Real Life Barbie

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Mom leaned over the counter and held her right hand under her watermelon belly. Her left hand stabilized her on the counter. She was blowing spurts of breath out of her mouth; her lips were in a perfect “O” shape. No one noticed her but me. Dad, Sharon and Lowell were all in the living room drinking glasses of red wine. Mom was trying to serve the cheese squares with toothpicks in them, but something was happening to her.

One long exhale. I asked her if she was okay.

“I’m fine, I’m just having contractions,” she said, her forehead scrunched at the eyebrows.

“Does that mean you are going to have the baby tonight?” I asked.

“I think I just might.”

I jumped up and down in the middle of the kitchen. “Are you going to the hospital?”

“Probably, but there’s a little time yet. I want to make it through dinner if I can. I’ve worked hard on this meal.”

I shook my hands like I was winding up to roll dice, and my legs were busy running in place. I flashed mom a smile, then kissed her belly. It was hard. Harder than I’d ever felt it before.

She stood upright and rubbed circles on each side of her belly. She still wasn’t breathing quite right. She picked up the cheese tray and carried it out to the guests.

I ran to the back bedroom where the kids were playing. I burst in and sing-songed, “Mom’s gonna have the baby tonight, tonight. Mom’s gonna have the baby tonight.”

Everyone stopped and looked at me. Danny was on Russ’s back, riding him like a horse. “What?” my brother asked, wide-eyed.

“She’s going to the hospital after dinner. Havin contractions.” I plopped down on my bottom bunk, and leaned back. I was five.

Chris sat by me and picked up Cheerleader Barbie off my bed. Chris was thirteen, and she already had boobs. She knew everything. Contractions meant the baby was going to be born that day, she told me. “Do you want a boy or a girl?” she held Barbie up to ask me.

I grabbed my Barbie wearing a tight-fitting shimmery prom
dress. The slit up the back of her dress had been torn, so I could see her plastic butt when I held her up to answer. A boy, Barbie told her. I didn’t want to have to share a room for the rest of my life with a sister. I shoved a pink heel on Barbie’s foot and looked around for the matching shoe.

“I want a girl,” my brother piped in and sat on the bed next to me. “Then I won’t have to share my room with her.”

“Did it ever occur to you two that you already share a room, with each other? Ding dong.” She anointed me ding, with a smack to the forehead with Barbie, and Danny got it once with dong.

Russ and Neil climbed up to Danny’s top bunk and hung their heads down over the side. They were upside down. Danny and I giggled. I didn’t recognize them upside down. Barbie got in Russ’s face and said, “Quit spying on us. We’re gonna change clothes.” Chris popped each of her kid brothers in the forehead with Barbie, and then opened the case with all Barbie’s clothes. “Hey! What’s the big idea?” Russ asked, as he curved his fingertips around the side of the top bunk and became an acrobat. He turned himself upside right in one smooth flip, and landed with his feet on the floor. He rubbed his forehead.

“Whoa. My turn!” My brother raced up the ladder to the top bunk. He looked over the edge at us with Neil.

“Boys! What! Are! You! Doing!?” We all jumped. Mom appeared from nowhere, supporting her belly with her hand. The upside-down boys disappeared from our sight. “Get down. It’s time to eat.”

Sharon was pulling the fresh garlic bread out of the oven. The aroma filled the house and mingled with the rich meaty scent from the prime rib. Each breath was so stuffed with good scents, I licked the air. Nothing.

At the kitchen table, the adults drank red wine with their prime rib. The kids were at our own table set up in the living room. We drank milk. Real milk. From Granddad’s farm. Cream floated to the top of my plastic cup. I skimmed my spoon along the top of the milk and scooped the cream into the little bowl with my peaches. That was a trick my granddad taught me. I mixed the rest of the cream into the milk and drank. It was thick, not like watery store-bought milk. It coated my tongue like ice cream, and tasted just as sweet.

Mom had cut up our prime rib and we ate it bite by bite.
Danny told me he wished we were having hot dogs and macaroni and cheese. I agreed. The adults must have heard us because Mom yelled, “You’ll eat your prime rib and you’ll like it.” The adults laughed.

I peered into the kitchen. I could see Mom through the arched doorway separating the two rooms. Jerking forward suddenly, she spilled her glass of red wine on the table cloth. The wine glass landed on its base and she held her belly with her hands as she did that “O” breathing through her lips again. Sharon got up from the table and dabbed the wine up with a dishcloth.

“Peggy, are you okay?” she asked.

She nodded through her staccato breaths. Again, one long exhale passed through her lips and I saw some tension release from her shoulders. She breathed a couple deep breaths in and out.

“This can’t be good,” she said as she poured a heaping pile of salt on the spill. “Spilled wine, bad luck.” Sharon smoothed out the salt until it covered the red. She pinched some salt between her thumb and forefinger and tossed it over her left shoulder.

“I’m fine. I’m going to enjoy my prime rib, and you’re not going to stop me.” She wagged her finger at her belly, and they laughed. “It’s not bad luck. It’s clumsiness. Just refill my glass.” Mom picked up her fork, exhaled, and took a bite as Dad refilled her wine glass.

“Looks likes we’ll be doing the dishes though. You’ll do anything to get out of doing the dishes, won’t ya, Peg?” Sharon laughed, as she got up and started organizing and rinsing dishes. “Is it time to go?”

“Yeah, pretty close.” She ate another bite of prime rib, closed her eyes, and chewed slowly.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Dad said, “we should stop and have some green beer on the way.” The men laughed. It was St. Patrick’s Day.

“Very funny,” Mom said, as she slid her chair back.

I piled my little bowl on top of my plate and carried it in the kitchen and set it on the counter. “Mom, are you going to have the baby?”

“Yes, honey, I am. Hopefully by the time you wake up in the morning, you will have a brand new brother or sister.”

“Danny! Mom’s having the baby! I told you!”

Danny ran into the kitchen, empty-handed. “You are?”
eyes bulged like grapes.

Mom held out her arms to us and we both ran to her. We hugged her belly while she was still sitting down. Still hard.

“I can’t wait to meet you,” I said to her round belly.

“Me too.” Danny said with his lips on mom’s shirt.

“You two are going to go to Sharon and Lowell’s tonight, okay?” she told us. We assented, on the condition that she would bring us a new baby tomorrow.

Sharon made us a pallet in the middle of their living room. There was one blanket to sleep on and one to cover up with. It was the first time we had ever been in Sharon and Lowell’s living room when it was completely dark.

In the black we couldn’t see each other. So Danny and I lay on our backs and talked about the new baby. I wanted to hold it first, but I wasn’t changing any diapers, I told Danny. He wasn’t either. Danny wanted to teach it to read, like I was teaching him. I confessed I wanted a sister, but I still didn’t want to share a room. At the first light of the day, the phone rang, and woke everyone up. Sharon stood in the kitchen by the red phone on the wall and talked to our dad. We bounced up and down at her feet. “Did she have the baby?” She did. “Boy or a girl?” Girl.

A girl! A sister! Danny and I ran into the living room, held hands and jumped together on our blankets. We spun around until we were dizzy. Thoughts of the new baby we had been waiting for forever swum in our heads. We had felt her kick months before and we liked listening to her, with our ears on mom’s belly. We wanted to meet her.

We got dressed, ran out to the car and hopped in. Kicking the back of the seats in the car, we waited. And chattered. Finally, Sharon appeared and fired up the Pinto. She put her hands on the wheel, with her thumbs straight up in the air like she was bracing herself. Rhinestone Cowboy played on the radio. I thought of the rhinestone earrings Barbie got for my birthday. I poked them right into the sides of her hollow head, piercing her ears myself. I couldn’t wait to play Barbies with my new sister.

Through a glass window, Mom pointed at her. The nurse rocked our sister in a wooden rocking chair. There she was. Finally. After waiting forever for this moment, it seemed to be happening so suddenly. I couldn’t see her face. Flesh poked through the pink blanket. She yawned. I saw her gums and her little tiny tongue. “Can we touch her?”
Inside the glass room, the nurse wearing the white uniform passed my sister off to Mom. She sat down in the wooden rocking chair, and cradled the baby in her arm. Danny and I were on opposite arms of the chair. She pulled the blanket down and we saw her face. She didn’t look human. Even her skin wasn’t the right color. It was deep pink, like she had been scalded. Her eyes weren’t open, like when the kittens were first born. Her mini-fingers gripped mine. Energy built up inside me. I stiffened my body in defense against it. “She’s holding my finger!” I whisper loudly to my brother. Her grip was firm, yet gentle.

Danny ran over to my side. “I want to hold her hand.”
Mom nodded at me. I moved her grip to his hand.
“What’s her name?” I asked.
My eyes widened. I looked at Danny. He smiled, exposing all his baby teeth. I put my hands on his shoulders and jumped. “Barbie,” he said, jumping with me, yanking his finger out of Barbie’s grip. I repeated it. We giggled. Our own real life Barbie. I could dress her and feed her and teach her to walk and talk. She didn’t look like a Barbie though. Not beautiful with flowing blonde hair. Our sister hardly had any hair at all.

“Okay, okay. Calm down. Let’s not wake the other babies up.”
I clenched my jaw shut. Danny stuck his pointer finger back inside Barbie’s grip.
“I love you, Barbie,” he said to her baby fist, and then he kissed it.
“I love you too, Barbie,” I spoke softly. “I’ll show you how to play Barbies when we get home. You are coming home with us, ya know. We can change her clothes and I’ll show you how to take her on a date with Ken.”
“Okay now. Dad’s going to bring you two home. You get the house ready for Barbie, okay?”
“Okay, we will.” We kissed Barbie on the forehead. Her skin was soft on my lips. We hugged mom. She smelled like antiseptic. Her belly was missing. I touched it. Soft. Was it really possible that Barbie was inside that belly and now she came out? She told me that was what would happen, but at that time I couldn’t believe it. And the story mom told me about how she got out of there was just as unbelievable. There is no way mom peed her out. No way. We ran to Dad, each grabbed a hand, and skipped out of the hos-
At home, I lined up all my Barbies for my new baby sister Barbie. Some of them were naked. One had short hair that Danny had cut off for me. Another one was missing a foot. I told them about her. “She is as small as a kitten,” I told them, “She doesn’t even have teeth.” They didn’t mind. They wanted to meet her. “Have to wait,” I said, “like I had to wait.” Forever, it seemed. Now that she was born, she was ours and we would be able to see her every day from now on. “Oh, and another thing, Barbies, she’s named Barbie too.”

Dad came in and told us it was naptime. I could sleep with my Barbies if I wanted, he said. I laid them out on my pillow by my head. I told them they could watch my dreams if they wanted. Danny hopped down from the top bunk when dad left our room, and he laid his head on my pillow. We drifted off, each hugging a Barbie close to our chests.