

The Messenger

Volume 1987
Issue 1 *Messenger*, 1987

Article 4

1987

In A Doll's House

Janine Hummel

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/messenger>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hummel, Janine (1987) "In A Doll's House," *The Messenger*: Vol. 1987 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/messenger/vol1987/iss1/4>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Messenger by an authorized editor of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

In A Doll's House

Before I went to sleep last night, I took a Thinz tablet. It's some sort of grapefruit and fiber pill that expands to the size of a football in my stomach so I'm not hungry anymore, while it magically burns off my fat cells. Oh sure, I felt them disappearing, yes, just shrinking by the minute. I chided myself on believing all of the commercials on TV. I believe anything, and that's why last week at the senior awards dinner, I got the award for being Most Gullible.

I was sitting there with my preppy-turned-hardcore boyfriend Tommy, talking about the new "Black Flag" album, and our cute but incredibly vapid class president started announcing the awards. We managed to block her out pretty well, and Tommy was saying something about "really thrashing guitar, really..." when our president giggled and announced, "The award for most gullible goes to..." another giggle, "believe it or not, Andi Worth!!" Tommy grimaced and ran one hand through his spiked hair while the other grabbed at mine to escort me up to the stage.

He muttered, "Dammit Andi, why are you so gullible anyway? This is totally humiliating." I stared at him coldly and said, "think how I feel!!" and dropped his hand as I ran up the steps to accept the award. I grabbed the microphone from her pinktipped fingers and mumbled, "I guess I really do deserve this, because I always believe everything, from the stories my mother told me at bedtime when I was little to my father's stories about how the admissions office at UNC is anxiously waiting for my acceptance letter..." and somehow managed to get both the audience and Tommy laughing.

There was a lot of truth in that little speech, and Tommy knew it. When I was 14, I would call him in a panic from wherever I was babysitting, frightened out of my skull by the rumors that flew around our little suburban town about the witches who lived out by Donner's Lake. A few years ago, an eight-year-old boy was found dead near the Donner's majestic but rapidly fading house. But he wasn't just *dead*, he was half decomposed, with his heart cut out by some jagged-edged object. Within weeks, rumor had it that the Donner house was a meeting place for a witch coven, and they made their sacrifices and worshipped the devil within the gorgeous, Early American labyrinth of rooms in the house.

I believed every word, and even researched witches at the town library one Saturday while Tommy was working. He knows I believed the rumors, but he still doesn't know I did the reading, because if I told him, I know I'd never live it down. I read about the existence of witches in modern times and also looked through a history of our town. I flipped through the pages, and discovered that ancestors of the Donner's were in Salem around the time of the witch burnings, and that was enough to make my blood run cold. I never told my family or Tommy, because I couldn't handle the teasing.

My goal right now is to go to college at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Unfortunately, I'm so deeply into my senior slump that I don't think I can pull myself out, and I'll be shocked if admissions can even look at my second semester grades without laughing and taking me permanently off their waiting list. I would give away my most prized possession—my miniature bookcase with the false back, copied after one built during the Spanish Inquisition—to get into that school.

I'm 18, but I still collect miniatures. Sometimes I think I'm insane because nothing pleases me more than having that incredibly ornate, detailed doll house sprawl against the back wall of my room. Grandmother left me the doll house when she died. She was as rich and as eccentric as they come, and she had a carpenter build her a scaled copy of a mansion she had lived in when she was young. She spent the last three decades of her life furnishing the doll house with exact reproductions of her favorite pieces from her childhood home.

But there is one thing about it that I don't like, and Tommy says I'm weird for thinking this, so I never told anyone else. I hate the dolls who have lived there since my grandmother had it built. She bought them at some friend's estate auction in Massachusetts. Their faces are porcelain but their bodies are made of hard rubber. Their arms and legs fold at weird angles so the dolls look like demented, deformed versions of real people. They have cold, flat black eyes painted on by some strange artist who obviously never studied the human face, and their lips are ruby red and look like they're smeared with blood. I hate them, and when I'm alone in my room, I feel paranoid for some reason unless the hinged back of my doll house is locked. Otherwise, I feel like I'm being openly watched by a dozen vicious eyes.

I met Jack Donner today. We were both shopping at the grocery store, and as I felt a cantaloupe for soft spots I thought

I recognized the man grabbing a kiwi fruit next to me. I had seen his picture in the newspaper around the time of the killing by the lake, and when he looked up into my eyes, I gasped. He didn't seem to notice, flashed me a slightly charming smile and asked, "How do you tell when these things are ripe?" I stepped back, and he stared at the fuzzy fruit in his hand as if he were an ignorant child.

"What did you say?"

"I was just asking how to tell if the kiwi is ripe," he answered calmly.

"Oh. Uh, I think it has to give in to your hand a little, you know, it can't be too firm."

"Ah hah. Well, you certainly do know your fruits," he said, and I realizing his eyes were on my chest, I quickly turned away. I felt his eyes violating and exploring my body as I pushed the cart down the aisle. Wondering why I had agreed to shop for my mother at all, I heard him clear his throat and call "Miss?"

My head snapped around involuntarily at the sound of his voice. My hands shook and my nerves felt raw. He walked to the end of my cart and draped his long body over it. "Yes?" I asked.

"Are you like that kiwi fruit?"

My stomach knotted and I felt ridiculously panicked, like I might wet my pants. "Excuse me?"

"Are you like the kiwi fruit? Would you be able to give in to my hands a little?" he asked, leering over the groceries.

I pushed the cart forward and he lurched back, grabbing at the metal fruit stand. I rushed past him, staring into the basket to avoid his eye, and I heard him laugh softly and say, "I'll bet you would, baby. I'll bet you would."

It's Saturday night and I pop another Thinz tablet and laugh at my psychological addiction, "Baby, you're so thin!" I say out loud and giggle. I think of Jack today at the store and stop.

Tommy and I are going to a Lords of the New Church concert and I'm getting dressed in basic black. The stereo is blasting to get me in the right frame of mind for the violent music at the concert. I think the music is more than a little nasty and I always need to psyche myself up for the slamming bodies and incredible amount of black clothing and spiked hair. As I rub more gel into my rock-hard hair, I hum "What I did for love" and laugh again.

"What's so funny?" Tommy asks from the doorway. I turn around smiling as I take in his outfit. It's completely black right down to his chunky boots.

"I'm not quite sure if you're into hardcore or you just hopped off a Harley."

He grins and kisses my cheek. "No offense, but you look like Grace Jones. I'll grab some beer from the fridge and be right back up. Be ready."

I salute him and say, "Yes sir!! Anything you say, you male-chauvinist pig!" I grab the big cross that hangs from his neck and playfully kiss him. "Who are you trying to be, Madonna?" He laughs and runs downstairs to get the beer.

I snap off the stereo and lean over to grab my shoes from under the bed as something flashes in the doll house, like a blinding fluorescent light reflecting off a mirror. I feel like someone has knocked the wind out of me. "Tommy, you there?" I call glancing toward the door and then again at the open back of the house.

I slowly walk toward it as my legs tremble despite the warmth of the carpet under my bare feet. I am closer now, and can see into the brick-floored kitchen. I remember laying the bricks down with my grandmother years ago. The mother-doll leans against the fully-set oak table.

Breathing in rapid shallow gasps, I step closer. My shaking hand touches the back of the doll house to lock it closed when I feel cold brick under my feet and I find myself looking into the eyes of the mother-doll. This is insane, but there is no mistake. I am in the doll house kitchen, and as the mother-doll blinks her cold eyes and parts her ruby lips in a grin, I scream.

Tommy looms in the doorway to my room. I see him from the tiny kitchen, and run to the edge of the bricks, frantically yelling his name. The mother-doll laughs harshly as she grabs the back of my shirt and pulls me to the floor. I am sternly told to shut up.

"You finally shrunk," she rasps as her rubbery body stands over me. "We've been waiting, but I think the problem was the shell on the pills. It should work better next time."

The wind is knocked out of me, and I stare up at her black skirt and painted face with its red circles quietly for a moment. "Pills?" I ask.

"Those diet pills. Evelyn put the concoction in there, but we got worried when it didn't work right away. Imagine," she cackles before my disbelieving eyes, "if the formula worked the opposite way and you got bigger from eating diet pills! Now, *that* would be horrible."

She lifts a carving knife off the table and tells me to come with her. I stare from the knife to Tommy, who still stands in the door booming "Andi, where the hell are you?" He steps into the hall to check the bathroom.

She glances at me, picks up two tea cups from the sideboard and pats the chair next to her. "Sit and drink some tea while I explain the little bit you need to know," she says, and I do as she says, not doubting that she would use the knife in an instant.

"I'm Thelma Donner inside this doll body. Evelyn Donner, my sister, killed a boy years ago for a sacrifice. The rumors were true, Andi, and you were one of the few who believed them."

She sips her tea and motions for me to do the same. As the hot, bitter liquid slides down my throat, I try to understand her story.

"Our home is a gathering place for other witches as well as for our family. We need sacrifices, but we can't risk having anyone connect any deaths to our lovely family again. So here we are, with you, and we'll kill you here where no one will find any evidence. Once we bring you beyond the walls of the doll house, we'll return to normal size and we'll have a life-size sacrifice to take with us."

She sputters a laugh and I turn to see what she is gazing at. Tommy's boot is inches away from me as he stands in my bedroom. "Andi, this isn't funny, where the hell are you?" he yells. The walls shake as he slams the back of the doll house shut, and my hope fades with the dimmed light. He storms out of the room, yelling for my mother.

I start to sob, and the mother-doll slaps me across the face.

I feel faint and my body floods with dread. She continues to smile at me as I swoon. The tea, there must've been something in the tea. Whispering, "Oh Christ, where are you Tommy?" I fall to the floor, and barely feel the boy-doll touching me as he lifts me to take me up the spiral staircase to the pink bedroom.

I wake up and feel the hard pillows under my head and notice the lumpiness of the mattresses. It doesn't feel like my mattress at all, and the canopy isn't the same color as mine. I look around me in horror at the rose-covered walls of the master bedroom in the doll's house, and everything begins to come back to me. It is a pleasant room except for the faint glow from the boy-doll's face, staring at me from the rocking chair by the window.

He hears me rustling about and smiles at me. "Sorry baby, it's not a dream."

My mouth feels incredibly dry. "Nightmare," I correct him.

He comes over to me and places a hand on my hair, smoothing it back from my face. "Such a pretty girl," he croons.

I cringe, never losing sight of his black eyes. "You're a doll, just a fake thing, not real at all!" I spit at him, and the spit hits him between the eyes.

He jerks back. "Filthy little brat," he breathes angrily wiping the spit from his face. "I'm not a doll, I'm Jack Donner, and I'll get you back for that before you die, you bitch."

He lurches back awkwardly and tries to jump onto the bed, but his rubber limbs fail him. I ball up into the corner, scanning the room for a weapon. Nothing! He tries again, and makes it to the bed. The black of his eyes is beginning to glow with a sick, victorious heat that makes me shudder uncontrollably.

"Get away from me, you creep," I hiss as the mother-doll lurches into the room.

"Jack, I don't know what you're doing, but get Andi downstairs right now and get her ready for the ceremony." He nods and she closes the door on us.

"I'll get you down, that's for sure," he threatens, and I push my body farther into the corner of the hard bed. His rubbery body flops toward me, and his hands grope around the pillows until they hit against me. He grabs my shirt and pulls me to the center of the bed while I fight with what strength I have left. The strange tea is still in my system, but I manage to smack his porcelain head once, dazing him long enough to jump from the bed. Jack's rubber hand shoots out like a piston, locks around my hair and yanks me back.

I am weak, and I feel myself fading out as he climbs on top of me and rips open my blouse. His hard, unwieldy hands beat my breasts, and I feel nauseated. His porcelain face hits into mine, his eyes so close that they become one black circle in the center of his face. I grab blindly and find the silver hairbrush on the nightstand. Pushing him up as far as I can, I slam it into his face. The red cheeks crack to reveal the face of Jack Donner, split down the center, and running with blood. It oozes into my eyes and burns them, and in a frenzy of horror I push his dead weight off me and roll to the soft pink carpet below.

Shaking, I stand and try to picture the layout of the doll house. The master bedroom opens into the hall, and I will have to run past the bathroom and across the top of the staircase landing to get into the library.

I see the scarlet stain on the bedspread and push my fist into my mouth, stifling a scream. No sounds from downstairs. I wonder where Thelma is; then I open the bedroom door and see

the grandmother-doll across the hallway in the other bedroom.

She glances up and her black circles take me in slowly. I bolt toward the library and the safety of the false-backed bookcase.

Once inside the room, I run to the bookcase and fumble for the latch that reveals the false back. It won't budge, and I hear the grandmother-doll screaming for Thelma, and then their rubbery feet begin to pound clumsily down the hallway.

The brass latch finally gives way and the front swings out. I step inside and then have to step out again to pull the door closed. My fingers are bleeding with splinters, and I can't stop crying. It clicks shut as Thelma and the grandmother-doll, who I suddenly realize must be Evelyn Donner, burst through the door.

They tear the room apart, and I watch them through a hole in the case as I feel my lungs about to explode from lack of air. I begin to breathe with exhausted relief in the stifling back of the bookcase as they finally give up and leave the room.

There is no time to take the staircase. I try to step out of the bookcase but the latch is jammed. Sweat runs down my face and back, but it finally it gives, and I stumble out in a heap of tears of relief. I hear nothing when I listen at the door for voices, so I cautiously open the door and creep into the hallway. The window at the hall's end slides up easily, and my last thought before I throw my body out the second-story window is that the shag rug had better be thick and soft.

I land hard on the rug with no memory at all. I am once again five-foot-five and don't know why I am lying next to my doll house with a ripped shirt and bruised face. Where has Tommy gone? I try standing, but my legs won't stay straight, and they fold, bringing me clumsily to the floor. As I hit ground again, I am strangely unnerved as I glance into the doll house living room.

I yelp with fear as Tommy says from behind me, "Andi, get up off the floor. Where have you been?" His hand reaches out to help me up, and I stand, blinking in confusion. "I don't know. What happened to me?"

He touches my shirt lightly and stares. "I couldn't find you... I thought you might be mad. I sat with your mom and talked. Where were you?"

"I really don't know."

Tommy shakes his head and turns, saying something about my needing water. Panicking, I clench his shirt tightly. "Wait. Let me come with you." His eyebrows knit together, but he finds

a sweatshirt on my bed, and gently lifts my arms to slide it on me.

"Thanks. And lock up the doll house for me, would you?" He drops my hand. Looking straight ahead to avoid his eye, I say, "I don't care what you say. Those dolls give me the creeps."

He laughs, turns and flips the locks closed. Let's move the thing downstairs tomorrow. Ok, little witch believer?" I feel funny when he says that, but I nod, and we go get a drink.

I went to the store for mom this morning. Part of me wants to be the model helpful daughter, and the other part wants to buy what I want without her knowing. I bought diet pills again. Mom found my old ones and threw them out, yelling the whole time that they're bad for me. She says she threw them out because she cares about me. How nice.

At the store, this older woman seemed to be wherever I was. You know, I'd look up, and no matter if I was buying cereal or fruit, she was there. And I know it sounds weird, but when I picked up the pills, she looked almost...triumphant. It turned my stomach. Strange people. Tommy should come with me next time. No, if I told him about it, he'd think I'm crazy.

Janine M. Hummel

Winner of the Margaret Owen Finck Prize for Creative Writing