



# WAR DOLLS

by Chelsea Laine Wells

**BOBBY** left for Vietnam a rule-following pacifist too timid to go full-fledged conscientious objector. He returned a year later with a head wound from a mortar shell and a long, low silence where his personality used to be. As it turned out, once it was clear a soldier had outlived his usefulness and was to be medically discharged, they stopped enforcing the short haircuts. So Bobby came home with his curly hair grown in as though he'd never been a soldier at all, and a bandage over the depression at the top right side of his head disrupting his hairline so it receded there like an old man. It was the shape and size of a child's kneecap, as though his head was made of wet cement and a little kid kneeled in it before it set, leaving

behind a smooth crater stretched taut with delicate skin. It was rough when the bandage came off. They all learned not to look, then learned to look, and then learned not to look all over again.

Marya had just graduated high school. As a girl she didn't have to worry about the draft, which was still in full swing, but her male friends did so it was all anyone talked about. Enrolling in college, fleeing across the border to Canada and draft dodging, sucking it up and going over there to see what the war was really about. They held Bobby up as an example of why to run, talking about his condition in remote, respectful terms and sliding their eyes to Marya for permission and confirmation.

"It's messed up for sure," she said, and took the joint passed to her and tried not to think about it.

Upon returning, Bobby lived at home, naturally, and would have to live at home forever, a tender and embarrassing situation for the firstborn son and the only hope of carrying on the family name. Marya was enrolled in the local state school for the fall and had been promised the attic where Bobby used to live, a significant step up from the corner room by the stairs that shared a wall with their parents. Her father was set to paint it that summer, strip the floors, line the closet walls with shelves. It was to be a promotion within the family and a reward for all her hard work. So she

waited, patiently. But with Bobby home and taking up permanent residence, the renovations were canceled and the attic went back to him automatically, no apology, no second thought.

This was the defining incident that shaped Marya's summer, when she should have been excited about college and relieved that her brother was home from the war, broken though he was. But the loss of the promised attic freshly renovated just for her, with its round window and access to the little roof deck where she planned to layer blankets and make love to her boyfriend in the open night air, was an idea that had sustained her through that last agonizing stretch of senior year and to have it disappear so easily proved to be devastating.

At first Marya retaliated indirectly by removing herself from Bobby and from the family as a whole, which was the opposite of what the doctors said to do. Close and constant contact with people he loved from a time before the war would help Bobby regain memories and would bring out who he truly was from whatever internal foxhole he had retreated into. So when he came down for breakfast, Marya slipped out the side door. When he watched television with their parents at night, she left her spot on the couch and retreated to her tiny room. She never gave him long enough

to interact with her and their parents were so absorbed with his care and recovery, they didn't notice.

But simply pulling away wasn't enough. She felt an increasing urge to lash out at Bobby, this silent idiot who both was her brother and was no longer her brother at all occupying every bit of space within their family to the point that there was no room to breathe. She was a ghost in her own house. But she complained to no one because in their small town boys back from the war, especially injured ones, were sacrosanct. Heroes. As his sister, Marya knew she was meant to feel a mix of awe and sadness and respect, so that's what she showed the world. But inside she was a mess of heated resentment and hostility.

There was a center where Bobby went three days a week, founded by the Methodist church ladies ministry group. The center catered to disabled adults, allowing them to work at menial tasks, to make things no one really wanted or needed, allowing them to feel useful and productive in a society where they were no longer useful or productive. In overheard conversation, she learned Bobby had failed at assembling care packages for other veterans. He had failed at stuffing envelopes for local businesses. He had failed at rolling bandages for the neighborhood clinic. It felt hopeless. But then they tried Bobby on the craft table, and he started making dolls.

He needed no guidance. His hands went to it that first day as though he'd been doing it all his life. He stuffed and sewed the cabbage head, the body, tube arms with an elbow joint flat stitched in. He could produce ten in a day, easily. They were sent to the orphanage in the next town, the children's wards of surrounding hospitals, foster homes, daycares, and eventually local businesses sold them for donations given back to the center. Someone called them War Dolls and it stuck. They weren't beautiful, but they were soft and strongly made. For the most part, children didn't care what the dolls looked like. They wanted a crude reflection of themselves to nurture. That's all a doll needed to be.

His routine was to make one doll and tuck it into his lap, where it stayed as he made the rest. That first doll came home with him. He cradled it like a baby, his unsteady hand on the misshapen head. He wouldn't set it down. He ate with it, dropped food on it. He took it to the bathroom. It was hard to look at. Marya felt shame for his ineptitude, for these ugly dolls made out of crude muslin. They had no faces, no hair. It was as though he had forgotten what humans looked like. It seemed grotesque.

Later she would tell herself that she didn't mean to do it the first time. She was in Bobby's attic, what should have been her room, while he was downstairs in the shower. There was no reason for her to be in there except

to seethe and feel cheated. One of his dolls was on the bed, on top of the covers smoothed in place by their mother. Marya picked it up and the head flopped back like a newborn baby. Then the pipes groaned as the shower downstairs turned off, and she heard their father's voice saying, "Come on out, buddy." There wasn't much time for her to get down the stairs and safely inside her room before they rounded the landing, Bobby's sunken body half exposed in a towel, taking each step one at a time. Marya panicked and darted out with the doll still in her hand.

She heard him through the ceiling, his distress noises, and then their father opening the closet to retrieve another of his dolls. He calmed gradually. Marya hid the doll in a dresser drawer and sat on the edge of her bed, swept with a swift and powerful throb of relief. For the first time in weeks, a knot had loosened. She could breathe. That was how it started.

Bobby's inability to communicate prevented her from getting caught. All anyone knew was that he started to backslide, and that he no longer seemed to have a doll like he always did. It was assumed that he was losing them or getting rid of them in his own way. Everything Bobby did was at once laden with possible meaning and meaningless. Marya waited for her parents to connect the absence of the War Dolls to his weight loss, his

retraction, his rocking, his silent crying, but they never did. She felt lightheaded from the depth of her own cruelty, but she kept doing it.

War Dolls amassed in the back of her closet. Periodically she would stuff them in garbage bags and dispose of them in the dumpsters of a nearby apartment complex. These blank, featureless nobodies that would never find nurture. Bobby retreated further. Marya breathed deeper and deeper, dizzy with it. Their parents chased Bobby into himself, tightening around him in a desperate suffocating orbit.

It was late fall, almost winter, when Luke Owen showed up on the porch. He wore his army fatigues but his hair was growing out and he walked with a limp, clearly a medically discharged soldier like Bobby. Their mother answered the door and let him in. Their father had just left to pick Bobby up from the center. Marya was in the kitchen fixing a sandwich in anticipation of skipping lunch once Bobby was home with his daily War Doll that she would later steal while he slept with his mouth gaping open or while their father helped him wash his hair.

Luke had one of those raucous voices that carried and bounced off walls. Marya stood still with a butter knife limp in her hand and listened to him talk about Bobby, the way he'd been before the injury. The way he made all the other guys laugh when things were tense and how he never



minded extra work. How he was both scared and brave like everyone, but unlike everyone, he talked about being scared. And it gave other guys the courage to talk about it too. He was everybody's favorite, and when he was injured, it took the spirit out of everyone. No one was the same after that.

"I thought he was a goner," said Luke Owen, "so I was real relieved to hear that he pulled through, even though I know he lost some faculties. I wanted to come by to pay my respects, say hello. See if he remembered me. I'm hitchhiking around the country after my discharge and I found myself here in Bobby's hometown. So I asked around a little and sure enough, everyone knew him just like I thought they would. I hope it's all right I'm interrupting your afternoon like this."

"Oh of course," said her mother, and Marya could hear in her voice that she was crying. Though by this point, on a daily basis, she was crying more than she wasn't. "Please. We're so thrilled to meet any friend of Bobby's. I know his sister will want to meet you too, she's here somewhere." And her head popped around the corner into the kitchen and Marya was trapped, no way to slip out the side door, no way to pretend she was sleeping, no way to fake a date with her boyfriend who she had broken up with months ago though she'd told no one. "Marya, come meet Bobby's

friend from the war,” she said, dabbing at her eyes with the sleeve of her sweater.

Marya set the butter knife down and walked into the living room where Luke Owen stood up from the couch and held his arms out, this tall lanky bearded man who seemed so much older than Bobby. She did not want to hug him but there was no escaping it. So she walked forward into his arms and he engulfed her. He smelled like weed and cigarettes and wind, the way little kids do when they’ve been running around outside. Through his fatigue jacket, she could hear his heart pounding.

“You have to forgive me,” he said, releasing her, his voice thick like he was about to cry. “I feel like I’m meeting a celebrity here. See all the other guys talked about their girlfriends, but Bobby talked nonstop about his hotshot little sister who was going to college and who always made the grades. He told us probably every story about you there is,” Luke Owen said, wiping his eyes and laughing explosively, almost a sob. He shook his head. Marya backed away, unsteadily, and sat on the arm of the couch opposite her mother. “Said you were great friends, you two. Boy, did he love you. Still does,” he amended. “I’m sure.”

Marya was searching for an appropriate response, or any response at all, when the front door opened and Bobby shuffled in, led by their father.

Luke Owen strode to him and embraced Bobby so hard and for so long no one knew what to do with themselves. Their mother cried openly into a destroyed tissue. Their father cast questioning glances at Marya and awkwardly patted Bobby's shoulder, then Luke's, then Bobby's, his car keys still cupped in his hand like something fragile.

Over Luke's shoulder Marya could see the top of Bobby's curly head and the shallow dent where the shell had ruined him. When they separated, Luke did what no one but the doctor had done: he touched that place, tenderly and with reverence. Bobby looked up to his face, his own expression unreadable. Marya was unable to look away from Bobby in this moment and some of what she had become, some of her terrible self-created armor, fell away and she remembered knowing Bobby better than anyone. And from a deep instinctive place, Marya could tell that he recognized Luke. That he remembered.

Luke backed up a step and noticed what Bobby had in his arms.

"Look at this," he said, and his voice was wide and gentle without being condescending—something most people could not achieve with Bobby. "What's this?"

"He makes them," their mother chimed in.

He touched the doll's head in the exact place where Bobby's wound was.

"They call them War Dolls," she said. "People around town buy them for donations. Children love them. It's been his great passion since... since coming back." She smiled at Bobby, and their mother's aching was such that Marya had to look away.

Luke hesitated then, and even from her place behind him, Marya could tell that he was crying. He started nodding, and nodded for a long time while everyone waited for what would come next. Marya on the arm of the couch, their mother perched on the opposite end, their father a few feet away from Luke and Bobby, and Bobby very close to Luke, in the expanse of his broad shadow, with the doll in his arms. Looking up into his face like a child.

"Well," Luke said, his voice strangled, so he cleared his throat and tried again. "Well that makes sense."

"Does it?" asked their mother. "How?"

"Well, see, when Bobby got hit," Luke said, and he turned so Marya could see his face. "We were in a little village and there were a lot of civilians around." He shook his head, dropped his gaze, and murmured,

“Always a lot of civilians around. Anyway, in this one village there was a woman who had been killed and she had a baby in her arms there on the side of this road. She was still cradling it, and the baby was crying. There were other people around and I figured they would come get that baby as soon as we had passed through, you know, they were just scared when we were around. Hiding. But Bobby didn’t want to leave the baby there like that. He was trying to take the baby and I was telling him, no, man, we can’t take a baby, someone will get it, but he couldn’t get past it. I pushed him out of there and that’s when the shell hit him. It was the last thing he did, trying to get that baby somewhere safe.”

The silence in the room was physical. Inside, Marya fell. She fell forever. There was no bottom to it. She felt the length of her selfishness and cruelty and grief.

Then Bobby reached out and touched Luke’s chest, and Luke snapped back to attention, peering down into Bobby’s drifting eyes. In his slow underwater way, Bobby’s hand drifted from Luke’s chest and lit on the War Doll’s faceless head.

“Baby,” he said softly. He had said a few words since his return home, but not this one. This one was new. The room seemed to contract around

them, an invisible emotional tide that felt like gravity, and Luke let out a sob.

“That’s right, Bobby,” he said, and pulled him into another hug. “You take care of that baby. You take care of that baby, buddy. That’s real good.”

Then after a moment, there was a massive shaking off and pulling together. Their mother remembered herself and offered to feed Luke, which he politely refused. Their father pumped Luke’s hand and exchanged one of those hard backslapping hugs that men do. Bobby settled in his chair with the War Doll cradled close to his face and Luke kneeled in front of him, helping him make the peace sign, and saying softly, “Peace, brother. Peace, Bobby.” Luke embraced Marya again, slipping these words into her ear before he hauled up his duffel bag and left: “Take care of him. He loves you best.”

That night Marya stood in the shower until the water ran cold on her back, and then longer, until she was finally able to cry. Then she dried and dressed and climbed the stairs to the attic.

Bobby was in bed but not asleep. He was clutching the War Doll which, on another night, Marya would have already taken or conspired to take. His eyes followed Marya as she closed the door and sat on the edge of

the bed. She was overwhelmed with an innate understanding that he had been expecting her, not tonight, but for a long time. For months.

Bobby sat up cross-legged with the blankets on his lap. He lay the doll down in the blankets between them. The light from the bedside lamp brought his good side into soft focus and hid his wound. Marya could see him in there, far back, secreted inside himself. The old Bobby, her brother. She searched for words but came up empty-mouthed.

Then Bobby lifted his arms and closed the distance between them. Marya's damp hair was gathered forward in two long pigtails, one over each shoulder, and he wrapped his hands around them, slowly, with an effort, and ran them along his palms all the way to the end. His hands shook. And it crashed back down over her, one of a host of memories she had been keeping forcibly at bay: dropping him off at the bus station when his draft date rolled around, their mother hysterical and their father stoic. Marya's hair was in pigtails that day too and he'd done the exact same thing, smoothed them through his hands, and though he smiled at her she'd felt him shaking and his fear rushed into her; she buried her face in his shoulder and wept while he whispered it's okay, it's okay, it's okay. It was the last time she would ever see him whole.

A year and a half later Marya picked up the War Doll and kissed it and handed it to him. She said, “Baby.” He smiled, his new soft smile, and held the doll close.

Then he touched her face, his fingers hesitant and clumsy, and said, “Marya.”

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chelsea Laine Wells has been published in PANK, Hobart, Knee-Jerk, The Butter, Third Point Press, The Other Stories, wingleaf, and Heavy Feather, among others, and has work forthcoming from The Collapsar. She’s been nominated for Pushcarts and Best of the Nets and subsequently won a 2015 Best of the Net. She is managing and fiction editor for Hypertext Magazine and founding editor of Hypernova Lit, a journal publishing the work of teenagers. Chelsea lives in the Oak Cliff area of Dallas, Texas, and is a high school librarian and creative writing teacher. Find her on Twitter at [@chelsea\\_l\\_w](https://twitter.com/chelsea_l_w) and at [www.chelsealainewells.com](http://www.chelsealainewells.com).



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