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Prose

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## Tea Time

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West Ottawa High School

Grade: 11-12

Genre: Creative

2nd Place

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Jennifer Jasperse

## Tea Time

Miss Eleanor Rose, of 37 Park Avenue, expected her tea at precisely four o'clock. Today, she was vexed to find that the arrival of a swarm of other young ladies of society at six minutes and fifty-seven seconds to four prevented her from soothing her tea-deprived throat. Instead, she sulked inwardly and smiled graciously at the mindless hens who clucked over her sister while the porcelain dolls on the mantelpiece presided with their all-seeing eyes.

Miss Natalia Rose, also of 37 Park Avenue, expected her tea at precisely four o'clock; however, today she forgot the time, because today she was no longer just Miss Natalia Rose of 37 Park Avenue; she was, as of forty-two minutes and eight seconds ago, the future Mrs. Sebastian Haddix. He had proposed- quite unexpectedly- after just two months of courtship; he was ever so handsome (all the ladies agreed) and he got on so amiably with her father. Surely, her dearly departed mother would have approved of the match as well; Mrs. Rose was always proud of her girls, especially when they behaved like the young ladies they were born to be.

Mrs. Rose, once of 37 Park Avenue, had expected her tea at precisely four o'clock, and she taught her daughters to expect the same. There were certain traditions that must be observed, she told her girls, and tea time was almost as important as church. Eleanor, back when people called the girls Ella and Nattie, would squirm in her seat in boredom or sneak highly unsuitable books, like Plato's *Republic* or Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, into the parlor in the folds of her skirt. Mrs. Rose gently reminded Ella of her folly and removed the books from her possession; later, Mr. Rose would paddle Ella for her impropriety, as if he hoped to whack the bad behaviors out of her body. Eventually, she learned to listen to conversations- especially any between men- to entertain herself. But now Mrs. Rose was dead; Ella and Nattie had heard their father yelling at their mother upstairs before tea one day, and Mrs. Rose was so distressed about the argument

that she tripped coming down the stairs and plummeted to her death. Tea was served at 13 minutes and 27 seconds past four that day.

A week after the accident, Mr. Rose sent portraits of Nattie and Ella to a doll-maker, who carved lovely porcelain dolls in their likenesses. Nattie's was light, with her honey blonde hair and blue eyes, while Ella's doll seemed dark and brooding, despite the best efforts of the dollmaker. The girls' governess had declared that the dolls were perfect and insisted on displaying them in the parlor for the visitors to see, against the girls' protests that they were really too old to be playing with dolls, at 14 and 16, respectively. The dolls had stood sentry on the mantle for three years, silently judging the Roses and their guests, and now beheld the spectacle of an upper-class engagement as women milled about, pretending to be happy for the elder Miss Rose while secretly seething that they had not been Mr. Haddix's selection. Rumor had it that he owned a cottage in Newport more luxurious than any other.

Ella was quietly considering mutiny as she watched women flutter about the parlor. Yes, what a lovely sight Nattie and Mr. Haddix made; what was he like, they asked, hoping for stories of romance and passion (though not too much, as the ladies were faint of heart and would hate to cause an inconvenience by swooning in another woman's parlor), but Ella could not drudge up any remarkably romantic anecdotes to share regarding the supposedly dreamy Mr. Haddix. Last week, when Mr. Haddix had come to a dinner party, Ella listened intently to his conversation with the neighbor, Mr. Jepson of 39 Park Avenue, and discovered that he was poorly read, frustrated with the low efficiency of the foreigners in his newest factory, and politically involved with politicians who were well-informed on the size of his bank account. She supposed any man could be these things and still be a good match for her sister, although he spoke of political theories as if he'd read the front cover and nothing more. Sighing, she resolved to announce that

she was in need of the lavatory; once free, she made her way to the kitchen staircase in search of her tea.

At the top of the stairs, she found the maid, holding the tea service and pressed against the door, listening for the flock of ladies to leave. “Oh, ‘scuse me, Miss, I was just bringing up your tea,” she stammered, trying to find a suitable excuse.

Ella resisted the urge to roll her eyes at the little mouse of a maid before her. “Please serve tea promptly in the library. And bring a warmer, as I’m sure my sister will need refreshment after her callers disperse.”

Nattie spent the next months commissioning gowns and silverware and toting Ella along with her on her errands in the hope of increasing her prospects; Ella spent that time eavesdropping on more interesting conversations than the ones she was supposed to be paying attention to. Ella was obligated to try on so many dresses during those errands that she felt as if she was still a little girl playing dress-up with her mother’s old clothes. Once or twice a week, Mr. Haddix would stop by for dinner, and, although Nattie made sure to publicize her feelings of elation, when he was around her, she refused to meet anyone’s eyes, especially when he and Mr. Rose spoke of horses. Mr. Haddix was something of an expert- at least, as much of an expert a gentleman could be on the subject without compromising his reputation- and recounted the story of his newest horse, which had to be beaten into total submission before he deemed it worthy. He brought a sort of celebrity status to the whole family; Ella had received invitations to four galas- before she had even made her societal debut- and many of Mr. Haddix’s colleagues begged for the honor of a dance with her.

To the rest of the world, 37 Park Avenue illustrated an ideal of domestic bliss. Not even the most jealous of debutantes could have suspected that, behind polished mahogany doors and

fine lace curtains, misery festered in the silence. She was not ready, she cried, and there was no way out of the mess of a romance that they called a wedding. Perhaps Mr. Haddix found her dowry to be a suitable match. And, of course, since Mr. Rose found Mr. Haddix a suitable son-in-law, Nattie was obliged to obey. Naturally, Nattie hid her tears from the world and nearly succeeded. A week before the wedding, when Ella decided to sneak one of her favorite books out of the chest where her father hid them, she heard her sister sobbing down the hall. Tentatively, she knocked on Nattie's door and pushed in anyways when she didn't get a response. Nattie was holding her miniature portrait of their mother, her arms marked with bruises that her dress usually covered.

“Oh, *Nattie*,” Ella breathed as her sister tried to hide the wounds.

“Don't. You shouldn't be here,” Nattie whispered. “Father will hurt you, too, like he used to, like he hurt Mother.”

“What do you mean, like he hurt Mother? No one ever hurt Mother. Mother fell. It was an accident, everyone said so.”

“He pushed her down the stairs. He wanted me to marry his business partner; she opposed the engagement, because his business partner was old enough to be our grandfather. And he was so cross that he pushed her down the stairs. And now, I do not wish to marry Mr. Haddix, but it will improve Father's business prospects ever so much. When I protest, he hits me and says he is preparing me for my future, where my insolence will not be tolerated,” Natalia said, avoiding eye contact.

Eleanor did not respond. She joined her sister on the floor, and they cried the night away together.

A week later, Natalia smiled and blushed through her wedding ceremony. Once Mr. Haddix whisked her away, she was markedly absent from future social functions. Eleanor stopped by with increasing frequency, hoping to contact her sister, but Natalia seemed to be perpetually indisposed.

After a month of rejected visits, Eleanor was out making calls and lost track of time when she decided to stop by Mr. Haddix's townhouse, just like every day. She was welcomed into the entrance hall by the butler, as per usual, but managed to sneak a peek into the parlor while the butler tried to explain that Mrs. Haddix was not accepting calls today. There sat Natalia, pouring tea as the clock struck four; her eyes were bloodshot, her forehead sported an ugly yellow bump, and her lips were blistered and dry. Her doll, a witness on her new mantelpiece, was cracked. Eleanor turned and dashed out the door.

She ran all the way back to 37 Park Avenue, not caring if it was unladylike or if she couldn't breathe. Gasping for air, she lurched up the steps, banged on the door, and pushed the butler aside when he answered it. Eleanor deposited her coat on the floor and grabbed her doll off its perch. She examined it tenderly for a moment, running her fingers over the smooth china and through the dark curls, before launching it against the wall. It shattered like Humpty Dumpty had, when he fell off his wall, but there was no one to put the doll back together again.

Miss Eleanor Rose, of 37 Park Avenue, made her societal debut, as her father expected of her. She wore pretty dresses and kept her opinions to herself; she went to balls like an adult and left her childish obsession with books and secrets behind. One afternoon, when a man of means and status proposed to her, she accepted, just as her mother and sister had before her. Madame Eleanor's days were full of hairstyles and fashion and petty conversation, but at night, Ella dreamed of Tolstoy and Plato and the world that could have been.