Normal

Katie Brown*

*Iowa State University

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When Maggie Loftus was about nine, PJ’s head popped off. Maggie was pressing PJ’s head into her tummy as she tried desperately to get PJ’s pink evening gown up her rubber body when all of a sudden PJ’s head bent to one side and rolled onto Maggie’s lap. Maggie thought that this was no big deal, the dolls’ heads always popped off. After PJ’s body was dressed, Maggie grabbed the head and ran with it to her mom. Maggie’s hands flew up in her mother’s face, and Mrs. Loftus sighed. She wiped her hands on her green-checkered apron.

“These Barbies!” Maggie’s mother took the head between two fingers and attempted to push it back onto PJ’s body. She got it back on and handed it back at her daughter. As Maggie took it, the head fell off again. The child grunted and thrust it back into her mother’s face. “Well, I just don’t know...” Maggie’s mother shoved the head back on again. It fell off.

Mrs. Loftus sat at the table and inspected PJ. “Oh, no.” She pointed to PJ’s headless neck. It had cracked down the side. There was no way that it would hold the doll’s head up again. “Sorry, sweetie, but she’s broken. Do you want me to throw her away?”

Maggie shook her curly brown head no.

“Okay, then, baby-doll, we’ll see if your dad can fix it when he gets home from work.”

Maggie went to her room and waited. The big, red numbers on her clock said five, one, and two. Her father would be home at six, two, and zero. He got off work at six, zero, and zero, but the “damn traffic” was always too bad for him to get home that soon. Maggie knew her father was going to be home soon enough. Although she couldn’t tell time, the nine-year-old knew that six was only one more than five.

While she waited, the little girl put away her other dolls. She had four Barbies, two Skippers, one Ken, and one dog. She carefully dressed each doll in the outfit that they were purchased in and meticulously placed them into the box. She left a spot for PJ, right between Skipper with the long hair and the puppy.

Maggie had gotten PJ as a gift right after the doctors told her parents that she was “autistic.” The Loftus’s thought Maggie was just quiet, because she played well by herself. However, when she started kindergarten, the teacher called her mother. Miss Sampson thought that Maggie was behind in school, because while the other children were jumping rope, Maggie rocked back and forth. While the other children sang songs with finger puppets, Maggie sat in the
corner, yelled, and threw her hands into the air.

Mrs. Loftus protested. Their child was just a quiet girl. She plays by herself just fine. She has all her toys out on the floor right now.

“I’m sorry Mrs. Loftus, but this student needs to be in a special classroom. She is a precious girl, but, honestly, she isn’t going to gain anything from a normal class.”

*Normal.* The word rolled around in Mrs. Loftus’s head until her husband got home that night. The conversation between the two soon turned into a tight-lipped argument filled with politeness. Silently each parent blamed the other. Mr. Loftus couldn’t sleep that night.

The day that Maggie and Mrs. Loftus went to the doctor, Mr. Loftus went shopping. He looked at everything, but as usual, he landed in the Barbie aisle. It had a street sign on it that read “Barbie Lane.” The pretend pink streetlights almost hit the top of his head.

On the top shelf were collector Barbies. Immediately Mr. Loftus reached for the Marilyn Monroe Barbie. She was pretty, and so was Maggie. Maybe Maggie would like her. No, Maggie didn’t have any idea who Marilyn was. He looked down a few shelves. A veterinarian Barbie, a rock star Barbie, a doctor Barbie, a secretary Barbie, and a bride Barbie. Mr. Loftus felt his chest tighten as he thought of the things that Maggie would not ever be able to do.

Finally, on the bottom shelf were Barbies dressed in evening gowns. There was nothing special about these Barbies except that they were beautiful. Mr. Loftus knelt down. His eyes scanned the different dresses of the dolls. He picked up a box with a doll inside named PJ. She had curly brown hair, just like his daughter, and she was wearing a pink evening gown with fake roses across the bottom. This Barbie was beautiful. She was normal. She was average. She had no special career. Maybe she was just a high-school graduate or a mom. Maybe she never did anything extra-ordinary, but at least she was average.

Maggie played with PJ almost every day, starting with the day after the appointment in which the doctors told Mrs. Loftus that Maggie was autistic. It was too early for them to tell how severe it would be. The doctors helped Mrs. Loftus find the best specialists, schools, and therapists in the area. To every one of her appointments, Maggie brought along PJ.

Maggie learned. She learned to count. Sometimes she would do it out loud, sometimes in her head. Mrs. Loftus sat with her for hours and helped her with her numbers. She could read them all by herself, but Mrs. Loftus still liked to sit with her to review. Maggie sometimes could speak in short sentences. The doctors said that Maggie might be able to read short words someday. They said that she was progressing amazingly fast.

While Maggie was learning, Mr. Loftus worked. He worked more than
he had before that phone call, partly to pay for the bills that Maggie’s condi-
tion brought along, but mostly to avoid being at home. If he worked till six, he
could drive home the long way, get home at six twenty, and put Maggie to bed
by seven. At this point, Mrs. Loftus would have to do dishes and laundry. Maggie
was a messy child, so this usually took about an hour. Mr. Loftus just had to pass
the time from eight to nine, when he and Maggie’s mother went to sleep. Mr.
Loftus knew that it would never change from this, because his daughter needed a
routine. His daughter made everyone else need a routine.

This went on for three years.
Until PJ’s head popped off.

Mr. Loftus walked in the door and sat down at the kitchen table. He
looked down at his mail. On the top of the envelopes was a brown-haired Barbie
head sitting next to a rubber body in a pink evening gown.

Maggie’s mother turned to look at Mr. Loftus. “PJ’s head popped off.
Maggie wants you to fix her.” She turned back to her mashed potatoes.

Mr. Loftus picked up PJ. He remembered this Barbie. Mr. Loftus didn’t
know that Maggie still had her. He looked at her neck and saw where it was
cracked.

“Could you please clear the table off—dinner is almost ready.” Mrs.
Loftus glanced at her husband, who picked up the mail and the Barbie. He would
deal with it later.

Through dinner, Maggie looked at her father. Finally, near the end of the
supper, she asked, “PJ?”

Mr. Loftus stared at the potatoes. “I’m working on her. She’ll be all bet-
ter by the time that you wake up in the morning.”

At nine, Mrs. Loftus sat down on the bed and looked into her husband’s
eyes. “You need to fix that doll. PJ means a lot to Maggie. She never goes any-
where without her.”

“I’ll just buy her another one, the neck was practically gone!”

“Whatever works, Gary. Just, please, don’t let her down.”

Mr. Loftus lay there until his wife was asleep. He didn’t want her to
know that he cared so much. He crept down the hall into his study and picked up
the doll. It had been three years since he looked at PJ, and now he studied her.
The doll had been such a normal toy. Now she was just broken.

Mr. Loftus started to try to screw the head back on. He tried to glue it
on. He pushed the head down until the scalp of the doll started to rise because
the neck was pressing against it. He pulled out duct tape. He worked for over an
hour on the doll, frantically trying to make it whole again. His study became hot.
He opened a window. His toes became cold from the October chill. He put on
socks.
Finally, Mr. Loftus thought of a solution. He lit a candle and melted PJ’s chin. He then melted PJ’s neck. Mr. Loftus grimaced. The two pieces of plastic body stuck firmly to one another. Mr. Loftus sighed. He sat the doll down. He felt his jaw ache from relief as he unclenched his teeth.

He looked at PJ. She looked terrible. Her chin was melted and distorted. Her neck could not be seen. PJ looked as if she had just stepped out of a severe house fire. Mr. Loftus thought that burn-victim Barbie would never pass Mattel’s standards. There was nothing else he could do. He could not fix this doll. He could do nothing to make her what she was supposed to be. This doll was obviously broken. He smoothed out PJ’s curly brown hair and walked into the kitchen. Mr. Loftus set PJ on the table.

He left too early to see Maggie before she left for school. He felt ashamed that he might let his daughter down. But, during his lunch break, Mr. Loftus called his wife. He hadn’t done this in a while, so Mrs. Loftus was surprised.

“Well, I didn’t think it was that big of a deal, but she was fine with her. In fact, in her own Maggie-way, she told me that PJ was ‘special’ now, and she said that we needed to be very careful with her while she got better.”

“Did you tell her that the doll wasn’t going to get better, that she was always going to be like that?” Mr. Loftus waited for the answer.

“Why, of course.”

“And?”

“And she didn’t say anything. She just took her back into her room and put her in the box with the rest of them. She’s okay with it, Gary.”

Mr. Loftus felt his chest tighten again. He said goodbye to his wife and hung up the phone. He couldn’t fix the doll, but his daughter was okay with it. She didn’t mind if PJ wasn’t perfect like the rest of them. She just wanted her PJ the way that she was. She didn’t mind that her dad couldn’t make her better. She didn’t mind if her dad couldn’t make her average. Maggie loved PJ unconditionally. Maggie had no expectations for PJ.

That night, when Maggie’s dad got home, Mrs. Loftus met him at the front door.

“Gary! You’re home early. I hope this doesn’t throw Maggie off. She needs routine.” Mrs. Loftus was smiling, though.

Maggie ran to the door and looked at her father. She held PJ in her right hand. “Five, two, two.” She pointed to a digital clock on the wall.

“That’s right, baby. Five, two, two. That’s my new time to get home. Five, two, two.” Maggie spotted something behind her father’s back. She grabbed at it.

Mr. Loftus handed his daughter the paper bag. She reached her hand into the bag and pulled out a book, a book about Barbie. It had six words on each page and bright pink and purple photographs of Barbies for illustrations. It was way below average for a nine-year old. But it was perfect for Maggie.

Mr. Loftus looked at his daughter. Though his chest tightened, he still asked. “Would you like me to read to you?”