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Watch-Your-Back Barbie



Finally, An Icon Gets What It Deserves

By Jody Mace

When my daughter Kyla turned three, I had never bought a Barbie, and yet they had already begun their covert infiltration of our home. Kyla received a Barbie from her grandmother, along with the props for a schoolroom. There were three students' desks, a tall locker, a teacher's desk with a chair, and several tiny books that didn't open.

Kyla set up the schoolroom. A Lego elephant and policeman were the bored pupils. Barbie's stiff body was perched crookedly at the teacher's plastic desk. She was dressed oddly for school: a bright orange halter-top and miniskirt, and neon pink shoes. Her skirt was so short and her legs so careless that her students could see the underwear painted on her skin. But even this did not get their attention. Then suddenly, without warning, Barbie turned the tall locker on its side to become a bathtub. She took off all her clothes, flaunting perfect breasts with no nipples, and bathed luxuriously, her head thrown back, blonde hair tumbled all around, and one long leg kicked high.

Frankly, I wasn't surprised at Barbie's behavior. I was not much of a

Barbie fan as a child, but I did have one Barbie, a Ken, a camper, and a pink Corvette. The only time I can remember playing with Barbie, she was tangled up with my brother's G.I. Joe in the back of the camper, while Ken waited, gazing vacantly from Barbie's Corvette. Barbie is not as innocent as she appears. She has always walked on the wild side.

Cutting Barbie's hair! Her crowning glory!

After Kyla started receiving Barbies as gifts, I grew uncomfortable with the message that they might be sending her, with their inhumanly large breasts and skinny waists. I worried that my dark-haired, brown-eyed daughter might get the message that the standard of beauty included only buxom, blue-eyed blondes. So, using some twisted if-you-can't-beat-them-join-them logic, I bought two new Barbies: one Caucasian doll with dark hair and dark eyes, and an African American Barbie. They weren't technically "Barbies," but off-brand imitations. To us they were still all Barbie, with the same impossible dimensions. If there had been a flat-chested Barbie or a thunder-thigh Barbie, I would have bought them, too.

I shouldn't have worried--Kyla couldn't care less about the Barbies. The only time, other than the schoolroom debacle, that I can recall her playing with them was the time that she asked me if she could cut the Barbies' hair. I hesitated. Then I was swept away by this idea. Cutting Barbie's hair! Her crowning glory! How deliciously subversive! "Only if I can do it too!" I answered. We attacked the hair with a cathartic vengeance. Synthetic hair was flying everywhere. When we were done, we stared, out of breath, at "Mohawk Barbie," "Bald Barbie," and "Rat-tail Barbie." Kyla smiled. "This is so cool."

After that, the Barbies came out of their plastic bag occasionally to look around with stunned, dazed expressions from underneath their haphazard haircuts, but they didn't get much playtime until Kyla's younger brother, Charlie, discovered them. He was three years old and found them endlessly fascinating. One time he arranged them in what might be a textbook male fantasy. They were naked except for their high-heeled shoes and lounged around on tiny, purple, inflatable chairs and couches. In the middle of the chairs was a small table that held slices of cardboard pizza. Naked Barbies at a pizza party. What could be finer?

Charlie played with the Barbies with more gusto than Kyla ever had. He had them arguing with each other. "Barbie, you took my dress right off my hanger!" "I did not, Other Barbie!" I'm not sure where he had gotten, at such a tender age, the idea for a cat-fight, but it was

mesmerizing to watch these Barbies, already maimed by the bad haircuts, now forced to defend their clothing turf against each other while drinking from tiny bottles of Coke.

Soon after the naked pizza party, Kyla (in her words) "passed down" the Barbies to Charlie, who keeps them in a big plastic bag in his closet. He often takes them out to get run over by his trains or to fall from his desk in slow motion, foot over head, as he voices drawn-out, high-pitched screams for them. Nobody ever rescues them, and they have acquired a weary look in their eyes. I shouldn't have worried about the effect of the Barbies on my kids. I should have worried about the effect of my kids on the Barbies.

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I recently was part of the audience for a finger puppet show. The finger puppets were the disembodied heads of all the Barbies. As they cavorted around on the puppet stage, the headless bodies of the Barbies sat in the audience and watched the show. Only they couldn't watch because they didn't have any eyes.