

## “BARBIE VS. TERRORISM AND THE PATRIARCHY”

Much of my early knowledge of how the world works was formed through countless hours spent playing with Barbie dolls. My sister, Taylor, and I had a plethora of toys, filling our basement’s cabinets and often littering our brightly checkered IKEA rug, but Barbie was our favorite. We gave her choppy, unfortunate haircuts, houses constructed out of large wooden dominoes, and a variety of cars— a neon orange truck, a convertible with a bubblegum-pink steering wheel, and a Volkswagen Beetle with a missing back tire.

Above the basement, the kitchen radio spewed out information— the news of the 9/ 11 attacks on our friends’ parents at the Pentagon, the War in Afghanistan, and the D.C. area snipers’ attacks on our entire community— but Taylor and I had trouble understanding what the information meant.

As my mom drove me to a doctor’s appointment, our local station announced that the snipers had shot someone just miles away. After I “raced” her inside into the waiting room, I soaked in the murmur about guns, a white van, and two very bad men. In the car ride home, I asked her a myriad of questions about terrorism including, “Do bullets go through glass?” Her responses left me still craving answers, so I took matters into my own hands. At five years old, I decided to enlist Barbie in the army.

While I fought against my penetrating fear of the world outside our haven of toys, Barbie herself fought against the very terrorism I was afraid of. In what we called our “Barbie Afghanistan,” Taylor and I worked through our confusion by making Barbie fight the battles, still wearing her high heels and ball gowns.

I no longer play with Barbie, but she has fought another war in my adolescence. I’m a passionate feminist, and my opinions about Barbie have caused an internal tug-of-war on my beliefs. As I sit in my basement now, surrounded by books and my laptop, I have just as many questions as I did at five years old.

I’ve desperately attempted to consolidate my opposing opinions of Barbie into a single belief, but I’ve accepted that they’re separate. In one, she has perpetuated physical ideals unrepresentative of how real female bodies are built. Striving to look like Barbie is not only striving for the impossible— the effort is detrimental to women’s psychological and physical health, including my own. In the other, Barbie has inspired me in her breaking of the plastic ceiling. She has dabbled in close to 150 careers, including some I’d love to have: a UNICEF Ambassador, teacher, and business executive. And although it’s not officially listed on her résumé, Barbie served honorably in the War in Afghanistan.

Barbie has proven to be an 11.5-inch-tall embodiment of both what frustrates and excites me. From terrorism to feminism and beyond, I am vexed by the complexities of the world but eager to piece things together. Although I’m frustrated by what I can’t understand, I’ve realized that confusion is okay.

With Barbie as my weapon, I’ve continued to fight in the many “wars” in my life. I’ve found great value in the questions I ask and in my attempts to reconcile our world’s inevitable contradictions. Things can be innocent yet mature, they can be detrimental yet empowering, and they can even wear high heels and a ball gown while fighting in a war.

## “GRANDMA’S KIMCHI”

Every Saturday morning, I’d awaken to the smell of crushed garlic and piquant pepper. I would stumble into the kitchen to find my grandma squatting over a large silver bowl, mixing fat lips of fresh cabbages with garlic, salt, and red pepper. That was how the delectable Korean dish, kimchi, was born every weekend at my home.

My grandma’s specialty always dominated the dinner table as kimchi filled every plate. And like my grandma who had always been living with us, it seemed as though the luscious smell of garlic would never leave our home. But even the prided recipe was defenseless against the ravages of Alzheimer’s that inflicted my grandma’s mind. Dementia slowly fed on her memories until she became as blank as a brand-new notebook. The ritualistic rigor of Saturday mornings came to a pause, and during dinner, the artificial taste of vacuum-packaged factory kimchi only emphasized the absence of the family tradition. I would look at her and ask, “Grandma, what’s my name?” But she would stare back at me with a clueless expression. Within a year of diagnosis, she lived with us like a total stranger.

One day, my mom brought home fresh cabbages and red pepper sauce. She brought out the old silver bowl and poured out the cabbages, smothering them with garlic and salt and pepper. The familiar tangy smell tingled my nose. Gingerly, my grandma stood up from the couch in the living room, and as if lured by the smell, sat by the silver bowl and dug her hands into the spiced cabbages. As her bony hands shredded the green lips, a look of determination grew on her face. Though her withered hands no longer displayed the swiftness and precision they once did, her face showed the aged rigor of a professional. For the first time in years, the smell of garlic filled the air and the rattling of the silver bowl resonated throughout the house.

That night, we ate kimchi. It wasn’t perfect; the cabbages were clumsily cut and the garlic was a little too strong. But kimchi had never tasted better. I still remember my grandma putting a piece in my mouth and saying, “Here, Dong Jin. Try it, my boy.” Seeing grandma again this summer, that moment of clarity seemed ephemeral. Her disheveled hair and expressionless face told of the aggressive development of her illness.

But holding her hands, looking into her eyes, I could still smell that garlic. The moments of Saturday mornings remain ingrained in my mind. Grandma was an artist who painted the cabbages with strokes of red pepper. Like the sweet taste of kimchi, I hope to capture those memories in my keystrokes as I type away these words.

A piece of writing is more than just a piece of writing. It evokes. It inspires. It captures what time takes away.

My grandma used to say: “Tigers leave furs when they die, humans leave their names.” Her legacy was the smell of garlic that lingered around my house. Mine will be these words. “MAZES” My