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Slobostina Barbie

Translated from Croatian by Andrea Milanko and Ulvija Tanovic

The War Cosmetic Bag

Until that day, I always thought such a sound could only be heard at air shows, where planes left blue, white, and red streaks in the sky while the pilots performed daredevil stunts much like Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*. But that day, the air-show Cruises wore the olive green Yugoslav National Army uniforms. I had never been to an air show, but my brother had attended a plane-modeling course in the sixth grade and was taken to one by a Comrade as a reward. And then all of a sudden, the air shows disappeared, just like we were no longer to address anyone at school with "Comrade!" Everything was transformed into something else. For instance, the word "comrade," and the greeting "zdravo" were changed to "Mister/Miss," and "good afternoon." We were ceremoniously admitted to the Pioneers but did not get to be admitted to the Communist Youth. In school, Tito's portrait was replaced by the Croatian national coat of arms and the crucifix. Holy mass was no longer held in a two-room apartment in Bolsiceva Street but in our school hall. The school itself changed its name from the Branko Copic Elementary School to the Otok Elementary School, and it no longer took us on a trip to Kumrovec or Pioneer Town but to the castles of Hrvatsko zagorje. Most of my friends with names like Sasa, Bojan, or Boro suddenly moved away. The letter Y disappeared from the Yugo logo on cars, and a lot of people sewed the Croatian coat of arms, over the star on their Converse high tops. In the name of honor, we stopped swearing by Tito's little key, we no longer played Rade Koncar at Chinese jump rope when we performed the star jump over the elastic bands. Still, those guys with YNA tattoo were probably the worst off.

Ever since the time of those air shows, my brother and I had a kind of small company. I say "a kind of" because he was the one who could dismiss it and summon it up again whenever it pleased him. And I accepted everything since I wanted to hang out with him and his friends at any price. In fact, I had crushes on some of them, although I was constantly aware that they never noticed me and only talked about the good-looking girls from their class, while I had a curtain haircut, and to make matters worse, all I ever wore were these really pathetic non-glittery corduroy ensembles that my mom and grandma were incessantly sewing for me. At that time, my brother was interested in various books on weapons and military aircraft, which he explained to me during those rare moments of goodwill and for want of better company: the Polycarpus 1-16, Henschel Hs 126 A, Messerschmitt Bf 109 E, and various others from the *Illustrated History of Aviation/ Ilustrovana istorija vazduhoplovstva*, as well as some supercool modern ones from a book in English. Although I never found these pictures anywhere nearly as interesting as he did, one or two things were quite OK. I remember an American plane whose nose had an image of a shark. My brother knew everything about planes, weapons, armies. What I found OK was only that shark plane, and the fact that every so often my brother considered me a friend.

Anyway, when the sound of the plane became so loud and so near, I realized what an air show must sound like, even though I had never been to one. Only, to put it mildly, that was not exactly the first thing that occurred to me that afternoon when two planes passed above our heads while we were playing in front of our apartment building.

The next day was supposed to be the first day of school and these were our last precious moments of playing on the grates in front of the apartment building, before the gloomy afternoons in the fall when

we would be forced to do homework. I would start music school again and would have to practice the piano and learn “solfeggio” so that I don’t become a disgrace to mom and dad in front of Mrs. Milic. As the planes flew just above our heads, I was gripped by the sort of fear I had felt before only when Comrade, I mean my teacher, called on us in geometry, flipping through the pages of the class register and lingering somewhere near the letter K. Actually, the feeling that Sunday was far more terrifying. We all fled at once because our fourth-floor neighbor Mrs. Munjekovic shouted at us. All our neighbors popped their heads out the windows, and I saw my mom screaming for me to come home immediately, which I would have done anyway with or without her telling me. We climbed the stairs instead of using the elevator as we usually did when we were coming back from playing. The whole building was in uproar and I raced to the fifth floor in the blink of an eye, my heart pounding so hard I thought I was going to have a heart attack, Like the one my mom told me I would have if I downed a cup of black coffee in one go.

Mom and Dad looked serious and nervous, but not in their usual way, Like when they were fighting or yelling at us for one reason or another. Inside, both the radio and the TV were on, broadcasting the news. And while the TV showed footage of unshaven men at barricades and some slightly less unshaven men under the Croatian coat of arms with President Mr. Franjo Tudman Ph.D at the forefront, we heard an air raid siren. My first air raid siren ever. Up until then I had heard only the one for the anniversary of Comrade Tito’s death, when we all had to stand at attention no matter where we happened to be. The situation in our apartment reached a climax: my dad was rolling down the blinds, my mom went to turn off the gas, and my brother rushed to hide the birdcage with the parrot somewhere away from the window. My heart was pounding again like in that heart attack my mom threatened me with. Then Dad told Mom to fetch the bag that had been packed days before and put in the hallway.

I rushed to collect my own things because I had already prepared myself for this, at least to a certain extent.

I had heard my mom and dad talking on the phone with the rest of the family in increasingly worried tones.

They never missed a news broadcast, and last summer we didn’t go to the seaside except for just a few days. My grandma and granddad had also been very worried, and all the beaches near Zadar had been quite empty, with plenty of room to lay down your towel and other swimming equipment. Everything had led up to a moment that, although we had been expecting it, was no less terrifying. However, we had to keep our wits about us, as our neighbor kept reminding us. His name was Stevo, yet he never moved away. I had also packed my own stuff, but without my mom or dad knowing about it. Into my small Smurfs suitcase I packed my most valuable movable assets, things I wanted to have by my side should the world come to an end. For if a bomb should hit our apartment building and turn it into a smoldering bombsite with sporadic licks of fire and plumes of black smoke, life would not lose all meaning if my Barbie doll remained intact, together with her bright pink suit with little fluorescent lemons, pineapples, and bananas, her pink-and-green watermelon- shaped handbag, her sunglasses, and the peep toe stilettos that went best with this outfit. And of course provided no harm should come to any member of my family, relatives, classmates, or friends from my building. Leaving my Barbie doll at the mercy of the sheiling would have been far too risky, and my Barbie doll on her own was just one small part of my little war cosmetic bag.

For what was Barbie without all the perfect things she simply had to have in abundance? Just a plain village girl from the Handicrafts Store, and I had seen more than enough of those before one day She finally knocked on my door, i.e. my maubox, to be precise. And this was a long time ago, long before all

this business with the planes and sirens. At first, my mom absolutely refused to buy me this plastic piece of perfection, but Barbie was talked about, everybody had heard of her, and some had even got one before me. Ana F. from apartment number seventeen, for instance. Everyone from my building had seen it. And even though it was very small, we all managed to get a pretty good look at the platinum blond cowboy doll in her hands. And not just a look. At the grates where the girls from number seventeen played, you could simply sense there was something out of this world there, something that must have fallen from the sky. Ana had a real Barbie that her aunt had sent her by airmail from America. She had blond hair, bendable knees, and lots of accessories. And the pop singer Neda Ukraden's niece, it was rumored, had no less than fifty real Barbie dolls! Jealousy could not begin to express what those of us who did not have a real Barbie felt. Yes, a real Barbie. For there were all sorts of so-called Barbies made of some hideous plastic material, non-Mattel fakes with puffed-up cheeks, unbendable knees, badly made clothes, catastrophic little shoes—and their names were not even Barbie, but Stefi, Barbara, Gyndy, and other such stupid names. And not having a real Barbie was equal to profound misery. My uncle Ivo from New York put an end to this dark pre-Barbie phase when he sent a real Barbie to my home address because he simply would not stand to have his niece in Yugoslavia deprived of that small but significant token of prestige and prosperity.

And so, one day when my mom and I opened our mailbox, there she was. Snapping out of her alleged indifference, my mom got caught up in my Barbie fever, at least in that moment. I saw it in her eyes. And I honestly did not think any less of her because of it, because you would have to be blind to resist Barbie. The fever consisted of the fact that between me and that most coveted piece of plastic ever there was only a thin layer of brown wrapping paper preventing me from even suspecting what my first real Barbie would look like. And when I unwrapped the package, it was as perfect as it could be, because my first Barbie doll was also my favorite actress, Crystal from *Dynasty*! Come to think of it, it might not have been the Crystal, but it did not matter because I put it into my head that this was Crystal herself. When I opened the box and freed Crystal Barbie from her protective covers, it was as if I touched a small deity. Only this deity was much more perfect than all those fat and grubby ancient goddesses from various exhibitions at the Archeological Museum where Mom and Dad regularly dragged me so I would become cultured from a very early age. The glossy little pink ribbon tied around the waist of her cocktail dress glittering with all the shades of every possible color all at once, and the same pink around her neck, her tiny ring, earrings, silver sequined shoes, a hairbrush and comb, the scent of fresh plastic... it was all so real! No longer an unattainable item I had only seen in commercials on the satellite channels, something I had imagined so many times, pretended to play with as if it were really mine. For the first time in my life I possessed something truly valuable.

My next Barbie doll was a gift from my Uncle Marko. Although it was my second Barbie, and all firsts are, after all, always special, my second Barbie really was an amazing thing. When my Uncle Marko brought me A Day to Night Barbie, only then did I realize what a Barbie doll really was and how many additional things you could get with just one single Barbie. During the day, A Day to Night Barbie wore her little pink plush suit jacket and skirt, she had a computer, a hat, a briefcase, and a tiny pair of pumps. In the picture on the box, she was deeply immersed into her work and her accounts, but at the same time, out of the corner of her eye and through a pair of glasses that made her look smarter. Barbie cast secret glances at Ken. Oh, the romantic twists and turns between the two of them in that little office with a view of the Twin Towers! At night, that same Barbie would take off her suit jacket to reveal a glittery pink bodice, her plush skirt would spout a sparkly veil, she would put on her open-toed heels, take her purse, and leave with Ken for a super-luxurious restaurant on Manhattan. Was

there anything more perfect than this Barbie doll?! I would spend hours upon hours just admiring her ability to transform easily from a businesswoman into a femme fatale, from a femme fatale into a businesswoman. Uncle Lolo brought me my third, the Tropical Barbie. Her accessories were rather sparse, but you had to appreciate that she had some qualities that both my first and second Barbie lacked. True, my cousin Karolina from New York had ten such Tropicanas lying lazily in the transatlantic suitcase she always left lying about at her Grandma Luce's house in Privlaka, but against the earth-and-gray landscape of Slobostina, my Tropicana Barbie was something quite unique to me. She had long blond hair, all the way down to her knees, a tiny Hawaiian bathing suit, and artificial flowers in place of a skirt.

She was neither a glamorous Dynasty star nor a Manhattan businesswoman, but a natural beauty surrounded by the sea, the sun, and the waves. Even though she did not have a single shoe and only one little hairbrush, Tropical Barbie was unsurpassed when it came to her natural features. Later on, the numbers went routinely. The fourth in my collection was not a Barbie but Aerobic Skipper—Barbie's little sister or cousin, whichever you imagined. My parents bought it for me when they went on a trip to Rome with my brother, my aunt Duba, and my cousin Vanja.

Actually, more likely this Skipper doll was a bribe because there was not enough space for me in our Renault 4.

But to be bribed with a Skipper was not all that bad. Aerobic Skipper was almost as perfect as a Barbie, but in a class below her. They did first mean to get me a pathetic little tennis player with only a stupid little racket, but since they decided to prolong their stay in Rome for a whole week, this had to somehow be reflected in my present.

Even though Skipper would never be a Barbie, because she had smaller tits and it was anatomically impossible for her to wear stilettos, anyone with even an ounce of dignity had to have at least one Skipper. Of course, a Ken was absolutely indispensable, although not much happiness could be procured from the fact that one possessed a Ken, given that he was just another Barbie accessory. Anyway, I had seen the Aerobic Skipper before only in the small Barbie catalogue I got for free in the American Pavilion at the Zagreb International Fair and kept in a special folder so it would not be damaged. It came with all manner of sports equipment imaginable. Everything from a pair of leggings and leg warmers, a leotard, two pairs of sneakers (pink and yellow), a baseball cap, a tennis skirt, and a tracksuit. But to talk about excess in the Barbie world is itself excessive, because nobody, and I mean nobody, from this world can have too much of anything from the Barbie world. Too little—by all means! There is never enough. Just to think of all the things missing in my own modest Barbie household! Listing them would take a lifetime, even longer for that matter, especially when it came to all those tiny accessories and small details in pink and violet that I had spent countless hours staring at, hoping that I could somehow bring them to life, make the images from the Barbie catalogue real, things that I could own. Oh, those images from the Barbie world.

Those little Barbie magazines that turned my longing into something utterly painful. And those commercials between two sets of Fun Factory cartoons I watched on Sky Satellite. I remember one Saturday morning when in the middle of the Fun Factory my mom and dad took me away to an exhibition depicting the Passion of Christ with hundreds of different crucifixes. At that moment, more than anything else I just wanted to look at the outfits from Barbie's wardrobe in the commercials that exclaimed "fun! fun! fun!" The night might ease my suffering, but with every glimpse of that perfect world worked out to the last tiny detail, my body came close to bursting with the immensity of my longings.

Eventually, however, you come to terms with your destitution and start seeking out other solutions. They abounded in the Barbie household I put together myself from all kinds of substitutes. Despair at not having all those things from the catalogue had twisted my mind to such an extent that I could turn absolutely anything into a Barbie accessory: the basin my grandma usually used for a relaxing scented foot bath became a Barbie pool, audiotape boxes fitted into an L were perfect for Barbie sofas, bricks from the balcony along with my mom's soil from her potted plants became the building material for my Barbie hanging gardens, eraser caps from mechanical pencils became a set of glasses for my Barbie and her friends, little sample perfume bottles contained top-quality whiskey for cocktail parties that my Barbie threw quite often, a red Converse sneaker became a red Ferrari (albeit with only one seat), towels were rolled into little beds, cans lined up together became a promotion desk for my Barbie ... My own Barbie design motto was "Name anything in the world and I'll tell you what it can become for Barbie!" I made many things on my own, but I also employed forced labor. For example, the cardboard armchairs my grandma lined with purple linen out of her old work clothes, and my mom sewed pillows for them. And as opposed to the pathetic boy clothes they tailored for me, when it came to dressing my Barbie, my mom and grandma were perfectly capable of coming up with sexy-and-spectacular clothes. Most of the tiny outfits they made could never measure up to the originals, but there were some truly brilliant feats of design. Finding the right fabric was the most important thing, an old bathing suit made of colorful synthetics, for instance, or a curtain that closely resembled lingerie. The best item in this category would have to be a transparent corset my mom copied from the Barbie catalogue. Wearing that corset, laid on the bed next to a little night table with a fake book she was not reading anyway, and a picture of Ken (made out of a cutout of Ken's face glued to a piece of cardboard), my Barbie looked almost exactly like the original from the catalogue.

My first original pieces of furniture for Barbie came later on. Actually, they were as close to the real thing as possible. Cyndy, who did not bear much resemblance to Barbie herself, was a passable substitute when it came to furniture. Cyndy furniture was cheaper than Barbie furniture, which is why my mom bought it for me. At first it was only a small dressing table with a little lamp that you could actually turn on, and then there came a little bed. A pink bed with a gold frame. This one time, my brother's friends used little handcuffs from a Kinder egg to handcuff poor Barbie to the bed and made Ken do all sorts of things to her. And Ken came to my little Barbie household in quite an unexpected way. He came in a package with a brunette so-called Barbie and two kids. They were called the Sweetheart Family. What's more, both the spouses had engraved wedding rings on their fingers. I asked my grandma only for a Ken, but she had to go and get me this holy family set that neither me nor my Barbies were too thrilled about, although Barbie's Mattel heart was made of gold. That sissy of a husband would not part, not for a second, from his brunette Sweetheart wife and those two brats. They would even wear matching idiotic aprons when giving the brats a bath. Somehow all that sopppiness had to be stopped. But every time a blond Barbie would charm Ken, there was always that stupid engraved wedding ring sticking out. If only it could have been a removable wedding ring! My grandma seriously miscalculated when she chose this present, because any relationship between this Ken and any of my blond Barbies would automatically qualify as adultery. After this essential unhappy family, there was another Skipper doll from a duty-free shop in Zadar. I convinced my uncle Marko she was indispensable. She came in a bathing suit that changed color in contact with cold or warm water. Although the bathing suit turned a remarkable bluish hue in the so-called mountain basin, flipping about in its glacial waters was not Skipper's favorite pastime.

So, all in all, there were three Barbies, two Skippers, the husband and adulterer Ken and one brunette

Barbie, their two kids, an abundance of handmade clothes, and a scarce quantity of authentic ones, with one dressing table and the little bed. That was my full list of the possessions that I had to protect somehow and insure against any catastrophe, for not a single insurance company would pay me damages if Slobostina were hit by missiles, whether surface-to-air or air-to-surface, or cluster bombs, or shot at by machine guns or automatic rifles, or bombed, or drenched in nerve gas coming either from the entrance to the apartment building or from behind the building.

That is why I had to find some way of fitting everything into my little suitcase. And not just squeezing it all in, but conserving it too; somehow all those Barbies had to be embalmed against the dust and shrapnel that might hit them as well as us. First, the Barbie dolls were put into plastic bags, the kind my mom used to deep-freeze meat, fish, fruit, and vegetables, then each was wrapped in a towel like a mummy, and then they were all together put into a special linen bag before they were packed into the little suitcase. The clothes were in a separate bag, along with a few scented moth repellents I stole from my mom's drawer, and the dressing table was dismantled and packed in its original box. The only problem was the little bed—it just would not fit into the little suitcase. I racked my brain trying to figure out how to best conserve and transfer this small but extremely important relic to the catacombs. And so, despite a long period of brain-racking and many attempts to squeeze it into the cosmetic bag, the bed issue remained unresolved throughout the war. In fact, not solving this issue reflected a trace of hope that nothing serious would happen, that there would be no sirens or war. And yet all of that happened. The bed issue had to be resolved ad hoc.

It was a matter of the utmost importance to immediately go to the basement. All the neighbors had already been running down the steps my mom and dad hurried us. As I was running toward the front door of the apartment, carrying the suitcase in my hand and the little pink bed with the golden frame under my arm, I heard a slap and felt a tingling sensation on my cheek. It was a slap, from my brother's hand, and then the words, "Leave that stupid bed, you idiot!" It was not the time or place to argue, I simply had to do it. The bed was left to the mercy of the YNA. I had to hope for the best! We went downstairs towards the basement and I was afraid of the planes and everything that was happening. The planes were still flying overhead, though now they were louder, and since I did not get a chance to see them but only hear them, I imagined them in my mind according to the pictures from the Illustrated History of Aviation, the section on "Warriors in the Sky."

When we reached the basement, the whole apartment building had already gathered there: Tea, Dea, Svjetlana, Ana P., Ana Matic, Borna, Kreso, Sanjica, and Marina. They all had already come down into the basement. I remember I could not stop crying, and then the air raid warning stopped a half an hour later, and we all returned to our apartments.

That evening I slept on the mattress in my parents' bedroom. Did I say sleep? Well, I was actually listening for the sounds of the iron wings of our army. And while I was falling asleep, a Pilot Barbie flew over me, wearing camouflage in shades of pink and leaving a stark pink trace from a Fear Factory episode on a Sunday. For Barbie can be whatever she pleases. Even more than what the little catalogue or the commercials promise.

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