

Sidedoor Season 6 Ep. 0 Edison's Demon Dolls Final Transcription

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And we're back, kind of. I'm here to say that Season Six of Sidedoor is coming your way in mid-January. We're really excited about those stories that we're researching right now. But in the meantime, we have a holiday story that we just couldn't wait to tell. So, grab your blanket, a warm drink of whatever you'd like, and settle in for a story. And this story starts at an auction for toys.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Bess what is it like to go to a toy auction?

[MUSIC]

Bess Winter: Well, there are a lot of old ladies, usually. (Laughs).

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I fit right in. (Laughs).

Bess Winter: (Laughs). Yeah, me too. And I was seven or eight when I was going to these auctions.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This is Author, Bess Winter.

[MUSIC]

Bess Winter: They were specifically doll auctions. I think your eyes would water at the amount of money that is spent. There are certain American dolls that are like American folk art and those go for like \$10, \$15,000.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Wow!

[MUSIC]

Bess Winter: Yeah. Yeah. So...

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: That's a lot for a doll.

[MUSIC]

Bess Winter: It is a lot for a doll. It basically is an investment piece, like buying a piece of art.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: As a kid, Bess didn't go to auctions to diversify her art portfolio. She was there because her mom was an antiques collector. And when you're a kid, you pretty much go where your parents go. Bess learned to recognize valuable dolls, but she didn't have much money.

[MUSIC]

Bess Winter: So, I knew what kind of doll was valuable and appealing, but I couldn't afford the actual good versions of those. So, it would be like, "Oh, this one's been squished into a box for 50 years and its head's kind of square, but it's still a Lindsey."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Bess took her oddly shaped antique dolls home and made up stories to bring them to life.

Bess Winter: Yeah. I grew up as an only child, so I did a lot of solitary imaginative play. And I played with all kinds of things, but I was attracted to dolls, I think because they were a bit like puppets or characters that I could make stories about.

Lizzie Peabody: These days, Bess writes her stories down. Mostly, she writes about people, but sometimes she writes about dolls too. And today, Bess Winter will read one of her fictional stories about a real doll that, you guessed it, lives at the Smithsonian.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, this time on Sidedoor, we time travel with Bess to the late 1800s to meet a talking doll invented by Thomas Edison. This doll has an angelic face that hides a demonic secret.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, here's Bess Winter's story of a holiday gift like no other, a talking doll invented by Thomas Edison. And just for clarity, this doll is real, but the story is fiction. So, here it is an excerpt from Bess's story titled, "Talking Dolls."

[MUSIC]

Bess Winter: The doll, too heavy to be tucked into the branches of the Christmas tree, she rested beneath its shaggy limbs. In her eyes, a reflection of the fairy lights dangling from branches above, the flames that spat inside their glass bellies, and of the family that gathered, now around the tree. Mother in new garnet earrings, straight backed father straighter than the

back of his oak chair, grandmother Rose pinching a cross stitched bookmark, a gift from her granddaughters who had shared in the stitching that you couldn't tell their stitches apart between her yellowed fingernails. They watched in silence as the sisters lifted the long-anticipated doll away from her resting place, her inner machinery heavy enough that both sisters had to clutch her. Her eyes were sleeping eyes. Lashes that batted her China cheeks. Her chest talked in a curious way when she was hoisted. Dangling at her wrist a tag, Thomas Edison's famous talking doll. And here were the sisters, in matching new made pinafores white lace for Christmas, knotted snug at their backs by their rough handed nurse, their tumbling pigtails and rumpled stockings. These sisters were at precisely that point when a little girl is an even more perfect shape and size than her doll. And each was a copy of the other, a single birth mark twinned their upper lips. A sideward glance seemed to skate across the face of one sister and onto the face of the other. Now, they held the doll between them and searched for the crank. When they found it, both took hold. Here was the noise, shrieking metal, the spirit of an angry child scabbled up from the grave.

Doll: (Undeterminable sounds).

Bess Winter: Mother recoiled. Father furrowed his brow. Grandmother Rose waved a knotty hand before her face as if she might shew the child banshee away. And the twins, to their relative surprise, swatted each other's hands. "You turned it too quickly!" "No, you snatched at it!" "I didn't!" Reluctant mother calling for nurse. Nurse still chewing breakfast, hurrying from somewhere deep within the house to separate the girls, to place the doll in the hands of one and then, the other. As each took her turn with the crank, the other glared at her sister, willing the demon voice to return. And it did. Neither girl could call up a girl voice from the toy. One sister sat on the rug, dumb as a doll and cried, while the other pressed her fists into her own eye sockets to make colors bloom behind her lids. All this observed by the grown relatives who clutched the arms of their chairs. Now, the doll was passed among the grownups. First, nurse who cooed that dolly only needed some care and patience. She cranked with three ruddy fingers pinched around the handle. Pinky raised like to whisper, "Careful, careful." The girls gathered close watching. One hung her head on nurse's shoulder. One leaned eager on the heels of her hands. And still, the shriek. Nurse's face, a brief twist into some adult disappointment. A look that betrayed her life beyond the nursery, the house, that suggested she'd seen a thing or two she didn't like before. Give it to mother. Here was mother's hand outstretched and shivering that seldom lifted anything heavier than a handkerchief. Nurse hoisted the doll into mother's dipping arm and mother quick lurched forward to catch the heavy toy, lifting it roughly in a way the girls had never seen. She sat the doll on her lap, where the sisters had never sat. With one finger, she brushed back it's bouncy curls, such alien tenderness, her daughters watched in silence. The translucence of her fingernail, just as it caught the light. The doll's curls, snagging like ribbon. Even this, the look she wore, a young girl's look. A curious tangle, like one who would give everything to be a girl again, to sit on the rug with her own doll. She turned the crank, the demon call. And mother's fallen face, the small slump that registered only in the loosening of the crepe about her shoulder blades, the way her grip sagged around the doll's waist, the toy tilting in her lap, a tremendous failure. "Mother," she said, her gaze fixed somewhere on the rug, "Would you like to try the doll?" "Keep it away," said grandmother Rose. "It's broken kitty." Here was father, her husband, "Broken machinery." He reached for it. The doll in father's serious hands, another vision for his daughters. Father touched pens and inkwells. Father touched long guns and dead ducks with floppy necks and the flag that wagged on the pole in the yard that he alone raised and lowered daily. Had father ever touched a doll before? The action of his fingers as he reset the needle, the fold of his brow above his troubled eyes, maybe the final gesture ever shared between these sisters, a look, a weird bob in the chest that said, isn't it strange to see father puzzling over this poor frilly

creature, to see him sheepishly pull aside the dress where it's slit, and clutch the cool tin body in his reluctant hands. The doll's audacious yellow curls drooping onto his knees.

Doll: (Undeterminable sounds).

Bess Winter: Father, scrutinizing the doll, staring into the china face, the glass eyes, the sleeping lids that were slow to open to him. "Defective," he said to the doll. One sister, hoisting herself off the rug, going to stand by father. The other, preoccupied now by her own new coral bracelet, a gift from grandmother Rose that she turned around and around on her small brown wrist. "She'll have to go back," said father. "Oh." Here was the twin who stood by father. Now, a deep sadness set in. Sympathy for this doll who must be shut up in a box, banished from this parlor, this family, this city and lugged by careless postmen back to the terrible lonely place she was made, where she'd maybe be destroyed. The sister pictured a man with a hammer, smashing her china face to powder. "But she's still nice. Isn't she? Look at her dress," she tried. "It's very fine." "We'll buy you a fine dress like hers. No use keeping a broken doll just for her dress. I've sown nicer dresses than that for your old dolly's," said grandmother Rose. "Oh, stop now with the crying young lady. How spoiled you are? Look how nicely your sister sits." Sister on the rug still turning the bracelet round her wrist. In this sister, a sweet hot thing that kicked up now and kicked harder as father explained how wronged she'd been, how wronged all of them had been, how expensive this item, and how difficult to acquire. What a sham they'd fallen for. What an unconscionable scoundrel Thomas Edison, who cared only about profits and not about little girls. "He hates little girls is what it is," said father. The sharp-edged word, "hate" twirled in her mind, a keen little gemstone. Did she hate? Who could she hate? Thomas Edison? Yes. All the Edison people who'd ruined her present. She saw them, heckits, twisting and battering the insides of the doll, before tossing them in like rubbish. Or maybe they'd sabotaged only one small part, a tooth on a gear, bent by an intentional finger, while they laughed. She hated them. She had more hate. She swirled her gaze around the room. Everyone caught in it. Mother, lips pursed and hand rested on father's fist. Grandmother Rose stroking the tassel that hung from her new bookmark. Nurse and the knot of brown bread still in her hand from breakfast. Her sister, watery eyed, pleading with father. Father and his stiff grasp on the doll. The doll. She leveled her hate onto it. The doll took her hate, pulled it into her joints and her useless tin body and her sweet, dumb face. The doll took so much hate. She was surprised it didn't crack apart. Father handed it to nurse who would carry it, soaked with hate, and pack it back into its box and return it full of hate to the horrible place it had come from.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: That's Bess Winter, reading from her short story collection, titled, "Machines of Another Era."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Bess, I love this story.

Bess Winter: Thank you.

Lizzie Peabody: And I have to ask, have you ever been so bitterly disappointed in a gift, as a child, that it caused you to hate the inventor of the gift? (Laughs).

Bess Winter: No, I don't think I made connections so clearly between toys and their inventors when I was a child. But I have had, like all of us, incredibly disappointing gifts that either arrived broken. I remember specifically there used to be a toy that was, you'd draw on it. It looks kind of like an Etch-a-Sketch, and then, you're supposed to be able to print out the drawing that you have made. And that thing didn't work at all. And actually, I didn't get mad at the inventor, but I did get mad at Santa because I thought, "This is faulty and why did you make me" (laughs)... I thought Santa made it.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). There's the inventor. (Laughs).

Bess Winter: (Laughs). Yeah. Santa was the inventor. And my mom had to reassure me that she was going to send it back to Santa's workshop to see if they could fix it and they never could because that toy was a complete piece of junk. So, I never saw it again. (Laughs).

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). How much research do you do for a story like this? That's based on something in history, but is fictional?

Bess Winter: That's a good question. I usually research until, A, my curiosity is satisfied and I feel like I can weave a plausible fiction out of this and, B, I've done justice to the subject, even if it's not completely true. And I guess, I'll use this story as an example. It really started with the doll as object. And I see writing sort of as play. So, also, when I'm teaching, because I teach creative writing to undergraduate students, the whole point of that is to get students back to their childhood state of wonder. That's what I always tell them at the beginning of a semester is, "Okay, we're going to try to knock all of the barnacles off of you. All of the films that you've seen, and the screens that you've looked at, and the ways you think you need to talk, and look and see things, all of that's going to be wiped away, so that you can go back to where you were when you were a kid and you are looking at the world."

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Coming up after a quick break, we find out what was up with Thomas Edison's talking dolls. Stick around.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, when I first read Bess Winter's story, I could not believe that Thomas Edison, inventor of the phonograph, early motion pictures, and the first mass-produced light bulb would intentionally have created a demonic talking doll, but he did. Naturally, I had some questions. So, I called up National Museum of American History, Curator, Carlene Stephens.

Carlene Stephens: I'm responsible for the phonograph collections and the sound recordings before electricity got applied to them.

Lizzie Peabody: And after hearing Bess Winter's story, I was dying to see some of these dolls, but since the museum is temporarily closed at the moment, I cannot go see it myself. So, can you sort of describe the doll to us?

Carlene Stephens: Well, this is a doll that's about two feet tall and it came with various faces. The torso was common to all the dolls, it was a tin box perforated by holes. And inside the tin box was a very peculiar rendition of Edison's phonograph.

Lizzie Peabody: That's right, inside the doll was a phonograph, an early record player also invented by Edison.

Carlene Stephens: The phonograph played a wax record that was three inches in diameter. And then a needle, a stylus, would travel in the grooves to produce the sound that emanated from the holes in the metal torso. The doll's head was a gorgeous porcelain affair. The museum's example (laughs) has no hair, so when you look at the back of the head, there's a great big open space where that hair would have been attached.

Lizzie Peabody: What happened to its hair?

Carlene Stephens: We don't know.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs). Developing the doll with a tiny photograph inside was Edison's way of trying to solve a problem. Suspend everything you know about the last century of the music industry and try to put yourself in Edison's shoes. He'd invented this machine that recorded and played back human voices, but he had no idea what it was for, how to sell it to the public. So, the doll was one idea for applying the phonographs technology. But if you remember that recording, you heard in the story, unfortunately, for Edison, that voice is how the doll actually sounded. And in case you didn't get enough, here it is one more time.

Doll: (Undeterminable sounds). Now I lay me down to sleep, I praise the lord my soul to keep.

Carlene Stephens: The sound that this doll make is pretty screechy. The voices on these recordings are basically those of teenage girls from 1889, screaming into the Edison's phonograph doing the recording. So...

Lizzie Peabody: Oh my gosh.

Carlene Stephens: Every single one of these records had to be done one at a time, there was no mass production. If I was screeching into this machine, I got one record out of it, not 10 copies. So, the sound that comes from this record is over a hundred years old, it's done by a shrieking teenager, the fidelity wasn't good in the first place, because it was a needle scratching sound into wax.

Lizzie Peabody: When it's explained this way, it's no wonder these recording sound the way that they do. But despite the crude audio quality Edison's dolls were celebrated. In 1890, they were featured on the cover of Scientific American Magazine. People were excited.

Carlene Stephens: People who could afford to buy this doll, really wanted one because it had the latest technology in a gorgeous product. They were expensive. \$10 for an undressed doll, \$12 to \$20, if it was dressed. That was in April of 1890 and \$10 in 1890 is about \$260, \$270 today. So, you had to be a fairly well off, early adopter to get this doll.

Lizzie Peabody: So, people were shelling out big money for this doll, 10 bucks, an entire Sheridan. That's who was on the \$10 bill in 1890. People had high expectations and why not?

Carlene Stephens: On the outside, they were gorgeous dolls. On the inside, they had cutting-edge technology.

Lizzie Peabody: But like so many hyped up toys...

Carlene Stephens: They were disappointing to the people of the period, when they didn't perform as expected. And the sound wasn't something that people wanted to hear over and over and over and over again.

Lizzie Peabody: It's easy to imagine the parents of the day, gathering up these misfit dolls and like Bess's mother, sending them back to Santa, or in this case, to Thomas Edison.

Carlene Stephens: It didn't sell well at all. There were great delays in getting it to market and a lot of them were returned. And he started trying to make an improved version, but couldn't raise enough money and then, just dropped it.

Lizzie Peabody: Edison's talking dolls were no more.

Carlene Stephens: To be fair, it wasn't clear at that time that recorded sound played back was going to become the basis of an enormous music industry. I think there's a lesson in that about invention and what it takes to have an idea come to a successful market situation and get absorbed by American culture. It's not instantaneous. And the doll is one of these incredibly interesting side... Trap things. I was trying to say something about Sidedoor and side... Sorry.

Lizzie Peabody: (Laughs).

Carlene Stephens: It didn't work. It didn't work, sorry.

Lizzie Peabody: I've given up on trying to make Sidedoor puns because they get universally rejected.

Carlene Stephens: (Laughs).

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Maybe it's a culs-de-sac on the road of invention.

[MUSIC]

Carlene Stephens: It is. It's a culs-de-sac on the road to invention. (Laughs).

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: But maybe this road peppered with culs-de-sac was really one big roundabout because the problem with Edison's scorn worthy demon dolls wasn't the idea. It just took us more than a century to follow through on his vision. And if you want proof of Edison's concept, look no further than Sidedoor's Producer, Justin O'Neill's living room, where a little girl plays with her own talking doll. And this one isn't a demon, but it is a monster.

[BABY LAUGHING]

Tickle Me Elmo Toy: Elmo is one ticklish monster.

[BABY LAUGHING]

[ELMO LAUGHING]

[BABY LAUGHING]

[ELMO LAUGHING]

[BABY LAUGHING]

[ELMO LAUGHING]

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. If you want to read more of Bess Winter's stories, the name of her book again, was, "Machines of Another Era." And if you want to see the original article about Edison's talking dolls, the one Bess read in Smithsonian Magazine that gave her the idea for this story, check out our website at si.edu/sidedoor.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Special thanks for this episode to Bess Winter, Carlene Stephens, Peter Liebhold, and Valesca Hilbig. Giggles this episode were provided by Ada O'Neil.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: We've noticed in your comments on Apple Podcasts that you want links in our show notes, and we're going to take your advice. So, in our episode notes on this episode, we'll include a link to our website where we'll put a photo of Edison's hairless talking doll.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast team is Justin O'Neil, Nathalie Boyd, Sharon Bryant, Ann Conanan, Caitlin Shaffer, Jess Sadeq, Tami O'Neill, and Lara Koch. Extra support comes from John, Jason, and Genevieve at PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And we just want to say, "Happy trails" to our friend, John Barth, who is taking his well-earned retirement from PRX after a long career. If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship@prx.org. I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This doll has an angelic face, but hides a demonic secret. (Laughs). What do you mean it's gold? I'm handing you gold. (Laughs).