

Dolls in the Desert
by Janet Miller

Arizona, 2001

My aunt, her brown deeply wrinkled skin marking thirty-odd years of southern winter sun, accepts the shoe box and lifts out a swaddled object. Carefully she unwraps the tissue paper.

“Oh, Doreen,” she says, “how lovely.”

Doreen’s husband has snapped opened a lawn chair for her and she sits.

To me, my aunt says, “Doreen brought these over for me to dress. Look how delicate they are. The dolls.”

My aunt places two stiff figurines in my hands. One is a long slender flesh-colored female body and the other only head, arms and torso, also female. Both have dainty faces and elongated necks.

“She makes them herself,” my aunt says, “What a marvel she is. We are so lucky to have Doreen here in our trailer park.”

I hold the rigid little bodies in my cradled hands. The figurines are pale and smooth with gently pointed hairless heads.

“They can be a redhead, a blonde or a brunette,” says my aunt. “The wigs have the loveliest long ringlets.”

Warm air settles around us. A dry, dustiness prevails.

My aunt returns to Canada each spring with four or five new hand-made afghans. She crochets while my uncle drives. When they settle in down south and are not off

golfing, she does crafts, she says, to keep her hands busy.

She has already cast on a variegated pink synthetic yarn and started crocheting a flouncy outfit. “I’m making one of those dresses with a full skirt big enough to hide a whole roll of toilet paper,” she says.

Or a Kleenex box, I think, or aerosol room deodorizers.

“You know, like you see on the backs of toilets. It’s for this one without the legs.” My aunt touches her crochet hook to one of the dolls but I can tell on my own which one does not have legs.

“Doreen even goes on cruises – complimentary ones – and teaches classes all about how to make miniatures.”

“They are only one-and-a-half hour classes,” says Doreen, as she looks down into her drink then brings her beaming smile up at my aunt and me. “It’s not enough time to do much of anything.”

“Oh,” I say, still startled by the frail nakedness of the dolls lying passively in my hands. “They remind me of those women with the long necks in that movie *Mars Attacks*....”

I realize this is not the appreciative comment I might have made. Apparently, not one of the six visitors sitting on lawn chairs under the awning beside Auntie Stella and Uncle Lorne’s 40-foot Park Model trailer has seen the movie.

“Are they plastic or china?” I am afraid to tap at the elegant bodies with my fingernail.

How on earth does she make them? I speculate. A teeny tiny kiln? Or does she

pop a mold into her narrow space-saving trailer-sized oven? A material that self-hardens perhaps.

“Porcelain,” Doreen’s long-legged husband booms in his deep voice. He tips back his glass until the ice cubes bump up against his teeth.

For some reason I visualize the whole of him toppling over backwards and sprawling out on the small patch of manicured green grass between this trailer and the next.

Behind us all, the desert sunset is beginning to color the scant clouds a soft orange shade. The sky above still a pale blue.

“Of course,” I say, wondering – does she supply the whole cruise passenger list with dolls from the waist up or does she just dress one doll in front of a bunch of people in deck chairs?

“What kind of cruises?” I ask.

“The National Association of Miniature Collectors Cruise. We even have some *Canadians* in our association.” Doreen laughs each time she finishes a sentence. “We are going on a 10-day cruise to Hawaii this summer.”

“For free,” says Doreen’s husband. He is now cracking ice cubes with his back molars.

Auntie Stella gently folds the tissue paper back around the dolls and places the shoe box on the steps leading up to their trailer’s sliding glass entry doors.

An evening breeze has picked up.

It seems the moment to ease myself into the conversation in a bigger way. “My husband makes doll house pianos and sells them on the E-bay Auction,” I tell the group –

who watch me attentively, waiting for more.

I decide not to explain but the picture comes to me anyway of my husband Daniel's hillside workshop leaning into its view of inlet and off-shore islands. And his lovely, handcrafted one-of-a-kind wooden pianos, the uprights four inches high, and the grands with strings made of golden thread. They glisten in mahogany and maple and oak. Each piano with golden foot pedals and matching stools.

He made our daughter's Victorian doll house modeled after John Lennon's estate in England and a medieval castle, for our son, with a blacksmith shop and stable. Genuine works of art in the standard doll house scale: one inch equals one foot. One whole room in our basement is taken up by the doll house and castle and the hordes of accompanying bits and pieces.

"He has a website with pictures of his pianos," I add, my words directed at the polite faces that are still turned expectantly towards me.

They collectively take sips of their drinks, smile small smiles as they wait to hear what Doreen will say back to me. Goodness, such an outsider, they are surely thinking.

The husbands and wives, each couple, have sunglasses pushed up to the tops of their heads, are drinking from matching high-ball glasses and sit on identical lawn chairs. When one goes for a late afternoon visit to the neighbors at the Oasis Garden Trailer Park in Yuma, Arizona, it is clear that you and your spouse carry along your own drinks and chairs. You place yourself on the concrete pad outside your host's abode. You don't go inside. Trailer park etiquette is apparently well understood by these winter residents.

"You could tell me how to find his website." Doreen says, laughing. "We have a

computer in our fifth wheel. The 35-footer over there.” She gestures with a manicured index finger somewhere behind her, without turning.

Cautiously, I stand in the doorway her good humor has flung open. “Ah, sure....” I say knowing that she doesn’t really mean it. And besides, I don’t know the website address off by heart and for certain I will not send the address to my aunt after I get home for her to give to Doreen who may not remember me by then.

But again, a visualization comes without my bidding. This time Doreen’s husband – whom I name Frank – and I lounge at the back of a crowded room with port-holes high along one wall. Our drinks slosh with the ship’s roll. Somewhere, out of sight to us, in front of a crowd of well-mannered onlookers, Doreen and my husband, Daniel, divulge their tiny, magnificent secrets to strangers with a hankering for the miniature.

Meanwhile Frank and I, old companions after all these many cruises, race each other to the bottoms of our gin and tonics. The ice clatter against our teeth signals time for the next round.