

Robert Wilson was born in 1953 in California, now lives in Toronto, from which he sends this perfectly chilling story about little Sarah, who undertakes piano lessons and instead receives instruction in something quite strange...

The Blue Gularis

BY

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here was nothing for it, little Sarah must have Lessons; and so the small, dark shrunken man was introduced into the household like a Lobe-Fin amongst a school of Gourami.

It wasn't Sarah's idea. Sarah, in fact, was dead set against it. The Lessons — piano lessons — were her mother's notion. Mrs Chesley had married into her husband's shiftless family, subsisted as they did on the remains of the family fortune, but she was determined that her daughter would not be raised an idler. And so Sarah, who would have been perfectly happy attending school during the day and tending her tropical fish in the evenings, was persuaded into an uncomfortable dress (yellow, a color she hated) and presented to Mr. Bodega on a Saturday morning.

"Sarah Chesley," he said. "How do you do."

Sarah looked at him with dismay. She had imagined a piano teacher to be a formidable and horrible thing, but Mr. Bodega was even more formidable and horrible. He was so small and old as to seem deflated, a pinkish brown skin from which the contents had been partially drained. His eyes were an unsettlingly bright, focused blue; and his teeth, which he displayed prominently, were uneven and matched her dress.

Sarah's mother, a buxom woman capable of lifting the dining room table unaided, pushed Sarah forward. "Shake hands, dear."

She extended her small white hand tenuously. Mr. Bodega put down his valise — an enormous mud-brown case peeling at the corners, which seemed from the way he carried it to contain something heavy but fragile — and reached out (too eagerly, Sar-

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ah thought) with his own long and parchment-like fingers. "So this is our little Liszt manque. Well, well."

Sarah noticed her mother's approving smile.

"If we can begin," Mr. Bodega said, "as soon as possible. . . ."

"Of course. The piano is in the parlor. Sarah will show you. I have shopping to do, but Charles and Em-meline are upstairs, if you need anything."

"Thank you so much." He bowed then — actually *bowed*, Sarah thought.

She guided him through the hallway and into the parlor, a room that smelled musty for not having been occupied. Sarah's mother had insisted that the house must have a Receiving Room for Guests (even though the Chesleys had never in Sarah's experience *had* Guests), and so the parlor was closed up and declared off-limits save for periodic dusting. In it were installed expensive but useless pieces of furniture, such as the glass-doored bookcase containing an entire set of Will Durant, or the matching lamps with claw feet and women's faces, or the piano. The room possessed only one small, high window, and the ivy had climbed over that.

"Scales," Mr. Bodega said, seating her at the piano. "Scales, Sarah, are the foundation of music;" he showed her, his

bony fingers surprisingly agile, how to poke the yellowed keys while intoning the names of the notes. This Sarah did obediently over and over,

while the room filled up with morning heat and dust rose like mist from deep within the body of the piano. She thought she might choke. She rather hoped she would, in fact; it would gain her a moment's peace, or possibly a glass of water. But whenever she flagged, Mr. Bodega would sternly direct her attention back to the Scales, until her head began to swim and her fingers felt clumsy and numb. An enormous amount of time passed in this fashion — almost half an hour.

Finally Mr. Bodega said, "Stop!"

Sarah did.

He looked at her — not unkindly, Sarah thought, but with a certain evaluating frankness that made her uncomfortable. She began to wonder if he was practicing X-Ray Vision or some similar arcane power.

He said then, his voice dry but insinuating, as if it had been lubricated with talcum power, "You don't really want to learn the piano, do you?"

"No," she confessed. There seemed no point in hiding it.

"No. That is perhaps as it should be. Little girls very seldom wish to learn the piano; those who do are usually disagreeable. It was your mother's idea?"

She was impressed with his perspicacity. "Yes. She *knows* I won't like it. She—" But then Sarah stopped, wondering how much of this might reach her mother's ears.

"She feels you should do some-

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thing unpleasant. To build character."

Sarah was delighted. "Right!"

"Tell me, then — what do you like to do?"

She examined his wrinkled and curiously old-fashioned suit, and wondered if he would understand. "Fish," she murmured.

"Fish — for trout? The flies, the hooks, the horrid worms?"

"No, no!" She reddened. "*Tropical* fish. I keep them, I have a small aquarium. I need a larger one, but Momma says I can't have it unless...." She looked back at the piano.

"Unless you do well at your Lessons."

"Yes."

"Does your father object to your fish?"

"Daddy? Not at all! That's the thing, see. In this family we all have hobbies. We don't do any work, so we have hobbies instead. Daddy has Mushrooms, and Aunt Emmeline has Old Bottles. I have Fish. All except Momma; she doesn't have anything. . . ."

"And she resents the rest of you who do."

"Exactly," Sarah said, delighted with his knack for finishing sentences she had not the nerve to finish herself. "Would you like to see?"

"Yes, please," said Mr. Bodega. "I approve of hobbies."

"You can leave that here," Sarah said, indicating his massively heavy valise; but he said no, he would prefer to keep it with him.

They went upstairs quietly. Daddy napped this time of day. Daddy napped after all meals, and often before them.

She showed Mr. Bodega the Mushroom Room. Except for the carpet, a water-stained Persian antique, everything here was devoted in some fashion to mycology. A bookcase along one wall spilled out field guides, volumes of lore, a huge dog-eared book of photographs of Toltec mushroom stones. Specimen cases held in their shadowed depths small, dried samples shriveled almost beyond recognition, like the ears of dead animals, but meticulously *labeled-Stropbaria semiglobata, Clitocybe illudens, Nae-matoloma capnoides*. The air itself had a peculiar sporulative must.

Mr. Bodega examined it all with obvious relish. "A very thoroughgoing man, your father. Devoted."

Farther down the hall, they stopped, Sarah introduced her new friend (for this was how she had begun to think of him) to Aunt Emmeline, who was in the solarium with a book, but hurried him on to the real attraction, the Bottle Room.

Emmeline had never married, and Sarah sometimes speculated that the energy normally so channeled was devoted instead to her Bottles. She traveled all over the state, and often out of it, to obscure antique stores, rural flea markets, small-town swap meets. Her treasures had accumulated over the course of years. Sarah opened the door proudly, and they

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were engulfed at once in a greenish glow The eye naturally rebounded from so many Bottles, Sarah thought, as it would from the inside of a gemstone

She had even learned some of the nomenclature " See here," she said to Mr Bodega "a Dunmore, a Demijohn, a Pitkin, a Chestnut, a Carboy' Here, on the sideboard, a set of fine mint Hemmgray Insulators' A rare Dyott ville pint flask with a commemorative picture of George Washington"

"Fine," Mr Bodega said, his pupils aswim with reflected bottles "Com mendable "

But Sarah had saved the best for last

"It's not a very *extensive* collec tion, " she informed him, leading the way to the small downstairs room her mother had so grudgingly allowed her to set aside, "but it's *mine* "

There was only one aquarium, set discreetly on an end table, a small fluorescent light generating a green glow reminiscent of the Bottle Room, bubbles rising from the aerator, fronds of Wild Anachans undulating gently

"Fine, fine " Mr Bodega bent down, peering Reflected in the aq uarium walls, Sarah thought, he looked rather like one of the Apple Dolls her aunt sometimes brought her from county fairs He smelled funny, too, she thought — like cardamom seed "Oh, very special, yes "

She pointed out each fish "These

are my Angelfish These — aren't they pretty' — Tiger Barbs And the big one is a Banded Lepormus "

She loved to watch the colors as they swam, like jewels, so hypnotic but then she heard the click and whine of the back door opening, and felt Mr Bodega's hand clasped almost painfully around her upper arm, urg mg her back to the parlor

"Scales," he hissed into her ear, meaning the piano kind "*Scales* "

She went through the weary motions with her fingers, sighing had her brief friendship with old man ended so soon?

They heard Mrs Chesley bustling in the entrance hall

"Scales," Mr Bodega whispered, then, even more intimately, "Tell me, Sarah — no, don't stop playing' — tell me what you want *more than any thing* "

"That's easy," she whispered back "A Blue Gulans" Her fingers stut tered over the keys "They're rare — they come from the Niger Delta And they're carnivorous, so I'd need an other tank Momma says *maybe*, if I learn to play the piano

"But you don't want to learn the piano (Scales)'"

"Right" Perhaps the fun wasn't over, after all

He looked very solemnly at her and patted his huge brown valise

"Well, then, Sarah," said Mr Bodega, "would you like to learn Black Magic, instead?"

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And she answered, equally solemnly, "Yes."

Privacy was their first problem. Mrs. Chesley liked to look in, those first few Saturday mornings and Tuesdays after six, and the dismayed expression on Sarah's face was no deterrent. It was Mr. Bodega who showed her how the repetitive playing of Scales — specifically, the striking of a C* rather than a C, every third time — guaranteed that Mrs. Chesley would not only abandon the *parlor* but would close the big oaken doors. This left most of an hour for the old man to explicate the mystic powers of the moon.

It took a long time to learn. Black Magic was more tedious than Sarah had expected, and more exhausting. Still, she consoled herself, it was better than Piano — and, like Piano, there was the promise of a Blue Gularis at the end of it all.

Mr. Bodega said he was impressed with her progress. The summer had ended; September had passed... Sarah, impatient, asked whether she could begin the Final Exercise now.

Mr. Bodega shook his head. "Almost ready, almost." He withdrew a blue apothecary bottle from his vest pocket, an old medicinal decanter with a prominent pontil mark; Em-meline, Sarah thought idly, would kill for one of those. She was surprised that Mr. Bodega had never yet opened his brown valise, carrying all his sup-

plies in the cavernous lining of his topcoat instead. "Powdered amaranth," he explained.

Her eyes widened. "That means—"

"You still need practice. Better not to begin with a difficult target. Something simpler first."

"Like what?" she asked, meaning: *who?*

"For instance, your father."

"Daddy" She was stricken with doubt.

"Come, come," Mr. Bodega said, stamping his foot. "This is not Piano we're practicing here! This is Black Magic! Do you want your Blue Gularis or don't you?"

"I suppose. . . ."

"Then do as I say." His eyes glittered coldly.

But she could not; not that first night. After the old man took his brown valise and left the house, the task he had assigned her began to seem less like Black Magic and more like Homicide. Besides, what if something went wrong? She was an amateur, after all. Failure would be disastrous. The whole household "would know; the Lessons would stop; no Gularis.

She went to bed, frightened, and stayed there.

She might not have attempted it at all if Daddy had not announced over dinner the next day that he would set out on a Foray the following morning. The rain had been prodigious, he said, and there were bound to be Puff-

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balls and Shaggy manes in the woods.

"I won't cook the filthy things," Mrs. Chesley announced.

But it didn't matter to Daddy. The Foray was the thing. He would have to get up early; he wanted to catch the *Coprinae* before they began to deliquesce. Sound sleep necessary to that end tonight, he said brusquely — and a drop of brandy wouldn't hurt.

She recognized her opportunity and grasped it. Daddy went to bed first, of course, bottle in hand. Then Aunt Emmeline. Then Sarah herself went through the motions, feigning sleep until she was certain her mother had retired. Mr. and Mrs. Chesley slept in separate rooms, a custom Sarah understood intuitively and was grateful for.

She crept into her father's room. He had fallen asleep in his clothes. The bottle reclined on the night table. A bound volume of *Mycologia* lay open on his chest. He was snoring, his small rib cage rising and falling.

Now, Sarah thought.

She sprinkled the foul-smelling powders and pronounced the Forbidden Words.

A shudder ran through her father's body.

Terrified, she ran from the room, through the darkened hallway, and back to her own bed, in which she fell promptly asleep.

The morning was difficult. No one remarked on her father's absence. They assumed he had left on

his Foray. Sarah sat restlessly through breakfast, fighting her own impatience. She chewed her food thoughtlessly; it might have been sawdust. Her mother chose to prolong the ordeal with a supererogatory glass of orange juice. "You need the vitamins, Missy."

She drank it as quickly as decorum allowed. "May I be excused?"

"I suppose so."

She ran into the Fish Room.

She was afraid at first that it wouldn't be there, Mr. Bodega had been lying, Daddy really *was* off on a Foray. But no — see! Swimming out from behind the Wild Anacharis!

Anoptichthys jordani: the Blind Cave Fish of Cueva Chica, bred without light for so many generations that its eye sockets were perfectly empty and overgrown with skin.

Pale, delicate, eyeless, it reminded Sarah of a sort of fishy mushroom.

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'oth Mrs. Chesley and Aunt Emmeline grew nervous when Daddy failed to return from the woods, though they did nothing so rash as telephoning the police; that was not the family way. He would return, or he would not. As time passed, it appeared increasingly likely that he would not.

Sarah herself found it difficult to suppress her elation at the acquisition of the Blind Cave Fish. She found her mother looking at her strangely, spec-

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ulatively — she guessed this was not how a little girl was supposed to respond to the loss of a parent — but she couldn't help it. She would have been sad, of course, if Daddy had *died*, but in fact he was perfectly safe — to Sarah's mind, much improved. The new specimen was breathtakingly beautiful.

Her mother frightened her by suggesting that perhaps the Piano Lessons weren't such a good idea, after all. "After all, Sarah dear, you've been at it for four months now, and all you can play is Scales — and that not very well."

"No!" Sarah protested. "Scales are the Foundation of Music!"

"It's all very well to have a foundation; presumably, however, one should eventually build on it."

"Mr. Bodega says I'm coming along *very* well."

"Hmm," her mother said. "Hmm, hmm."

It was a setback. They were forced to spend the next several weeks devising a highly toxic version of "Glow, Little Glow Worm" with which to drive Mrs. Chesley from the parlor. It made Sarah all the more impatient to get on with Black Magic.

Aunt Emmeline was next.

Sarah pouted. "I want the Gularis, the Gularis! Besides, I *like* Aunt Emmeline."

"Practice," Mr. Bodega chided. He sat on the piano bench with his valise crouched beside him like an enor-

mous and somnolent pet. Sarah had become increasingly curious about the valise; it seemed to her, in quiet moments, that she could hear a sort of tortured movement inside it, and a faint high-pitched sound of sighing or whispering. But Mr. Bodega would not discuss the valise, which he referred to, primly, as his "Collection."

"Anyway," Sarah said, "Aunt Em-meline's at *least* as difficult. It's not like Daddy, you know. I've seen Aunt Emmeline sleep. It's an old lady's sleep; she wakes up if you breathe hard."

"Then let her be awake!" Mr. Bodega handed her an additional phial of powders. "Use your ingenuity. Nobody promised it would be easy, Sarah."

The phial itself was the salvation —that, and all the other bottles and jars the old man had given her. For months Sarah had been hiding these in a bottom dresser drawer, under a deposit of frocks too small to wear but too expensive to throw away. She had been afraid that Emmeline, habituated to the pursuit of glassware, would sniff them out somehow. Now she divined their special utility.

She waited until her mother was out shopping. The house at such times took on a pervasive stillness, Emmeline being too old, too thin, too self-absorbed to raise much commotion. Sarah found her in the Bottle Room, admiring an array of sky-blue Medic-inals.

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"Emmeline?" Sarah stood in the doorway with her hands behind her back.

Her aunt looked up briefly, preoccupied. "Sarah, how nice. Have you come to look at the Roman Bottle again?"

Sarah ignored her. From behind her back she drew forth the first of the phials Mr. Bodega had given her: it was small, cerulean, mysterious.

Emmeline sucked in her breath. Her eyes widened. "Where — where did you get that!"

"Around," Sarah said airily.

"Let me have it! Let me, let me—" Her dry eager hands flew out.

Sarah shrugged and passed over the bottle.

"A Medicinal! And so old. It's free-blown, Sarah! And sheared! It must be, oh, very ancient!" She ran her finger around the lip of the bottle. She uncorked it. She sniffed the stale air inside. Sarah had poured off most of the contents earlier, into a jelly jar

— all but a few measured grains, which flew unnoticed into her aunt's dilated nostrils.

"There's more," Sarah said, passing over the others — the miniature Decanters and Dunmores and Demijohns

— one at a time. Aunt Emmeline performed the same greedy ritual with each.

"More," she said, intoxicated now, "there *must* be more," but Sarah had run out of bottles; so she said the Forbidden Words instead.

She was grateful her mother was absent. Aunt Emmeline's arms flew out cruciform, sending the sideboard full of Insulators crashing to the floor. She stumbled backward on a flurry of Collaterals. Seven rare Figurals shattered at her

feet.

In all this, what interested Sarah most was Emmeline's face: how the eyes widened and separated and became grotesquely round; how the mouth, now suddenly lipless, expanded and thrust forward in an obscene parody of a grin. Her arms, too: how they shrank, fusing, and flapped uselessly at her sides. Sarah fled when Aunt Emmeline began to make dry, gasping noises.

She was downstairs in time to see the fish appear in her tank. It was a *Chandra ranga*, called Glassfish on account of its eerily transparent flesh, and Sarah was very pleased.

Mrs. Chesley grew increasingly nervous after the disappearance of Aunt Emmeline, and since they were alone in the household, there was no one for her to focus her anxiety upon save her daughter. It was only with the greatest difficulty that Sarah persuaded her mother to pay for the second aquarium, as promised.

"You *did* promise, Momma. You said if I took Lessons—"

"Tes, yes. Very well. Have the nasty device, then."

It was was a fine, bright, glass-walled tank. Its aerators gleamed and

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bubbled in a confidence-inspiring fashion. Sarah lined the bottom with white gravel and planted it artfully with Water Wisteria and Parrot's Feather. The finished effect was quite lovely.

"There are no fish," her mother observed.

"I'm saving the tank for a very *special* fish," Sarah said. In her other, older, tank, the Cave Fish of Cueva Chica cruised sightlessly and the Glass-fish hid behind the plants. Her mother's scrutiny intensified. She insisted on sitting through three consecutive Lessons, her eyes sometimes on Sarah but more often and more intently on Mr. Bodega and his huge brown valise. If this kept up, Sarah thought with desperation, she might actually be forced to learn the piano.

But Mrs. Chesley was called away one Tuesday evening early in winter to see the Executor of the Estate, and Mr. Bodega got down to business.

"You've done very well so far." He studied her intently. "You've been a good pupil, Sarah. One of the best. Time now for the graduation exercise." He withdrew from his cavernous black topcoat the final bottle, the last barrier between herself and the Blue Gularis.

But he pulled it back. "This is not to be undertaken lightly! You've been lucky; you are not infallible. Your mother is a formidable target. One slip, and the game is lost. Do you understand?"

"Yes!"

He smiled. "Then bide your time." He handed her the bottle. "Caution—and when you stride, speed."

But as it turned out, there was no time for caution and no opportunity for speed.

Her mother arrived home hours after Mr. Bodega had taken up his valise and lurched away. She slammed the front door. Sarah, who had been half-dozing at the kitchen table, sat upright. Door slamming! She was scandalized, astonished. This was not a household in which doors were slammed.

Her mother's feet thundered up the stairs, and then—worse!—there was the unprecedented sound of shattering glass and splintering wood. Trembling, Sarah ran up after.

The noise was coming from the Mushroom Room.

Her mother, red-cheeked and hissing, wielded a tatty broom handle as if it were a war ax. Sarah gazed in mute dismay at the bookshelves, which lay in ruins. Tattered pages sifted down like snow or ash. A display case shattered, lofting up a choking miasma of powdered spores.

"Momma!"

Mrs. Chesley continued about her violent work. "Don't speak to me, Missy! You're one of *them*, oh yes! Born a Chesley with their damn lazy ways—!"

Slash.

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Sarah recalled that her mother had gone to see the Executor.

"Momma, what happened?"

"—a slight *irregularity*,' he says; 'we regret to *inform* you,' he says! Hah! Frittered away the entire fortune, your father did — *and* his luckless sister — and now I can't even get what's left because he's gone and wandered off somewhere!"

"Momma, his Mushrooms!"

"I'm doing nothing more than I should have done long ago, Sarah dear!" *Slash*, dried specimens tumbled across the carpet, disintegrating. Sarah, wide-eyed, stifled a sneeze. "Spending what was by rights *my* money on these shiftless hobbies! That goes for Emmeline's Bottles, as well — and your Fish, Missy; oh, yes, don't think I've left *you* out!"

The Fish! Sarah was panic-stricken. She imagined her mother, plainly crazed, shattering the aquariums with that ugly broomstick. Oh, the Angel-fish, the Tiger Barbs, the Banded Le-poriums! Not to mention her newer and even more precious specimens!

Gasping, she ran back to her room. She gathered all the specifics Mr. Bodega had left her and measured them out with shaking hands. The torrent of destruction continued unabated down the hall. She uncorked, at last, the final bottle. Its contents were bitter, astringent; their pungency filled the room.

She picked up the potion in its bowl and ran into the hallway.

Her mother had finished with the Mushroom Room and was striding toward the Bottle Room.

The situation demanded precisely what Sarah had hoped at all costs to avoid: a frontal attack.

Mrs. Chesley threw open the door of the Bottle Room. Sarah had cleaned up after Aunt Emmeline's unfortunate convulsions; the thinning was not appreciable. Mrs. Chesley's eyes gleamed as she raised the broomstick: clearly, this was an ambition long postponed.

Sarah flung a sticky handful of the Potion onto her mother's broad back, where it infiltrated her imported silk blouse.

Mrs. Chesley whirled, enraged.

Sarah stiffened. She closed her eyes tightly and began to pronounce the Forbidden Words.

A thick hand clasped itself over her mouth.

"Blasphemy!" Mrs. Chesley cried. "I won't hear blasphemy from you, my girl!"

Sarah mumbled against the pressure of her mother's huge palm, but it was no good: the Words must be coherently Pronounced. She felt herself dragged backward, down the hallway, toward the stairs; heard her mother unlatch the door of the linen closet.

"In you go, Missy! When you're ready to apologize, knock — but not before! — and maybe I'll *think* about letting you out."

She was thrust into the damp-

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smelling closet The door thudded shut behind her

It was one of Sarah's secret phobias the fear of being confined in a dark space

She began to pronounce the Words again — then thought better of it, clamping her own hand over her mouth Did she want to be locked in here *forever* ?

"Momma, I'm sorry' I won't do it again, *I'm sorry*—"

Too late There was the sound of breaking glass from the Bottle Room Chestnut Flasks, brittle blue Carboys, Commemorative Piece Molds, ice-thin Hogarths — oh, it took quite a while

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Irs Chesley hesitated on her way from the Bottle Room to the stairs The broomstick in her hand was nicked and chipped Shards of glass had opened small cuts in her forearms, Mrs Chesley in her rage had not yet noticed

Almost done But she was tired now

She heard a faint knocking from the linen closet door

Sarah' She had almost forgotten about Sarah

"Momma" The voice sounded faint, chastened

"Is that you, Missy?"

"I'm sorry for what I did "

"That's easy to *say*, dear

"It's true' I am, really"

Mrs Chesley sighed

"No more blasphemy?"

"No"

"No more tricks?"

"I promise"

Her hand hovered at the latch

"It makes no difference about the Fish, you know' They're still going' No more Chesley madness for you"

"I know Kill kill the fish if you have to I don't care "

She sounded so meek

Mrs Chesley turned the key in the closet door

The Forbidden Words came spilling out

Sarah was immensely happy — at first — with her new Blue Gulans

Tiger striped, shovel-mouthed, a vigorous swimmer, it was also abnormally large for its species It seemed crowded even alone in the larger aquarium, turning itself in nervous figure eights Its diaphanous fins twitched among the Water Wisteria Big, beautiful and carnivorous What was she going to feed it?

She was weeping when Mr Bodega arrived the next Saturday morning He settled his enormous vase carefully in the foyer and looked at Sarah sternly

"There now You're an attractive girl, Sarah, don't make yourself ugly with tears Tell me what happened '

Sarah explained about the fight with her mother, the Forbidden Words "But then I said them, and she, she—"

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"So you have your Blue Gularis. And we're alone now? Quite alone?"

"Alone, yes. That's the problem! I didn't know how to get any — and when I was asleep *it jumped, it jumped*, Mr. Bodega, into the next tank — and they're gone now, all gone, the An-gelfish, the Tiger Barbs, the Banded Leporinus! *And* the Blind Cave Fish of Cueva Chica, *and* the Glassfish!"

"Tragic, of course," said Mr. Bodega — peering now over his left shoulder, now over his right — "but what do you expect me to do about it?"

"I thought — perhaps — if you

had some sort of Black Magic. ..."

"Oh, but I do. I do have some sort of Black Magic."

He reached for his valise.

"The Collection!" Sarah cried, brightening; then: "Do I get to see it now?"

"Yes, now," said Mr. Bodega. The latches clicked, the valise fell open. Sarah was astonished, then dismayed, at what she saw: strapped against the side, meticulously arranged — shrunken, but immaculate, and dressed in identical yellow doll dresses — a perfect bevy of Little Girls.

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