DOLLS

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You can tell a lot about a person from their childhood dolls. While some little girls may have had a preference for colourful ponies or bricks or plastic food, they all had dolls. My sister Maddie had a horde of beautiful blonde and brunette Barbies stacked in a large wooden box, their hair permanently straw-like from too many brushes, their dresses held together by the most worn-down Velcro known to mankind. One solitary nude Ken doll sat at the bottom of the stack, surrounded by extra dresses and shoes and purses.

When Maddie and I would play Barbies I'd beg her to let me be Zara, the best doll of them all, with two-toned brown hair and a smooth body free from the moulded-on underwear that got in the way of our typical games, but she instead would give me Stacy, with moulded-on togs and limited arm flexibility, or naked Ken. You should be Ken, she'd say. But when I pointed out Ken didn't have clothes or hair you could brush, she'd simply tell me someone had to be Ken, and it couldn't be her. Strangely enough, I could never come up with a counterargument for that.

When Maddie was sixteen and I was fourteen, our cousin Lou came to visit. Unsure of how to entertain her, we brought out the box of Barbies. I want this one, she said, pointing at Zara. Maddie shrugged and picked up Stacy instead. When Lou left at the end of the week, she packed Zara. When I pointed this out to Maddie she just shrugged again and told me that she'd get more fun out of them. I watched them from the doorway as Maddie carried the box to Aunt Chrissy's car. She's all grown up, said Mum from behind me. I nodded and gulped, and ignored the sinking feeling that I was meant to be all grown up too.

My best friend Jamie and I also played Barbies, but hers were different. They sat on her windowsill, next to the cacti we planted at school, and only came down when friends were over. Jamie didn't have many friends though, so the second I'd arrive with my overnight bag, we'd run down the corridor to her room and bring the dolls down.

Jamie's dolls weren't Barbies, but the cheap knock-offs sold down the road at the two-dollar store. They were unsettling, with large heads a different shade from the rest of their bodies, and

legs I worried would fall out of their sockets at any moment. They weren't very nice dolls, but Jamie loved them and I loved Jamie, so when we'd sit on her rug and Jessabelle's leg came out I would shove it back into the hole and cover it with the glittery skirt.

One day, we decided to make them furniture out of cardboard. We pulled a box out of the recycling bin and spent the day turning her bookshelf into a Barbie high-rise. When Jamie's mum got home, she yelled at us for damaging the bookshelf, but she never made us take it down. For years we'd invent drama about the upstairs and downstairs neighbours, until Jamie moved into a real apartment and got rid of the bookshelf.

We packed the furniture into a shoebox in hopes there'd be somewhere to set them up in the new room, but it was barely even bigger than the shoebox. We had to put the dolls and their box of furniture in the wardrobe, and they sat there until Jamie's mum died last year. The dolls were better than I remembered, the furniture worse, and for old times' sake we enacted one last story before placing them gently in the 'donate' box.

Jamie's and Maddie's dolls may have been the best for make-believe, but my favourite dolls were Granny's. We would be allowed to carefully undress them from their nightdresses and button them into their day clothes. Granny couldn't remember what she'd called them when she was little, so Maddie and I called them Milly and Molly. Molly was my doll and had a patterned blue dress with a matching hat, and a pink poncho that Granny said her mother had made. Milly had a white frock with a little blue cardigan and no hat at all.

The dolls were too fragile to do much with other than dress and undress, so once we'd dressed them we would hold and rock them for a short while, then place their clothes in neat piles in their bassinet and lay them down again. When you laid them down, their eyes rolled forward, giving the impression they were sleeping. Dead, said Maddie once when Granny left the room. I was mortified that she could say something like that about our dolls. They creaked when you moved their arms and their hair was sparse, but I could play with them like they were my children. Soothing and talking to them.

The last time we went to Granny's while Grandad was still alive, Maddie confessed to me that she preferred her Barbies, 'coz she could actually play grown-ups with them'. I thought so too, but seeing Granny's face when we played with her dolls made them a thousand times better, in my opinion.

Sometimes, when a client is taking a while to open up to me, I bring out Milly and Molly. 'What do these dolls make you think about?' I say. Most people say their childhood, some say responsibility or femininity or parenting. They tell me the dolls remind them of their childhood dolls, or their friends', sister's or family's. I once had an elderly woman tell me that Molly looked just like her daughter as a child, and tear up right there on my couch. A teenage girl asked if she could play with Milly, and gently held her in her arms the rest of the session. I called Maddie when I got home that night, told her Milly was being loved again. She laughed and told me her own daughters were playing with dolls the way we once did. I went to sleep with a smile on my face, not knowing that tomorrow, I would have a little girl tell me they reminded her of the bodies.