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Tension in Barbie World

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I live four houses from the Dairy Queen, the luckiest kid on the planet. My friends are jealous. It is my treat, I say, and then ask my mom for money. I know all the best things on the menu. Avoid the Nerds Blizzard but the Peanut Butter M&Ms is superb. I am the connoisseur of soft serve. The owner knows my dog’s name and the ice cream girls recognize us. I am the kid who knows to ask for “mistakes,” so our second round is on the house.

My room has a Grasshopper Green ceiling, Sky Blue floor, Lilac walls and Bubblegum trim. I chose the paint colors, Crayola brand. I am living in a crayon box. Vaulted ceilings and stained glass windows to spy on Bill, the neighbor with the conspicuously neat lawn and mustache. Barbie world is in the West, Littlest Pet Shops is in the North, and a Good Will collection of dress up clothes is in the closet. Oversized blue crepe prom dress and silver shoes with pink pompoms, graduation gowns.

There is tension in Barbie world. I have only one Ken doll and the sixteen ladies are forever quarrelling. Domestic squabbles so loud there are noise complaints from the other dolls. Ken has only swim trunks and one dress shoe. You can’t take him anywhere decent and the ladies make sure he knows it. My mother said no Barbies. But my grandfather makes sure I have the seventeen. He makes sure Barbie has career options, as mother or hairdresser.

My best friend Andrea and I spend our time dissecting garlic cloves. We eat zucchini straight from the garden, the dirt crunching between our teeth. We invent a way to make perfume. Squish flowers in water, put in mason jars and shake. Add whole petals for aesthetic appeal. Dean is remodeling our basement, we give him daisy perfume. To us he looks like a cross between Hulk Hogan and our gym teacher. Daisies are a more masculine flower. He keeps the jar on his truck dash; we are so proud. We play “Midgets on Crutches,” hobbling around the yard with croquet mallets under our armpits, screaming.

Our club house sits on stilts and has a porch. We hole up in the stifling, eight square feet and scribble graffiti on a Titanic poster, give Leo a mustache. We write news stories about how my mom’s boyfriend Rob violates his goldfish. We spend more time outside when Rob is over. We show off on the swing set while the neighbor boy Frank glowers from across the alley. I have a golden retriever and he threatens to blow her up.

It is the last summer before school becomes a bad word. The one before I learn I should be shaving my legs. The one before I find out only losers play with toys. The last summer before I stop playing with makeup and start having to wear it. The one before Andrea moves away.