Learning Barbie

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It’s hard to get over being plastic.

When she was younger she’d thought she hadn’t been designed to do certain things. Like sighing. Her chest didn’t seem to want to move that way. It’s hard to stay convinced of that kind of inevitability. She didn’t believe—couldn’t believe—that it mattered if some things didn’t come naturally, if they didn’t come factory-issue. She’d already learned so much along the way. How to sit, stand, fold her legs, hold her head. How to crawl, and lie still.

She could remember when her legs had been stiff and unyielding, so sitting was awkward and silly-looking. For a while, she thought it had frustrated her the most, having her feet always sticking out in front of her that way, but it was worse for whomever was trying to make her sit. They’d push her this way and that, pressing painfully hard on her shins, thinking somehow they would be the one who could make her bend. It was so much better when her legs became softer and finally bent at the knee. Especially for crawling. Crawling without knees is worse.

Spreading was easier with softer legs, too. They still didn’t spread in some right way, but it was enough to get by.

It had always seemed predetermined that she was made to be pushed at, pressed upon, a temptation to force aimed at her passive rigidity. It was hard not to believe it. There were others that certainly did. He did.

He had no sophistication, no subtlety. They’d all be at some function, like a tea party or something, and without fail he’d finally maneuver around her so he’d have to press past her on his way to the table, and he’d make sure to mash his groin against her hip.

Rugged, but not aged or weathered, he was one of the bendable GI action figures. A real man’s man, full of patriotic reassurance and implied virility.
His name was Bill or Bob or Grange, or something, but she called him Scott.

There was a slight blue tinge to his authentic flesh-tone where some young leader had decided the platoon would need to be camouflaged differently for a mission into the master bathroom. Success depended on their ability to blend into the heaven-blue carpeting and wallpaper.

The story had been told a dozen times: the mission had been a fair success, at least for the troop. They weren't able to smuggle the leader into the room, but the entire platoon had watched most of the elder sister's naked bathroom regimen. The story always stopped there, just before the ignominious part where the older sister had discovered them, and pitched them all from the window into a clump of scratchy shrubbery. The dirt and leaves and bird shit came off fairly easily, but the dip in blue food coloring was harder to undo, so they all had a sickly blue tinge under their khakis.

So, it was a slightly-blue Scott that would huff a clumsy grunt in her ear, whispering all too loudly that he couldn't stop thinking about her. Or how she drove him crazy. Or that he couldn't stop thinking about them together, God, that night—and he'd mash a little harder against her, and try to whisper a meaningful moan that somehow came out a tactless grunt. What disturbed her the most was that he seemed to have such a vivid recollection of their attempted coupling at all.

After all, there really wasn't much anyone could actually do in a Corvette anyway, beyond sitting and driving. See her sit, see her drive, see her hair blowing, see her smile—see her try to sit in Scott's lap. In the summer, though, sometimes she'd be forgotten and left outside in her car, and she'd drive it around and around with the lights off. Even if it rained.

Maybe if she'd been able to move better she could've remembered it better. As it was, when it was over, and she and Scott had been driving back to her place from their tryst under the bed, he'd babbled breathlessly how weak and helpless he was now, from the throes of ecstasy, and God she was so, so, so good. Her face rigid and expressionless, she wanted to cry and scream from the cold panic she felt. She'd been there, panting and huffing, and grinding and exclaiming, and trying to will something to happen, and then mere minutes later she'd driven them both home. She already couldn't remember a thing.
But Scott would grind at her every time he saw her now. She wanted to make him stop. She wanted to say, no, don’t do that, every time he’d mash at her so certain of his attraction. It was hard to say no through that plastic smile—it always still looked like a yes.

One day she’d even gone to her dressing table for the little pin that could hold her pearl choker to her throat through the factory-issue tracheotomy in her neck. She positioned the pin so it would protrude ever so slightly through the thin cotton of her summer shorts. Once she thought she had it perfectly placed, she could’ve almost giggled at the thought of Scott finding a way to mash at her and encountering that pin.

She knew there would be a fake beach party later that day, all laid out on a stale bath towel across the big, rumpled twin bed, and she moved around gathering her beach tote, hat, and her beach floppies that still just looked like high-heeled tramp shoes. No matter how she tried to avoid it, every time she moved, she’d graze her forearm on that damned pin. Swallowing hard, she looked at the series of gouges and scores collecting on the thick, tough skin of her forearm, and finally pulled the offending pin from inside her shorts.

She eventually learned she could keep away from him easier by spending most of her time with the baby dolls, reading the backs of their packages or their authentic birth certificates to them, and then she could borrow some of their diapers to take with her. She tried to visit a bit every day with old Mrs. Beasely, who was usually safely hidden in the back of the closet. Mrs. Beasely had terrors, and a small problem holding her water. She could bring her diapers, but she couldn’t take away the terror of ending up in some hard, cold box used for throwing people away.

She often helped some of the foreign dolls with reading some of their boxes, as well. They were the new, enlightened wave of diversity dolls. They never looked very different from the rest of them, except for the skin. Even that was almost universal, for no matter what part of the world the box said they hailed from, their skin was all the same brown tone.

She didn’t spend much time with them past the occasional reading, though. These new dolls seemed to prefer the larger group of American girls: the cheap, knock-off fashion dolls that barely seem to have been fashioned at all.
They were nameless, nondescript, bordering on plain, and they had almost the right proportions so clothes were virtually interchangeable, but never completely. They were budget stock, quiet, mousy. Most often they were the first to be forgotten about, maimed, dismembered, or lost. Expendable.

Expendability terrified her. It never seemed to change or diminish, even though she had been changing over time, even if in admittedly small ways, or in sometimes agonizingly slow ways. Changes, no less, that made her hurt inside her stiff plastic chest. She could move differently, and more, a little bit at a time. A knee, an elbow, a tip of the head. Not much, just a little. She learned movement.

In some ways, the changes made it all worse, because she adjusted to the changes. She learned. But, learning only made the things that stayed the same more known, more real. Things like expendability. And vulnerability. She learned to worry.

Even if you're changing, you worry. It's hard not to.

It's easy for worry to become fear, and fear to become terror. Having her head come off terrified her. Even though she'd developed more range of movement, becoming more supple, if somebody pushed or pulled or twisted just that little bit too far, farther than they understood or wanted to, well, it would just come off. She could have almost liked that feeling, because if she listened just after the first little pop, there would be a sweet, whispery rush of lightness and relief. She still dreaded it, though: the helplessness, the uselessness, the cold-steel knowledge that her days were numbered in that state.

She knew very well what could happen, and probably would, when a head and body were in that condition. She'd always been lucky and whoever had popped her head off had managed to put it back on almost right away.

Others weren't so lucky. She knew some of them never got lucky. They were doomed to lie in chunks and pieces in any kind of place. Maybe in the grit that gathered on the floor behind the curtain, or in the dark clutter of crayon bits and shavings and hardened rubber bands and greasy potato chip crumbs all fuzzy with lint, that grew in the corner beneath the spot where the messy twin bed met the walls.

One of her few old friends, the Francie doll, was mostly gone. Her hard, poly-resin torso had finally been thrown away, but one remaining leg was trapped
outside with the knee and toe peeking out of the damp earth underneath the
garden hose next to the back-yard shed. Her head, eyeless now, was stuffed into
the rusted barrel of an old, corkless pop-gun. They could've pulled it out by her
hair, but somebody had shoved it in wrong, and the hole under her chin was all
they could get at anymore, so every poke and prod trying to retrieve it only
succeeded in driving it further in.

Eventually, she was forgotten altogether. Unless someone moved the
hose. When the hose was stretched out to the garden, then everyone could see her
knee and pointy toe-foot poking up out of the dirt. Then some of them would
remember and think about the head in the cork-gun.

No matter where you were scattered, whether in the open or in a niche,
the other dolls would tiptoe around the pieces, when they encountered them,
trying not to see.

Granted, you could still be lost or hurt while intact, but when you were
in pieces survival was even more unlikely. The pieces had no significance when
they were so un-whole, and they'd be scattered, or just allowed to scatter, and
drift away from each other.

Anything could come along and mutilate you, especially if you were in
pieces. A dog, perhaps, or a toddler, and a little teething on the neck joint. Or a
nasty neighbor boy, who'd think nothing of trying to make a slight, melting scar
under the chin, creating a puckered, yawning maw from the chin to the back of
the head.

Even if someone had some passing fancy in trying to help you get back
together, the odds were too impossible that they'd be able to find your head or
body in some unseen dusty corner—maybe trapped beneath the hamper—nor
could you trust that the pieces would be in any condition to reattach them.
Eventually, things harden and set and become brittle, and they just crack or
splinter or disintegrate when somebody tries to shove a head and body back
together.

Indeed, losing her head had always terrified her a great deal. Even, or
especially, the slippery, mashing, spinning, and horrible, bearing-down agony of
trying to get it put back on. She just couldn't learn how to get through that and
not want to scream.

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If she couldn't unlearn her fear of losing her head, she did eventually
learn to worry less about being mauled. Mangled was different from forsaken,
and hardly anyone noticed anymore that one leg flopped slightly at the knee,
where its wire had been broken. She'd learned long ago that she'd been made too
tough to bleed. She'd learned to believe in some things.

One night she stood before the metallic gleam of her mirror, just
looking. She looked at her smile, then took off her blouse, and looked at the
smile and breasts she knew Scott saw. She looked at the face and body that she
saw. She thought the skin along her jaw was becoming slightly jowled. There was
certainly a tiny crease that ran up and down between her eyebrows from all the
thinking and frowning that no one else ever saw.

Downstairs, a door clattered, and young voices burst and gurgled into
the quiet space. She remained in front of the mirror, motionless. The noise faded
into the kitchen of her dream house, and she knew the two teenagers would be
raiding the refrigerator. They had been living with her for a while. She couldn't
even remember when they'd come.

She'd always suspected that they were really hers, that she'd given birth
to them, but she couldn't prove it. She'd tried talking to Scott about them, how
she thought they were really hers. He had laughed at her.

She reached for her waist and undid the snap that held her skirt. It
drifted away to the floor. She stood naked before the square of silver, and looked
at the body she knew. There were many marks and scars that others had in-
flicted—those others could see. But the changes and marks she looked at were
her own, and she believed in them more than anything.

Her breasts didn't have their original torpedo-tension. She saw them
laden with age and gravity. The nipples were large and papery, and one of the few
confirmations she allowed herself. They had to be nipples that had nursed and
nurtured someone. The stretch marks around those nipples had to have come
from skin swelling to make room for milk and warmth and hope. Even if she
couldn't remember anymore. Even if no one believed her.

The skin of her stomach didn't look tough and hard to her now, it was
softer and less molded. She'd been at this so long. The creases at her hips weren't
just there to mark her flexibility. Nor were her buttocks the same as before—
there were soft spots that changed the shape into shapelessness. There were more marks where she’d gained weight over the years, only to lose far more later than she’d ever had. Weight that nobody had ever bothered to notice, anymore than they did when she finally lost it. Her legs were still long, but now the knees looked jutting and angular, and her toes were marked and misshapen from years in hideous contraptions of fashion footwear.

The self that she saw angered her. That she had earned nothing from it brought despair. It should have, but hadn’t, saved her from Scott or her fears. Something had been building for a while now, past Scott, past frustration, past fear, and she felt it swell as she stood gazing upon herself. Up to this night, she’d sensed it with little more than a mild curiosity, feeling it like a forgotten memory, a shape just around a corner, a thought that darted back into shadow just as she tried to turn a light upon it. Tonight, she held very still, not looking at anything but herself, as if waiting for it to take shape and come to stand with her.

Curiosity paled and wafted away, and suddenly she was more than a mere shape before herself, she was full and icy-white-hot and immense. Not skittering away from her now, this new feeling solidified within her and became as steady-burning as her gaze. She was as deliberate as she’d ever been. Scott would not press and mash at her ever again. She would push and shove back. She could kick. She’d learn to kick harder. She would not hear his laughter at her fears, her beliefs. She would never again lie in the dark and try to remember a time before this one.

She ground her teeth together beneath her plastic smile, and drew in as deep a breath as her indifferent plastic chest would allow, and held it, held it, held it until she felt a clamping, burning hand squeezing in her ribs, spurting bright purple and yellow spots like fireworks behind her eyes. The hand gave a final, extra little squish and the pent-up air exploded from her in a great jolting, heaving gasp, leaving her choking and sputtering.

She cried for just a while that night, softly, quietly—tiny little pretend tears that rolled down stiff cheeks. Cheeks, she imagined in the dark, pliable enough to crinkle and scrunch, pliable enough to let her close her eyes. She’d learned to sigh.

She practiced in the dark until she perfected how to pull in and let go
whenever she wanted. It was a solitary and glorious rapture. A deep, quivering sigh. A long, sad sigh. A choked, frustrated sigh. And she realized that long ago, in a primal crystal place, she’d learned to live.