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*During the horror novel glut of the 1980s, it seemed that every month, a new novel was published featuring a demon doll who bore malice toward all. There is nothing wrong with the premise of the demon doll—many masters in the field have tackled it and managed to make it fresh. Still, I could never help but wonder how all these demon dolls got that way in the first place.*

*“A Doll's Tale” was my first professional short story sale. I was lucky to see it published in the fourth incarnation of *Weird Tales*, in the Winter 1989 issue. It is a privilege to have been published in the same magazine that gave us H. P. Lovecraft, Robert Bloch, Ray Bradbury, and even Tennessee Williams—whose own first short story sale was to *Weird Tales* (“*The Vengeance of Nitocris*,” 1928).*

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## A Doll's Tale

JOHN PEYTON COOKE

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I used to get angry whenever Cindy's mommie came home from the supermarket with yet another “demon doll” horror novel. But that was a long time ago, when I was newer, when my dress was clean and Cindy kept my hair brushed, when she spent more time playing with me than with any of the others.

It all started about a year ago, one day when Cindy was sitting on the couch in the family room, burping me over her shoulder. I was looking out the picture window, waiting for her to finish.

Cindy patted me on the back and pretended I was through burping. “There, there,” she said, in that high-pitched, squeaky voice of hers. “That's a good baby. Does Huggums feel better?”

She pulled my string. “Mommie,” I said flatly as my string retracted. But even at that time I already knew she wasn't really my mommie; I had read the brand on the bottom of my foot: MADE IN TAIWAN. I was nobody's fool.

“Whad'ja get, Mommie,” asked Cindy. She dropped me on the table and I lay there on my back, no longer able to see because my eyes had closed.

“I didn't get any candy, if that's what you're looking for.”

Apparently because there was no candy to be eaten, Cindy picked me back up and held me upright under her arm. My eyelids popped open, and since Cindy was standing on a chair, I could see the whole table and kitchen before me. Cindy's big brother Rob was there, and I felt embarrassed because my dress had slid up over my waist. I caught him staring at me lasciviously in his Ozzy Osbourne T-shirt, and quickly averted my gaze.

But what I saw next was even worse. There, among the groceries strewn about the table, was a new horror novel. In red, bleeding, raised lettering, the title was *Die, Dolly, Die!* The cover was black, with a painting of a doll's baby face with green, glowing eyes and fangs protruding over its chubby little lips. I stared at the book in shock, my eyes stuck open.

As the groceries got shuffled around, the book fell on its face. Although I tried to resist, I couldn't help myself, and I read the copy on the back cover:

*In the terrifying tradition of The Playpen comes a novel of unstoppable, heart-wrenching horror: Die, Dolly, Die!*

*Todd and Samantha Morgan had the perfect family and a beautiful house in the quiet town of Badger Prairie. Their pride and joy was their youngest daughter, Tammy, who was "gifted," bright, intelligent, and pretty. The Morgans had not a single worry in the world. . . .*

*Until they bought Tammy an antique porcelain doll named Lucy. Tammy said that Lucy "told" her things in the night . . . that she "made" her do things. And when the Morgans' neighbors started to die, and the school children who teased and taunted Tammy started to die, they realized they were next. . . .*

*Because Lucy was short for Lucifer, and there was no way to stop her. . . .*

Die, Dolly, Die!

I was mortified! How could anyone write something so horrible about a harmless doll? And how could people like Cindy's mommie pay *money* for it and *read* it?

But I didn't let it get to me. I figured I could forgive Cindy's

mommie this once. As far as I could tell, she harbored no particular hatred toward dolls, so I assumed her interest in the book fell into the category of “guilty pleasures.”

But in the months that ensued, I managed to catch glimpses of other books she had bought: *Witch Doll*, *Baby Satan*, and *The Dolly Upstairs*, to name a few. I began to wonder if there were more to this than met the eye.

During this time, I was treated well. Cindy burped me, fed me, changed me, and dressed me up nearly every day. Often she would invite me to tea parties and jungle safaris with the stuffed animals, and I always got to sleep with her at night, too. Life was easy.

That is, until the beast moved in.

Cindy's parents gave her big brother a dog for Christmas. Not a puppy, but a large, energetic, curious, hungry *dog*. I was in Cindy's closet with the other toys while Christmas was going on in the living room, but I could hear Rob playing with the beast, Cindy's mommie giving him a lecture on its care and feeding, and Cindy saying, “What's his name? What's his name?”

“Ozzy,” said Rob.

A little while later, when the family was eating breakfast, I heard Ozzy making his way down the hall. The door to Cindy's room was open, and he lumbered right in, a fat, full-grown, fluffy collie with a tongue a mile long and razor-sharp teeth. Even if I could have moved of my own volition, I wouldn't have; I was petrified. Ozzy sniffed the red shag carpet of the room and then headed for the trashcan next to Cindy's dresser. He buried his head in the can, and when he pulled it out he had the wrapper to an ice-cream sandwich in his mouth. Within seconds, he chewed it and swallowed it, and licked his jowls. He seemed hungry for more, and continued his search, sniffing every inch of the room.

*Somebody call the doggie, please*, I thought.

I could hear, from the dining room, dishes clinking and kids talking with food in their mouths—breakfast was far from over. Nor was it over for Ozzy. Shortly, his long nose appeared in the closet, then his whole hairy head and ruff. He cocked his head and stared at me with his dark, water eyes, perhaps sensing my complete state of panic.

He bent down his head and clamped his jaws on my delicate, pink plastic body, and strutted out of the closet. He shook me violently—as if I were some dirty dust rag he could just throw around. With each swift shake, my eyes opened and closed rapidly. I became dizzy and disoriented. The next thing I knew, Ozzy was prancing down the hall with me in his mouth, slobbering and panting as he approached the breakfast table.

“Oh!” Cindy’s mommie gasped. Then she laughed, and quickly tried to suppress it, probably for Cindy’s sake, not mine. *I knew it*, I thought, *she’s a doll-hater*.

But Rob and Cindy’s daddie didn’t care what anyone thought. They laughed away, unashamed. “Get her, Ozzy!” Rob yelled excitedly. “Hey, Mom, can Huggums be his new toy?”

“No!” Cindy screamed. “No, Mommie, no!” Nestled in her lap was one of those soft, cute, fat, expensive dolls with puckered faces.

“But you don’t need Huggums anymore,” Rob said. “You just got that nice new doll, and Ozzy doesn’t have anything to play with. Or maybe you want to keep Huggums and let Ozzy have your new one, huh?”

“No!” she screamed again, much louder, and began to cry. “Mommie, tell him Ozzy can’t have Huggums *or* Krystle!”

Cindy was hanging tightly onto Krystle, acting as if the world were coming to an end.

“I don’t see anything wrong with Rob’s idea,” said Cindy’s daddie. He wanted to see me torn to shreds!

But Cindy’s mommie demurred. “No, absolutely not. I simply will not have it. Huggums and Krystle both stay with Cindy, and that’s final.”

“Hooray!” Cindy cheered, and kissed Krystle’s nose.

Ozzy’s teeth, meanwhile, were sunk deep in my plastic flesh. I was so frightened I wet my panties.

Rob got up and said, “Here, Ozzy, give it up.” Then he grabbed me by the legs and ripped me from the dog’s mouth. Cindy shrieked. The beast still had my right arm, which he promptly chewed and gulped down before anyone could take it from him.

But that was just the beginning.

On New Year's Eve, Cindy's parents spent the night out of town at a friend's party, leaving Rob in charge of taking care of both the house and his sister. He took care of Cindy by locking her in her room and invited his friends over for a party. All the kids at the party got excessively drunk and stoned, and the police came twice to tell them they were being too loud. Somehow, Rob managed to clean up the house before his parents returned.

But Cindy threatened to tell.

To keep her quiet, Rob took me from her closet and forced her to watch as he threw me in the clothes dryer and turned it on. He left the door open and kept the machine running by holding the door sensor button with his finger. I was hurled to and fro, tumbling head over heels, my head pounding against the metal walls of the revolving barrel. All the while Cindy screamed, tears streaming down her face. Rob didn't turn off the dryer until she got down on her knees and promised she would never tell their parents about the party.

But did the child learn from this? Of course not. She kept finding ways to get Rob in trouble, and in turn, he kept torturing me to keep her in line.

When Cindy said she was going to tell their parents about the stack of *Hustler* magazines in his closet, he took a black magic marker and drew a beard on my face and a swastika on the front of my dress. When she was going to tell about the "funny cigarettes" he smoked, he took his lighter and set my hair on fire, partially melting my scalp. When she was going to tell about what he and his girlfriend had been doing one afternoon, he popped out one of my eyeballs with his switchblade and ran over me with his motorcycle.

After that, whenever Cindy pulled my string, something inside of me skipped and I simply said, "Me, me, me, me. . . ."

Cindy didn't love me anymore from that point on. She left me out of all the fun things, keeping me hidden away in the darkest corner of her closet, with the spiders. Krystle, who never spoke to me, was now the center of attention at all the tea parties, and got to lead the jungle safaris. I wasn't even invited to them. In fact, the only reason I was still around had nothing to do with Cindy caring about me; she was just too selfish to let anything go.

Then one day, Cindy and her mommie were cleaning out the closet when her mommie said, "Oh, Cindy! You really ought to let me throw this thing away." She held me up and looked at me with disgust. "You never play with it anymore, and look at the shape it's in! Tire tracks! How on earth did it ever get this way? You had better not treat Krystle like this."

"Oh, I don't, Mommie. Krystle's nice."

"So can I throw it away or not, dear?"

"Sure, Mommie, you can throw Huggums away."

"Good."

*Throw Huggums away? Good?* I couldn't believe my little plastic ears. Cindy was going to let her mommie kick me out of her life, just like that? What was to become of me?

I was thrown into the kitchen trash, where I landed headfirst in a pile of refried beans. A few hours later, Cindy's daddie carried the trash sack out to the front lawn for pick-up. By then I had resigned myself to my fate. I decided that dolls were all destined to come to tragic ends, and enjoyed a little consolation by thinking Krystle would someday be thrown onto a pile of refried beans as well. I waited, hoping the garbage truck would arrive soon, but knowing it would not come until morning.

Sometime later that evening, I heard Rob and Ozzy on the front lawn. "C'mon, Oz, hurry up!" I could hear Ozzy relieving himself on a nearby bush. Then Rob said, "No, Ozzy, you dunderhead. Get out of the trash."

But it was too late. Ozzy plunged his head in the sack and sniffed around. Suddenly, he grabbed me in his jaws and took me out of the garbage. He pranced toward his master across the moonlit lawn, drooling all over me. I was glad to be saved from the trash, but as Ozzy came closer to Rob, I wondered which would be worse—to be at the mercy of a garbage compactor or of this metal-head.

"What've you got there, boy? Well, look at that! What was sweet little Huggums doing in the trash, huh?" He leered down at me from above, the bright orb of the full moon reflecting in his black eyes. Ozzy's breathing was quick, his breath hot; he stood still.

"Hand it over, Oz," Rob said sternly.

Ozzy's jaws clenched down tighter.

"I said, hand it over!"

Rob tried to pull me from the dog's mouth, but Ozzy was too strong for him and darted off, through the open front door of the house. He carried me into Cindy's bedroom and set me down on the chair by her bed. (It made me wonder if dogs can actually *think*, like people and dolls.) Ozzy left and went into the living room to wrestle with Rob.

Cindy was sleeping soundly beneath a quilted bedspread, every now and then letting out a little, dainty snore. Krystle, the bitch, was tucked lovingly under the child's arm.

Ozzy's act had been brave and noble, but how far would it get me? The next day, Cindy's mommie would probably throw me away again, for good. There would be little Ozzy could do against *her*.

I sat there for a long time, just thinking. I wondered what I had done to deserve all the misfortunes I had met with. I had been treated unjustly, even *cruelly* by the whole family, except for Ozzy, who had redeemed himself. But what, being a doll, could *I* do about it? It seemed hopeless, and I became very depressed.

Then the whole house became quiet. I heard the wind picking up outside and the feeble tapping of tiny raindrops against the window-pane. The full moon was lower in the sky than before and now cast a brilliant ray right into my single remaining eye.

It was then I came up with my plan.

I wondered then if I could speak to Cindy without the use of my string, and say what I wanted to say, and get her to do what I wanted her to do.

"Cindy," I said. I repeated it softly, over and over, until she woke. "Cindy."

*Yes, I could do it!*

When she saw who was talking to her, she bolted upright in her bed and clutched her quilt tightly up to her neck, her eyes wide and staring in horror. She gasped, and just barely managed to say, "Huggums?"

"Yes, it's me—Huggums!" I must have looked awful, with refried beans on my bald head, beard, swastika, tire tracks, and an arm and

eyeball missing. But I knew what to say; I had watched TV. “So you thought you’d gotten rid of me, eh?”

She swallowed hard, speechless, terrified.

I tried to make the moonlight reflect in my eye. I wanted to look as menacing as Rob had seemed to me. I had to be convincing, because my life depended on it. It was either them or me.

“Cindy, do you know the big knife your mommie has told you never to touch? Now listen to me very carefully. There’s something I want you to do. . . .”

I proceeded to tell her my plan, in which she would slit the throats of her parents, and chop her brother up into tiny pieces, then go after the neighbors just for the hell of it.

She heard me out, stricken dumb. I think I had her in my power for a few seconds, but then, from under her arm rose Krystle.

Krystle looked at me and said, “Huggums, darling, that is so cliché!”

Krystle told Cindy she was just having a very bad dream, to go back to sleep, and everything would be fine when she woke up the next morning; Huggums would be gone.

And that’s how it turned out. Cindy’s mommie discovered me before the child woke and personally delivered me into the hands of the greasy garbage collectors.

It was then I realized those “demon doll” horror novels were entirely works of fiction.

*Krystle, you’ll get yours!*