

Burning Barbie

by Susan S. Calfee

“Pardon me, miss,” I said to the WalMart clerk, flashing my most lady-like smile. I held out a narrow pink box. “Will this burn?”

She blinked several times, pudgy fingers pushing thick glasses up the bridge of her powdered nose. “Excuse me?”

I tilted the box to make sure she could see inside. “This. Can you light this on fire?”

I plunked a large bag filled with charcoal, kerosene and over-sized matches on the counter. The woman glanced around nervously and backed up a step.

“That’s Princess Barbie,” she breathed.

“Right. You don’t have Home Wrecker Barbie, but she’ll do. My question is, will she burn, or just melt?”

The clerk clapped a hand to the cross at her throat. “Ma’am, I think Mattel products are supposed to be...inflammable.”

My eyes were fixed on Barbie’s synthetic blond tresses, her impossibly perky breasts.

“I know,” I sighed, swiping my credit card. “But one can always hope. Have a nice day.”

I tossed the bag into the back of my SUV. Hauled myself into the driver’s seat. Cranked on the ignition and the Oldies station. Rammed the gearshift into reverse, completing the full range of my sequential capabilities.

These days I couldn’t eat, sleep or cry in any order; feel my feet touch solid ground or read a full sentence. Memory was extinct, concentration shot. I was too brain dead to write my own name. No wonder I’d had nothing published in months. Since my recent divorce from a thirty-year marriage I was living my own mini- version of the Poseidon Adventure. Down was up, up was down. I had, quite literally, flipped.

But hoped no one had noticed.

In the car mirror, dark-ringed eyes above sunken cheeks stared out from under a fly-away tangle of red wisps.

“Perfect. You’re Medusa,” I told my reflection. I backed out of the parking lot and sped toward the public beach far south of the clubby, crowded ones. Here my coven of friends and I could be incognito.

After all, this was a private exorcism. Invitation only.

The parking lot was nearly empty except for the days' littering of brown bags, crushed cans, broken bottles. Sea grass lined the wooden walkway. It led to the beach between screen-porched cottages and sloping dunes. The salty breeze mixed with gas fumes and creosote carried the cries of gulls.

My partners in crime were parked and waiting. Six arms waving wildly like antennae on a multicolored sea creature.

"Damn, girl, what took you so long?" In her uniform khaki shorts and white sleeveless shirt, Kate cranked open my SUV's hatchback with one twist of her tanned bicep. She was our athlete, a tennis star; tall, broad, lanky, invincible. Short blond curls sat on her head like a crown.

Vanessa, our event planner, peered into the jumble, tightened the silky blue sweater knotted at her neck. Blankets, totes, chairs and charcoal appeared neatly piled on the tarmac as if by magic. She dusted off her white Capri's, patted her sleek dark ponytail. Flashed her personal high-sign with two fingers. "V" for Vanessa, queen of volunteers.

"Nice job, looks like a picnic to me, though the camouflage can only last so long."

She gave me a side-long grin, pointing at the WalMart bag, "Meggie, I saved the best for last. You get to do the honors."

I stuffed Barbie in with the kerosene and matches. "Let's do this before I chicken out." My knobby knees banged together, legs wobbled like they were rubberized.

Gwen, music teacher by day, party girl by night, hoisted two champagne bottles into the sky. "Here's to the bravest chicken ever," she hollered. "There's more bubbly in the cooler along with other goodies, all fattening." She grabbed the handle of her ice chest- on- wheels, turned with a sweep of ankle length tie-dye and samba-ed toward the walkway.

We bumped and dragged down the rickety stairs where I had to catch my breath, as always, at the first sight of the sea. The endless ocean lay before us under a tranquil day's-end sky. A soft sea wind nudged the water ashore in foamy rings where sandpipers pecked for their dinner.

Twilight. The beach's best hour.

Not many people around. A few joggers, dog-walkers, a strolling couple or two.

We paused, panting, scanning the terrain for the perfect site for witch's work.

To the left a yellow umbrella shaded a patchwork of towels scattered with dolls, shovels and buckets. In waist deep surf, a young father, tall and muscled, tossed and dipped a tow-headed toddler. She emerged from each wave kicking and sputtering. "More, Daddy, more," she shrieked.

The mother, in a one-piece and big-brimmed hat, hovered at the shoreline. She held a squirming baby in a pale pink cap.

God. That was us. My heart ripped open at this snapshot of my past. Tears stung my eyes. Hope her story ends better than mine.

My friends saw the mom, the dad, the girls. Chatter ceased, seagulls wailed and everyone looked at me.

Wet sand held my feet like cement. For a long spinning moment I searched the sunset, struggling to catch my breath. A sudden breeze ruffled my hair, cooled my face, stirred the sand to glitter. The sky promised stars.

“Let’s keep moving. That way,” I commanded, grinding my heels in a pivot. My skinny arm poked forward like a drill sergeants, tee shirt sleeve flapping in the wind. Dressed in drab olive green I looked part soldier, part scarecrow.

We marched silently in the opposite direction. Our feet made swishy sounds in the sand. Someone’s hand touched my shoulder.

Then we were in the shelter of sun-warmed dunes.

“This is the spot,” I said.

We dropped everything where we stood. Groaning, we stretched and inhaled deep gulps of balmy air, then made a circle of chairs.

With tie-dye skirt brushing the sand, Gwen grabbed a stick and drew musical notes around us in the sand. “To ward off evil spirits,” she smirked. “It’s a real grabber for seventh grade screw offs.”

I rummaged through our gear for the retractable shovel, the charcoal Brickquettes, the kerosene and matches.

Swinging her tawny braid behind her Gwen jabbed a finger to the fading sky, silver bangles clanging like chimes. “First things first.” Out came a bottle from the cooler. One twist and we heard the welcome pop.

Vanessa pushed up the sleeves of her blue silk sweater, passed out matching Witch cups and napkins. “Halloween leftovers,” she chuckled.

Mine overflowed with splashes of cool amber liquid that trickled along my arm.

“Meggie, I remember force-feeding you oatmeal,” Gwen continued. Three heads bobbed in agreement. “And here you are guzzling champagne, ready to move on. I propose a toast.”

Kate and Vanessa lifted their cups, faces gilded by the setting sun.

"To Barbies everywhere," Gwen incanted. "Long may they burn."

"To freedom," I shouted.

For a moment there was only the soft surge of distant breakers. The whisper of water on sand. Warm hands in mine, the rainbow remnant of sunset.

Then, night.

"Okay, I'll start digging," I said, jamming my tee shirt into my saggy shorts. "You guys set the table."

Flashlights appeared and everyone moved at once. The table was an old tattered sheet with a rose motif.

Sand flew in all directions until I was a foot down in a pit large enough for fifty Barbies. I was dripping sweat, chewing grit, beyond feeling. I whacked open three bags of Brickquettes and dumped them in.

"Now for the best part," I said, calmly manic. I emptied two large kerosene bottles onto the black coals until they glistened in the dark. "That ought to do it."

I held out my empty cup. Gwen filled it to the brim.

"Here's the fried chicken you requested," said Vanessa. She took the shovel from my hand, and replaced it with a piled high plate. "Brownies, too, for later. If there is a later. You going to eat something or just drink dinner?"

Kate slapped mosquitoes. Rubbed bug repellent into her neck and hair while dragging a chair in my direction. She stepped close, tucked some tendrils behind my ear. "Stop pacing and sit. You'll wear a hole in the beach."

I tried to obey; chew, swallow food I could not taste. The champagne was working, though. I took another long swig and stared at the stars.

"Every morning I wake up to a bad dream. Not from one. It's like I've crash-landed on some other planet. I know what's happened. But I can't believe it."

Only the distant pounding of breakers cut the silence.

"And when you're not a zombie, you're homicidal. You were married thirty years to a poser who used unprepared, unsuspecting you to hide his double life. No wonder you can't write. Or anything else. We understand," Vanessa soothed.

"I was so accepting. So blind. I'm afraid I'll never trust again."

A ruby flush climbed Kate's cheeks. She rocked forward onto her knees, her khaki shorts blending into the sand.

"You took a vow. And don't ever apologize for trust."

“Indeed,” said Gwen around a mouthful of drumstick. “Talk about insanity.”

A whiff of kerosene floated on the breeze, redolent of funeral pyres, freedom marches.

I felt the tears, the whys, the waste boil up like lava. The goodbye moment had come.

“Ladies,” I announced, bounding from my chair. “It’s time for the fireworks.”

A torrent of matchbooks landed at my feet.

With a theatrical bow I bent to pick one up. Scratch, scratch, whoosh. I sent it sailing in blue-tipped, slow motion splendor into the waiting pit.

Ka-Voom.

Flames burst into a fiery funnel no doubt visible in police stations for miles around. We leapt back from the searing heat.

“Takes care of the bugs,” said Kate.

“Very funny. You guys ready?”

“Burn, Blister, Melt and Bubble. No More You’ll Cause This Heart to Trouble,” I screeched. “Here goes.”

Princess Barbie rocketed through the night like a pink torpedo. The roaring flames were so loud we didn’t even hear her hit.

We watched her disappear in the blaze. Her gown turning to flying embers. Blond locks frying to a crisp. Sizzling to nothing.

Motionless, we stared at each other through the smoke.

“Wow,” Vanessa whispered, wiping a hand across her glistening brow. “She burns, all right. Ding dong, the wicked witch is dead. And leave it to Megan to make it a literary event. Shakespeare is spinning out of his grave.”

Kate solemnly eyed the fire pit. “You believe that? She really is melting. Only thing better would be to have Ken go with her.”

Crimson flames leapt higher into the sky.

Vanessa tightened the knot of her sweater. “Don’t worry. He’s already been burned.”

Gwen nodded to me and held out her arms. “Go ahead and cry, Meggie. It happens at endings. But it happens at beginnings, too. You’re doing great, you’re letting go. You’re going to have a wonderful life, even if the future looks like a black hole. Mystery can be exciting when you’re in control. You have gifts which will save you. And you are loved.”

“You’ll write about this someday,” Kate added. “Tell it and sell it. That’s what I call poetic justice. How

about... ‘Burning Barbie – The Musical’?”

Everyone gaped as if we were hard of hearing. How could this be funny, so fast? We screamed, bellowed, doubled over. Stamped our feet. Wiped our eyes, as if laughter was a pill we all needed. The desert we forgot to eat.

“I hate to get practical, girls,” said Vanessa, “but I think we’d better clean this mess up before somebody calls the cops. This is a public beach. We’ve been getting some strange looks, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“Race you to the water,” said Kate.

We grabbed our buckets and pounded after her into the surf. Gasping, we dragged them back, sloshing and spilling, to douse the blaze. Shoveled and scooped wet sand like Girl Scouts on steroids.

The fire hissed to a smoldering ash pile.

“Whew,” I sighed, “Barbie still stinks, dead or alive.”

“Yeah, but you win,” Kate said.

Stuffing trash into plastic bags Vanessa raised the last of the champagne to the heavens. “There’s enough for one more toast, just drink from the bottle. To Now,” she cried.

We passed and sipped. “To Now!”

Led only by the moon, we zigzagged back down the beach and along the walkway to the deserted parking lot. Sea sounds were replaced by the slap-slap of our footsteps. First on wood, then on asphalt.

It was almost pitch dark except for a few dim, buzzing overhead lights.

We hoisted the trash into a smelly, over-filled bin. Toweled sand from our arms, legs and feet.

“It’s going to take a vat of shampoo to clean this mop,” said Kate, raking her fingers through her curls.

“I was thinking the same thing,” added Vanessa, freeing her ponytail from its ribbon. “Not to mention these clothes, which we should have burned while we were at it. It was worth it, though. What a night.”

“Actually I’m sick of this thing,” said Gwen, strolling toward the dumpster. “Don’t panic, there’s another layer,” she laughed, shucking her skirt

Kate brushed her hands together. “Takes dedication to burn a Barbie.”

Our hugs were brief, a bond of loyalty passing between us like an electric current.

Cupping each sooty cheek, I murmured, “Thank you for joining my insanity.”

Car doors slammed, engines rumbled to life. We waved, blew kisses through open windows. Someone cranked up the Oldies station. ‘Lean On Me,’ was the final sound I heard as their cars crunched

away.

I was last in the caravan to pull out of the lot. I punched on the Oldies, shout-singing in the clean night air, following their red winding trail into the dark.

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