

ENCHANTED EVENING BARBIE AND THE SECOND COMING

A Memoir by Rheta Grimsley Johnson

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The Year the World Lusted for Barbie

Connie Duncan's mother was a dish. She had the Ava Gardner look going on, with wavy black hair and a cute, voluptuous figure and the absolute confidence of a pretty woman. All of us wanted to be Cora Duncan's daughter.

Connie was my best friend, transparently convenient, since I got to stay overnight frequently at the Duncans' and have Cora tell me nice things about myself. Cora was amazingly sweet in that way. She knew I needed confidence. She would compliment my hair and eyes and posture, anything to boost my low esteem. It worked, but only as long as I was in Cora's presence. Between visits, I would forget I was worth killing.

We could stay up late at Connie's house, and try on Cora's high heels and make-up. We could generally do anything we wanted. I might never have seen Johnny Carson if it hadn't been for the Duncans, who let us park our shorty pajamas in front of the television for popcorn and inappropriate late-night adult entertainment. In the summertime Cora hosted sprinkler parties, which were in vogue before everyone and his brother had a swimming pool in the back yard. We'd run through the rainbows of cheap water in our modest swimsuits encircled with little skirts, stopping only when the watermelon was cut and served by Cora. Sometimes we had "dress up" parties and wore glittering earbobs and evening gowns and pranced about the backyard like miniature street walkers.

The Duncans had an indoor dog, a poodle named Dandy, the first indoor dog I'd ever seen, and Connie's room was the stylish aqua blue and lime green of the period. Everything about their place screamed hip and happening, as opposed to my own home with its traditional fur-

niture, something called Early American, and strict curfews and rather rigid thinking.

I think it was from the more worldly Connie that I first learned about Barbie, though in retrospect it seems as if a general alert went out in Montgomery, Alabama, and every girl between eight and eighteen suddenly had to have the doll. All at once. Barbie was on everyone's Christmas wish list in 1964. This was before there was any debate whatsoever about whether Barbie set a bad example for young ladies, what with her impossibly top-heavy figure and wardrobe from hell and total lack of math aptitude. I was eleven, almost the age when you give up dolls for jewelry and sweater sets. But I had seen Barbie. I wanted Barbie. Barbie was not so much a doll as a goal.

In Barbie's halcyon first years you bought the doll, which was wearing a strapless bathing suit, then bought all the rest of her wardrobe separately. We had memorized the names of all the fancy outfits. There was "Prom Night" and "Wedding Day" and "Country Picnic." The sexiest of all was "Evening on the Town," with its black sequined and strapless evening gown, a torch singer's duds. For some reason I wanted "Enchanted Evening" more than any of the others. It seemed more glamorously versatile.

Today you get a new doll with every outfit. Not so then. One doll, numerous outfits. Made a lot more sense.

Grannie handmade all of my Barbie doll dresses from scraps left over from the clothes she made for me. Until I was sixteen I didn't own or need a bought-ready-made dress. It didn't take much of a scrap to cover lithe Barbie, and Grannie churned the doll clothes out with regularity and great finesse.

Looking back, I should have been thrilled with the original creations, and I was grateful. I wrote my grandmother thank-you notes on flowered-paper. But I was secretly disappointed. The homemade outfits lacked a certain sex appeal that was part and parcel of the bought-ready-made Barbie clothes. Those had a certain vampy, tight-bodice, hip-hugging, sequined allure that Grannie's neatly-stitched organdy and cotton doll dresses lacked. My Barbie looked as if she had just returned from a Girl's

Auxiliary meeting at the Baptist Church where the Lottie Moon Christmas offering had been discussed. The store-bought-dressed Barbie looked as if she'd had an enchanted evening all right, possibly at Ken's frat house where the boys were brewing Purple Passion punch.

Speaking of Ken, nobody I knew ever had or even wanted a Ken doll. Not even Connie. I cannot believe Mattel made the mistake of even creating a Ken doll. It was much better to imagine Barbie's mate than to see him. We were, after all, inside our Barbies, at least inside their blonde heads. Never mind I was a skinny, knock-kneed brunette with no chest and legs that were beginning to sprout ugly pubescent hair. I felt more like the stacked and blonde Barbie, with perfect ponytail and big, flirty eyes. I would decide what my boyfriend looked like, not some Mattel merchandiser.

My imaginary Ken, by the way, looked just like Steve Murphy, the son of the Pure Service Station owner where we gassed up the big Buick once a week. Steve was the most popular boy at Dalraida Elementary, mostly because he kept his mouth shut. That reserve, or perhaps it was real shyness, passed for cool. By not saying much, Steve achieved a mysterious allure that had me and all of my female classmates salivating. It didn't hurt that Steve also was the quarterback of the PeeWee football team and had the smoothest crew cut and deepest dimples on the squad. He was a dude worthy of our inner Barbies.

Christmas morning arrived in the Year of Barbie. My Barbie was in a small box that smelled of hard plastic limbs. She was perfect. The long part of her blond ponytail felt exactly like silk, and she was wearing that trademark, strapless black and white one-piece bathing suit, the only mass-produced garment my Barbie would ever wear. With that stretchy knit swimsuit she wore toeless black heels. If you had that body, wouldn't you?

That year there was no anguish whatsoever in the decision about which toy to put in the car for the drive to Georgia. Cousin Donna and I had been exchanging letters for months discussing the Barbies we would surely get for Christmas. We were just about past the age of believing in Santa Claus, but we trusted our folks wouldn't let us down. Not this

year. Not about Barbie. Not about something so life-altering as getting a doll with breasts.

Donna's family was always later getting to my grandmother's house on Christmas day than we were. We had three hours to travel, they had thirty minutes. But Donna's mother, my sweet aunt Margie, was one of those fastidious women who examined every detail of her three daughters' appearance before herding them into the car. The whole group looked parboiled and gleaming when finally they stepped out of the family auto and into the freedom that was my grandparents' house. For a few moments after arrival, their outfits were starched and ironed to perfection, their ears were clean, the hair on their heads shone like blonde halos. It wouldn't last long, but Margie got her brood there in perfect order.

The wait for Donna this time was agony. Something about "playing Barbie" was a communal sport. There are only so many times you can put your Barbie back into the box for the joy of opening it once again. Finally I saw the car pull up into the grass drive, and I ran down the red brick steps to greet Donna, waving my Barbie box like a drum major's baton.

"Did you get one?" I asked, knowing the answer and knowing she'd understand the question.

"Yes!" she said, and we raced off for a private corner to compare and contrast.

Even at my insensitive age, I knew immediately that something was wrong. Her Barbie obviously wasn't. It was some cheaper, imitation doll with a ragged ponytail. Donna's attempts to smooth and wash the doll's hair had turned it the green color of an old penny. It lacked the pert, upturned nose and perfectly shaped brows of my model. This counterfeit Barbie didn't even arrive in a bathing suit, but a cotton dress. You could tell. It wasn't Mattel.

Donna handled her disappointment that day in a child's brave way. She refused to acknowledge a difference. I didn't say anything, but she knew I knew. We played. That night, under the covers, Donna bawled.

Later Aunt Margie realized the terrible mistake she had made in saving a few dollars. She bought Donna the real deal, which by then had the

stylish “bubble” hairdo and was brunette. Today cousin Donna still has that doll and many of her original outfits, now worth a small fortune. I don’t know what became of my Barbie, much less her wardrobe. I guess Donna’s initial devastation that Christmas made her cling to the doll a little harder.

I’ve come to know that Donna got the better gift that long-ago Christmas when I presumed to pity her. Donna’s faux Barbie with green hair and lumpy features and cotton clothes forced her to deal with the truth early. We weren’t ever going to dress, look, or live like Barbie. Our Dream House would come with utility bills. Prom Night often would be spent at home. Ken might take the Dream Car and run off with Midge, whom Barbie had believed was her best friend. A Country Picnic always had rain and ants. An Enchanted Evening could end in an unwanted pregnancy.

I never achieved the stylish look of Barbie. For that matter, I never achieved the nonchalant confidence of Cora Duncan. Cora would remain beautiful into her seventies. I saw her once not long ago when Connie phoned to say Cora had cancer and was not expected to live long. It was sad, returning to the little suburban Montgomery house where I’d spent so many happy childhood nights playing on the floor with Barbie dolls. I can remember imitating Cora’s graceful walk, even her laugh, feeling in her presence like a different person. She had that magical effect on people.

Cora had taken up painting since I’d been around, and the walls of her home were now filled with amazing color. That living, breathing, brunette Barbie had evolved into an amazing artist and gardener, as evidenced by the view through a plate glass window into her lush and dreamy backyard. Her life, however, had not been a bed of roses. She and her husband had separated, then reunited, proving once and for all that even gorgeous women grow boring to some men. There should be a Barbie outfit for that. Disenchanted Evening.

When Cora died, hope of someday being a rare beauty died inside me. Cora had so long ago fostered that hope, telling me again and again it was just a matter of time. She detailed the features about me she found

attractive, even pretty, assuring me that my beauty was in its pupa stage and needed only time's metamorphosis. I had wonderful eyes, she would stress, and a pug nose that would keep me looking younger longer. I should always wear blue or red, she said, to emphasize my coloring.

Even on her death bed in 2009, Cora made me feel good about myself. I think that was the day I realized where her true beauty lay, and it wasn't in her porcelain skin or amazing Pocahontas eyes. She saw beauty everywhere, and in everyone, through some generous spirit that she had that most of us don't possess. Cora would have been a rare beauty without the cute clothes and good skin and high heels. There was nothing plastic about her. ~