

LANI IRWIN

Intolerable Absence, 2007

Oil in linen, 20 x 28 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

TOM BENTLEY The Dolls

“They’re Bulgarian, right?”

My hand was poised to knock, but I dropped it and looked at Cal. “Yeah. No. They might be Yugoslavian. Can’t remember.” I looked around the door and peered into the window, but that was pointless, because the summer sun was blasting it with light that knifed into my eyes, and the heavy drapes were pulled tight. “You know, one of those old Commie countries. Some Slavic thing.” I snapped my hand through the air and said, “Maybe they’re Transylvanian—what difference does it make?”

“Well, we might at least understand where they’re from,” Cal said. “Maybe they’ll lower the rent if we’re friendly.”

I waved my hand again and said, “C’mon, these guys might as well be from the moon. And the way Mrs. Pokorny goes over the rent checks to make sure every digit is in place, there’s no chance she’ll drop the rent. Man, she could smear the ink by the way she eyeballs every letter.” I knocked and took a deep breath.

Though I couldn’t hear anything, I imagined Mrs. Pokorny scuttling to the door. She’s probably the only person I’d ever describe using the word *scuttles*. She’s apple-doll-like, tiny, the gray hair always tight in a bun, always some kind of faded print housedress. This was the fourth time we’d brought the check—the terrors of the U.S. mail were overwhelming to her—and she usually stood at the door going over it like it was a breaking news bulletin before shooing us off.

This time was different. “Calvin and Richard. Please come.” She swung the door wide and shook her arm toward the room. I thought it was a pretty small house from the outside, but the living room was large, though with a low ceiling. In the dim light, I could see lots of dully glinting tapestry-like hangings on the walls. A giant, tarnished samovar was on a deep mantle over a fireplace. The furniture, heavy with dark wood and bulging cushions, looked like pieces from a museum. The place smelled, like what? Old blankets, maybe.

“Tea. You will have tea.” She moved out of the room like a quick crab. Cal walked up to one of those secretary desks that have a pull-down cover and rows of slots for papers and envelopes. It was scarred and dirty. “Man, look at this desk—it must be two hundred years old!” he