

THE TIME OF MISIA

When she was ten years old, Misia was the smallest girl in her class, and so she sat in the front bench. As she walked between the benches, the teacher always stroked Misia's head.

On her way home from school Misia collected things her dollies needed: horse chestnut shells for plates, acorn tops for cups, and moss for pillows.

But once she got home, she couldn't decide what she wanted to play. On the one hand she was drawn to the dolls, to changing their dresses, and feeding them dishes that were invisible, but which did actually exist. She was drawn to wrapping their stiff bodies in baby quilts and telling them simple, rag-doll stories for bedtime. Then, once she had picked them up, she'd suddenly feel disheartened. They weren't Karmilla, Judyta, or Bobaska any more. Misia's eyes saw flat eyes painted onto pink faces, reddened cheeks and mouths that were permanently sealed, for which no food could exist. Misia turned over the thing she had once regarded as Karmilla and gave it a spanking. She could feel she was hitting sawdust covered in material. The doll didn't complain or protest. So Misia sat her with her pink face to the window-pane and stopped bothering with her. She went to rummage in her Mama's dressing table.

It was wonderful to sneak into her parents' bedroom and sit before the two-winged mirror that could even show things that were normally invisible — shadows in the corners, the back of your own head . . . Misia tried on the beads and rings, opened the little bottles and spent ages fathoming the mystery of lipstick. One day, when she was feeling especially disappointed with her Karmillas, she raised the lipstick to her mouth and painted it blood-red. The red of the lipstick set time in motion, and Misia saw herself in a few dozen years, just as she would die. She furiously wiped the lipstick off her mouth and went back to the dolls. She took their coarse, sawdust-stuffed paws in her hands and clapped them together soundlessly.

But she always went back to her mother's dressing table. She'd try on her silk camisoles and high-heeled shoes. She'd