

Medium Girl, Living Barbie

I haven't played Barbie in ages. And never with a living woman. My Barbie was a small doll that fit into my lunchbox if I folded up her plastic body. This girl found a special trick to bring her Barbie to life; like my Barbie, hers is blonde, blue-eyed and buxom with perfect skin and perfect hair and perfect everything – plus, her Barbie walks, breathes and blinks her eyes. Her Barbie is so real that she towers over the little girl, like her mother does. The girl is dark-haired and plain; she looks at her Barbie with admiration, if not love: I want to be like you when I'm big, but, in the meantime, I'll pretend by dressing you up, like Mommy dresses me. The girl has lots of old retro clothes for her doll: white laced kerchiefs, some aprons, a big black skirt, a golden dickey. She even has bobby pins to do up Barbie's hair – to fix her thick braids, this way, that way – although she has to stand on her bed to reach the doll's head.

Barbie has a date, as she always does. Barbie has a date with Ken, but first she is going to meet her secret friend Barbara whose name can't be mentioned to anyone in the world. Barbara always wants to play civilisation; it's her favourite game because lots of other people can play, too. Barbie and Barbara are going to meet in the museum because that's where you are sure to find civilisation. Anything that ends up in the museum has to be civilised, even the visitors wandering around inside. But the girl has a plan; she dresses up her doll, not for a trip to the museum, but like a painting hanging on the wall in the museum, maybe like Vermeer's *Milkmaid* in the Rijksmuseum. The girl dresses up the doll to look like a maid and sits her down in a chair right beside the window. The light from outside hits her face, which glows in its frame of white lace; she even glances out of the window, as if she were waiting for a love letter from Ken instead of Barbara. A mirror hanging on the wall reflects everything inside the room, including the girl, who admires her work. Barbie looks beautiful, even in a maid's uniform. She's an artwork; she's an Old Master, she's a new master, it doesn't matter. Barbie can be anything.

Barbara has no trouble finding Barbie; she aims her camera at the doll and reduces the scene from a majestic painting to a postcard image, without leaving her own reflection in the mirror. Barbara's invisible, after all. The girl decides that this game was too easy; it's time to play hide and seek, not in the museum, but somewhere in the Netherlands. She dresses up her doll in a traditional costume to go to the market, maybe at Noord-Beveland in Zeeland. Getting dressed for the market is a complicated ritual, with strict rules for each place that have been handed down from one generation of women to the next. The doll is Protestant, so she must wear a rounded kerchief on her head in Noord-Beveland (the square ones are for Catholic women living there, or maybe it's the other way around); she wears a golden dickey because she is rich; an

extra white kerchief because she is not married (at least not yet); an apron because it is market day; and a voluminous black wrap because it is the autumn season. But Barbara finds her in a split second because there are hardly any women wearing traditional costumes anymore and certainly no young women walking around in "mooi-tooi." The costumes are part of a dying civilisation that may as well be in the museum along with the Old Masters.

Anyway, the doll is bored in Noord-Beveland and wants a more modern and glamorous life. Her blue eyes have an empty gaze waiting to be filled with more exciting visions, if not blinded by the storm of flashbulbs that illuminate famous people. She wants to be part of Western civilisation, where everyone gets to be famous and everything can be bought, even civilisation itself. She is going to become world-famous as the fashion model whose face graces every single Dutch product that leaves the country: Edam cheese with the red wax seal that you can squeeze in your fingers, Dubble Zoute Drops and, her favourite, stroopwafels. She could even do the advertising campaign for Flower Bomb perfume by Viktor & Rolf. The girl can make her doll into any image to sell any commodity, from a bag of licorice to a perfume bottle. If the doll wears her kerchiefs like a tall crown, her head could appear on coins, just like Queen Beatrix's head, and travel around the Euro zone, moving through hands and pockets and purses and cash registers. No: The doll will travel in person and represent Dutch civilisation around the world. She is going to make an appearance at the living museum Huis Ten Bosch City in Nagasaki, which is more Dutch than anything in the Netherlands. Or she'll live on Holland Street in Disneyland, the best place on earth. She could be the Dutch ambassador's wife, although she's not sure if Disneyland has a Dutch embassy. But it doesn't matter; she'll be so famous that she'll end up in wax at Madame Tussaud's, where everyone will take her picture.

Wherever the doll's face appears, Barbara recognizes her right away: winking on the cheese wheel, looking regal on the coins, smiling at the tourists. The girl has yet another trick: She puts Barbie in a burqa. She covers up the doll's face with several white kerchiefs, which easily double as headscarves; the doll's head and body disappear under black skirts and wraps. Only her big blue eyes are visible, along with her hands, which rest with the fingers spread on her lap. The doll looks like a traditional Muslim woman; she also looks like a citizen hidden behind the voting booth. It's important to be anonymous; in certain situations, no one should be able to see your face. But there is a problem. An inevitable clash of civilisations. The doll is sitting on a chair by a window in a police station in Antwerp because women are not allowed to wear a burqa in public in that city. "Except for certain holidays like the carnival," explains the policeman, "masked people in Western culture are up to no good." But the doll does not want to pay a fine because she has civil

rights, which protect everyone's freedom of religious expression. The policeman says that he is not discriminating against her religion; she is simply breaking the civil code of conduct by covering up too much of her face. The police will fine her, whether she's in a burqa or a Mickey Mouse mask.

The game of hide and seek is over. The girl has to come up with a punishment: Barbie and Barbara must civilise the barbarians. That will teach everybody a lesson. The task is endless; there are all sorts of barbarians. There are the children, the lower classes and the riff-raff who need to be taught hygiene and manners: how to keep your ears clean, how to chew properly at the dinner table, how to walk in high heels while signing autographs on the red carpet. There are the backward people, who live in primitive conditions and need more technology to be modern, like toilets, space ships and milkshake mixers. Then there are the primitives themselves, who idolise magical wooden carvings instead of one God and a bunch of movie stars; the primitives don't know how to read and to write. Sometimes, they eat people; sometimes, they don't wear clothes. Just jewellery, headdresses, feathers or scars, which probably mean something, like the kerchiefs, aprons and golden dikkies. If only the primitives could learn how to wear more clothes on their bodies, which is important to get a job. The girl fashions an apron into a halter top by tying the apron around her doll's neck; it's too hot to wear anything more than an apron where the primitives live. But the doll just sits there watching with a void expression on her face, as she if were an anthropologist, a living blank tape that records a way of life while witnessing it disappear. Whoever the barbarians are – children or primitives – they will be civilised into history. Into extinction.

Civilising all of the savages is far too much work; it's impossible to finish the job before dinnertime. Plus, nobody seems to like being civilised; everyone is discontent; they just want to enjoy their own cultures: low, high, somewhere in-between, native, foreign, exotic, pop. The girl decides to travel far back into the past, all the way back to a period before such confusing distinctions. The name of their destination appears on the dressing table right in front of the mirror: Loutraki Ivi, a Greek brand of bottled water that comes from the springs at Loutraki. Indeed, there's no civilisation without water and Greece. Life begins with clean drinking water; then you have to add some Ancient Greek philosophy and democracy (while ignoring the taste of polytheism and mythology). But the girl wants to relive the myth of Pygmalion; she wants to be the sculptor who fell in love with his creation and brought the inanimate figure to life. The doll is her living statue Galatea. And Barbara is her assistant who has to trek deep into the mountains and steal some marble to make a pedestal for the statue, without being seen by the gods. The girl lovingly strokes the doll's face while trying to decide which

clothes would look best. The doll behaves exactly the way that the girl wants her behave; her body bends to the girl's every gesture, more like warm wax or wet clay under the fingers than stubborn marble. The metamorphosis is already complete. The doll walks, breathes and blinks her eyes, but she never says a single word. If she could speak, wonders the girl, what would she say about civilisation? The girl stands in front of the mirror, watching her creation. Barbara arrives and watches the girl watching her creation. We watch everything.

The World Belongs to Early Risers, The World Belongs to Tourists

Now the image itself has come to life. We are no longer passive spectators, watching the scenes of civilisation that appear before our eyes. We can walk around inside of the image and choose our own perspective. We do not want to civilise people; we do not want to be civilised ourselves; we just want to take pictures, wherever we go. Our trip starts at a bus stop on the long avenue that runs parallel to the beach. As we wait for the bus, we see a glossy ad in the light box inside the bus shelter; instead of showing a product, the ad displays an image of the beach lying right in front of us. In the image, people are tanning on towels; in the distance, closer to the shore, a few people are playing with some plastic toy for the water. The image must be a marker, which means that the beach is authentic and worth seeing. We take a picture of the ad because then we can remember what beach we saw. Unlike a traditional historical site, the image does not have an explanatory plaque; we know we are in front of something significant, but we are not sure why. The only text is the front page of *Corriere della Sera*, which the biggest sunbather in the image is reading. The headline is: "Impronte digitali per gli immigranti." We forgot our dictionary at the hotel. It must be a warning about immigrants who steal digital cameras on the beach.

The bus arrives; we get on, only to get off at the very next stop. After all, we're doing the bus tour to get the authentic insider local view of the city. At the next bus shelter, a similar beach image welcomes us again, like a guide leading on us along the right track. The image looks about the same, except that we are getting closer. Moving inside the image for a closer look, we get to see just how fat and tanned the next sunbather is, after the newspaper reader. We see that the group is not inflating a plastic toy but taking a picture of someone lying on the beach. Maybe someone drowned; maybe the headline was a warning about illegal immigrants drowning at sea. The toy turns out to be one of those reflectors used by fashion photographers, not police photographers. Maybe the headline read: We are looking for digital images of immigrants. Could we pass as immigrants? We could get pictures of ourselves working as models; we photograph the image, just to remember this moment. The bus arrives; we get on and travel to the

next stop, which takes us even deeper inside the image, closer to the body lying on the beach. He looks way too beautiful to be drowned, although the photographer's assistants are holding other tools, besides the light reflector: a white sheet to cover up dead people and a striped band for crime scenes. One man is holding his hand to his chest, maybe in regret. Next bus stop, next close-up: The man's hand looks well groomed but he doesn't have a police or a press badge. We continue, from bus stop to bus stop, from shelter to shelter, until we finally arrive at a close-up of the beached man's face. We seem to be seeing what the photographer sees through his lens: a tanned young man, freshly shaved, with one eye slightly open. He can't be dead; he's a model; everything is a prop. And we are definitely not tanned enough to get our picture taken as immigrants on the beach.

That seems to be the end of the tour. How much closer can you get? We decide to go to the beach; we can work on our tans and look at our photographs. As we walk from the shelter towards the sea, everything is there: The man reading the *Corriere della Serra*, the fat tanned man closer to the shore, the group of photographer's assistants holding their props, the photographer and the model. We ask them ~~if they~~ about the headline. Was it a plaque, a warning or an audition call? "No," they tell us, "this is part of an artwork." They are doing a photo-shoot of a photo-shoot; the images appear in the bus shelters near the beach. We tell them that we just saw all of the images on the bus stop tour! "Then, you're all part of the artwork," they tell us. Wow, we are art. We take a picture because otherwise no one is going to believe us. Who else goes to the beach and gets to be part of an art project? Maybe this experience is inauthentic, due to its patent artifice; but that claim would take us back to the divisive terms of civilisation. The process of looking for authentic markers – and trying to interpret them – joins all tourists with each other, whatever their origin, whatever their destination. We wonder what the plaque says; we make our translations; we keep moving until we end up at a scene that satisfies us; we say "It's like Alice *Beyond the Looking Glass* meets Antonioni's *Blow-Up*" and argue; we say things were good; we heard they were bad; and we always take pictures to continue the conversation with other people in other places.

Jennifer Allen