.”

Jason didn’t know what to believe. True, Audrey was becoming rather placid, but he attributed this to her advanced age. Was he about to lose this pet the same way his family had been taken from him?

The following day Audrey was rather morose, barely touched her food and could not be enticed to play. Jason almost had to drag her out to get her to walk to the corner to pee. He was disheartened when he returned to the apartment.

“See, we told you so. You better let us have her blood before you lose us as well” insisted Estelle.

“I didn’t know you could be so cruel” snapped Jason.

“You did know, you have just willed yourself to forget” replied the dummy sardonically.

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He laid Audrey in the living room, resting on a blanket. Jason had given her a huge dose of Benadryl and had essentially forced her to fall asleep. The dog was unconscious; she occasionally stared at Jason with sorrowful, unseeing eyes. As Jason hovered over the animal,

sharp knife at hand, the Albert dummy called out instructions: “First, make a cut across the neck, severing the windpipe. That should kill her.”

Jason raised a trembling hand and struck Audrey with great force. The dog yowled desperately and attempted to move, but it was too weak and subsided. Blood began pouring down its cut open neck, and Jason immediately placed a bowl under the head to capture the fluid. Audrey’s body went into convulsions, which grew weaker after a few moments and finally ceased.

Tears blinded Jason, but he substituted another bowl for the almost full one. “Give her a cut below the groin, to capture blood from the lower part of the body” instructed Albert from above. Jason complied, his shoulders heaving with sorrow.

At the end, he harvested four bowlfuls of warm blood from the dead animal. Jason put the bowls in the refrigerator and went to the bathroom, where he vomited and bawled inconsolably for several minutes. Then, composing himself, he wrapped Audrey’s body in the blanket. He would take it to the park that night and bury it there, hopefully without being seen. But, right now, it was feeding time for the dummies.

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Two weeks passed. Audrey’s blood was gone and the animal’s carcass rested in peace under the fallen autumn leaves. But peace evaded Jason: he had nothing with which to feed the dummies, and had flatly rejected the suggestion that he get another dog.

“You could never take care of your family” chided Estelle.

“Grandpa, I’m dying of hunger” whimpered Amy.

“Father, do what you need to do, but we’ll be gone soon” advised Albert.

Marie just sighed, resignedly.

A great weariness enveloped Jason. He could not keep the dummies, nor could he go back to his unbearable solitude without them. He changed into his best clothes, took the six dummies to the bedroom and laid in bed with them on both sides of his body. "I'll feed you as you demand, but you will have to help yourselves" he advised. He closed his eyes and recited a silent prayer, or perhaps a farewell. He then cut his throat with the same knife he had used to slay Audrey.

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Two weeks later, an inspector from the animal shelter appeared at the door of Jason's apartment. She knocked repeatedly and, getting no answer, went down to the building super's apartment and asked that he open the door for her.

"We have been trying to contact him for several days to arrange for a home visit for the dog he rescued from the shelter. He never answered the phone or responded to our text messages and emails. Something is wrong, and they sent me to check it out."

The super was grumpy, but the lady had an air of authority and expressed her request firmly. He led her upstairs and opened the door of the apartment.

The lights were out and the air inside was close and had an unpleasant odor. The apartment was empty, except for the decomposing corpse of a fully dressed old man, lying on the bed and as pale as the bedsheets. He exhibited a wide gash across the neck; blood had caked on the surface of the wound, but was not visible anywhere else.

Everything was in order in the apartment, except for two oddly dressed dummies that were sprawled atop a bookcase, their heads resting on the wall. Around them, and on the floor beneath, there was a mess of rags, plastic bags, and discarded clothing, including a hideous yellow polka dot blouse that once may have belonged to a child.

THE END