



## The Doll House Museum

**Victor Armendariz lived happily next to the doll house museum his family had owned for more than a century.**

“Careful dusting the Victorians!” his father cautioned him as Victor carefully opened the case and slipped the feather duster inside. This was no normal feather duster. It was small enough to fit into the hand of the motionless man in a dapper black suit and cummerbund. Or to slip into the glove covered fingers of the woman next to him stiffly holding a *pence nez* against her sightless eyes.

“When you’re finished there, we need to repaint the walls of the Swiss chalet.”

“Yes, Papa.” Victor was well aware that the busiest days were the ones when the museum was closed to the public. While he’d sometimes rather be reading, he didn’t really mind the tasks so much. It gave him the opportunity to visit each house, inspect it, and find out the condition of each of its inhabitants. Victor had given them all names, every tiny character living in the miniature structures, from the cottage the size of a matchbox to the multi-level mansion that took up the center of the large main room.

“You look fine to me, Mr. Black Suit and Ms. See Better.” He slid the glass door on the case closed.

Just as Victor approached the Swiss Chalet, though, he noticed something amiss. Heinrich, the yellow-haired skier, dangled from the wire above his seat on the ski lift that would carry him up to the top of the snow-capped mountain, if the ski lift actually moved. “Papa,” he said loudly so his voice would carry across the wide room. “Something has happened here.”

“What? What is it?” His father scurried from where he’d been working nearby. “Oh, my.”

Victor watched as his father untangled Heinrich from the wire and set him carefully back in the seat. His father had not yet given Victor the responsibility to rearrange or reposition any of the figures yet. Not until he was another year older.

“There. That’s better. But I wonder what caused that to happen?”

“An earthquake?” Victor responded.

“Perhaps. But not likely.” Victor’s father pressed one finger against the side of his nose as he always did when he was thinking. “And it certainly wasn’t caused by the weather.”

The doll museum, and the house that adjoined it, sat far off the road that connected the two nearest towns. For years Victor’s father and mother had journeyed the world collecting small things for the museum’s collection, and when they finally settled down, Victor’s father’s job was to maintain it while his mother and older sister created new objects to fit inside. On weekends, people from the nearby towns or tourists from places Victor had often never heard of paid 20 pesos to visit the building filled with the smallest of things the earth had to offer.

Victor’s father closed the display case door. “Can you finish up here, Victor, while I make a trip into town for more paint?”

“Yes, Papa.” Victor picked up a very small broom and dust pan to continue his chores.

After the car engine turned over and sped into the distance, the museum fell very silent. Victor’s mother had accompanied his father, and his sister was spending the afternoon with friends. Victor didn’t usually mind being alone. He liked to make up stories as he moved from display to display, and had already collected more than a hundred that he’d written down in his display journals.

When he reached the tree house, though, he found another unusual thing: the chefs from the restaurant display were now preparing food in the ornate home suspended in a giant oak tree replica. And when he rushed over to the restaurant display, the group of stuffed monkeys usually found in Serena Pink Dress’s bedroom were now slumped over the counter filled with tiny sliced carrots. “How did this happen?!” Victor said to no one in particular. His voice echoed throughout the building.

Victor went over to his father’s reader, a machine connected to all the other doll house museum owners through a cable that stretched for miles in each direction. He turned it on and saw a flurry of comments. There were usually only one or two on any given day. “Something’s tossed my displays around...earthquakes...like a hurricane in the building...some sort of mischievous creature is playing games!”

Victor had never commented on his own, even though his father, who rarely added one either, never told him he couldn’t. He had watched his father do it a time or two and decided he could manage it. “My name is Victor,” he typed into the old typewriter connected to the machine. “We’ve had some problems with our figures changing displays. Sincerely, Victor

Armendariz.” Victor sent the message before he realized he’d introduced himself twice, but he wasn’t concerned as he thought it might make him seem friendlier.

When Victor looked again, he saw his message lost among dozens of other anxious notes. Something was clearly wrong.

Instead of worrying, Victor set about making it right. Even as he was not supposed to move any figure, he decided that returning them to where they belonged, if he did it carefully, would be better than leaving them in the wrong place, and his father might not worry so much. Soon the stuffed monkeys were back with Serena Pink Dress in her storybook cottage and the chefs returned to their places in front of the chopped carrots.

Just as Victor was about to leave the room, satisfied it was back in order, he stopped. His favorite doll from Ghana no longer stood looking out from her wooden house onto a crystal blue sea, but instead leaned against the inside of the case holding the Inuit family building an ice house from snow.

Victor ran as fast as he could through the door and into his house, barely noticing the brisk, cold wind gusting against him. In the rush, he’d forgotten to put on his coat. Shivering from frigid air and fright, he dropped into his bed and pulled the cover over him. After a few minutes of considering what might be causing every figure in his family’s museum to switch places, he remembered something and jumped out of bed. In the corner, he rifled through his stack of copies of “Doll House Magazine” until he found what he was looking for. On one copy, the cover mentioned a story he’d not gotten to yet. *“Haunted Dollhouses: Are They Real?”*

Victor had heard of haunted doll houses but had never experienced one himself in all the many years his family had tended the museum. As Victor picked up the magazine and thumbed through it, he wondered if ghosts weren’t the cause of all the displacement in the building only a few feet from where he lived.

The story focused on a girl named Laura and her experience with a haunted dollhouse she found when she moved into a new home. She worked out an agreement with the little woman who haunted it. That’s it! Victor thought. That’s what he would do, too.

He rushed over to the museum again, hoping to resolve the situation before his parents got back. The lights for some reason had dimmed so he couldn’t see very well, but he thought he might be able to get the doll house ghosts to behave in a darker room, even though it frightened him a little.

“Excuse me,” he said loudly but not harshly. “I know there are ghosts here moving through the houses. And I want to welcome you, but, well, I...if we could just talk...”

Victor was interrupted by a scattering of voices, whispering and giggling all around him.

“Excuse me,” he said again. “If you could speak a little more loudly, then I’d understand what you want...”

Suddenly, an explosion of voices sounded coming from all corners of the building. “Toys! Books! Stuffed animals! Games!” So many voices that he couldn’t keep up with what they were saying.

Victor ran out the door, shutting it behind him, and hurried back to his room as the sky darkened above him and a moon hung just above the forest. Once he reached his bedroom, Victor quickly read through the article again—and after a few moments of frustration, it dawned on him. He had the answer. “Of course!” The girl Laura was told by the small woman in the doll house that the larger house was also inhabited by ghosts of childhood, the remnants of spirits of people who’d lived there who had grown up and left those spirits behind.

“What if...?” he asked himself. What if, for some reason, the ghosts of childhood all over the world decided to enter the doll house museums everywhere, believing they were places to play.

Victor pressed his palms against both sides of his head, trying to figure out a way to get the childhood ghosts—if that’s what they were—to leave the museum. He took in a frustrated breath and let it out again. He remembered that night was the evening of the winter fireworks, one of his favorite nights. And the view from outside their home was as good as the view from either of the towns. He had to hurry. He had to find a way. He had to...

Victor’s eyes widened. He had an idea. And one more time he ran out of his house and back to the museum, just as he heard the first ‘pop!’ He threw open the door. “Come on, everyone! Look at what’s happening. Better than toys! Better than stuffed animals! Better than games!” And with a big ‘whoosh’ the voices slipped past him and swirled into the sky toward the brilliant colorful lights.

Victor sighed his relief but didn’t spend much time watching the fireworks show. He left the doors open while he set about straightening up the museum. When the last figure was back in its proper place, he stepped out and watched the final stunning moments exploding above his head. Soon after the show finished, the lights of the family car illuminated the snow that had begun to fall from the cotton candy clouds that formed after the fireworks.

“Victor, did you see the fireworks show! Humberto outdid himself this year!”

“I did, Papa. Everything about it was...amazing!”

Victor never told his father what happened at the museum, but he did find time to go to the reader and type in his suggestion. “All of the disruption is caused by the ghosts of childhood and all you have to do is distract them with something outside to encourage them to leave. Sincerely, Victor Armendariz.” Soon, he had so many questions from other doll house owners that he had to return to the reader several times a day to answer them.

So, even though he never said anything to his father about that day, Victor knew his father had to have read his messages. “Good job, my son,” his father once said, smiling, and tapped Victor on his shoulder without explanation.