

Sex Ed With Barbie and GI Joe

by Julie Britt

As soon as I discovered that nasty thing the grownups called “sexuality,” I just knew it would get me in a lot of trouble some day—with Jesus, my parents and some yucky boy—so I hid it. But my Mama and Daddy noticed my sinful sexiness way before I knew I had it, not to mention what I was supposed to do with it.

I was only 10—too young to be thinking about boys, sex and chastity, a real important and mysterious word they talked about in church all the time.

One night I was filling the tub when I realized we were out of bubble bath. I turned off the faucet and briefly considered taking a bath in plain old water. No. That wouldn't be good enough. It was summer, and I had spent most of the afternoon playing in the woods with Josh, my pesky little brother. I needed the extra clean that only Mr. Bubble could bring. I figured Mama had a fresh box in the pantry.

“Mama!” I called through the bathroom door.

No answer.

Daddy probably had turned up the TV so he could hear his western above the racket from the kitchen, where Mama was busy preparing our big Sunday dinner for the next day. She had to get an early start or the roast would never be done in time to eat promptly at one. We'd be home from church by twelve-thirty, so Mama and I would have half an hour to heat the roast, warm up some canned vegetables, fry some yellow cornbread and get everything on the table.

My job was deviling the eggs. I was pretty good at it, but sometimes I put in too much mayonnaise, which made the filling too soupy, or too much mustard, which made it runny and kind of spicy. Oh, and don't forget to drain the sweet pickle relish. If I put all that juice in there that egg mush would drip all out the sides of those egg whites, even if I had managed to slice them into two more-or-less even halves. Most of the time if I got the filling just right, I'd end up tearing up the white part when I spooned it in, then I just had a mess.

Usually we could make do, but one time Mama told me to just forget it, the eggs looked so awful. She put everything in one of her new Tupperware containers, burped it for freshness and then shoved it into the fridge. Josh and Daddy and I had egg salad sandwiches for lunch the next day.

"Where are the deviled eggs?" Daddy had asked after I said the blessing, the new one about Johnny Appleseed I had learned in Girl Scouts.

"We're not having any," Mama answered.

"It's Sunday. We always have deviled eggs on Sunday," he said.

Josh nodded. "It's weird without eggs," he said, trying to make his spoon stick to his nose.

"We don't play at the table," Daddy said, taking Josh's spoon. "This food is God's blessings on us, and we have to show respect while we're partaking of it. You'd never catch me playing at dinner. MawMaw Hopewell would've sent me to my room without any vittles at all."

Josh, squirming in his chair as usual, like he had ants in his pants, looked around for something else to play with. He couldn't just sit and eat. He had to do something else at the same time.

"Mrs. Hastings says growing boys and girls should never, ever skip meals, and each meal should have something from the four food groups," he said, piling his corn onto his fork with his hand. "I made a B on that test and I'm pretty sure eggs are one of the food groups."

"Don't use your fingers, Josh. You know better than that. If you'd listen to us half as much as you listen to Mrs. Hastings, you wouldn't spend so much time in your room, thinking about how bad you've been," Mama said.

Mama liked to remind us how bad we were. It seemed to make her feel good. One time me and Josh had been good near about all day, even though it was raining and we had to stay inside and play quietly so she could hear herself think for a change.

Josh played GI Joe, without the machine gun and bomb noises, and I read my Black Stallion book and made up stories in my head about the adventures my horse and I would have some day, except I didn't really have a horse, I just wanted one real bad. Josh did a good job of keeping quiet while making GI Joe crawl on his belly under the coffee table.

"You younguns have been so good today," Mama said at bedtime. "I don't know what to make of it."

She seemed confused and not all that pleased. I think she had gotten bored with all that time on her hands when we weren't being bad. Yelling at us and making us go to our rooms usually took up a big part of her day. Being good was hard.

Staying clean was hard, too. I needed that bubble bath. Mama

couldn't hear me calling her through the bathroom door, the clanking and clunking of pots and pans, and gunfire, so I had to go find the Mr. Bubble myself.

But I was already nekkid. So I grabbed a towel and started to wrap it around me. It was bright yellow, like I imagined Ellie Mae Clampett's hair would be in real life. You couldn't tell on our television. Everything was just black and white and gray and snowy, unless Daddy climbed on the roof and straightened the antenna.

I always wanted long blonde hair like Ellie Mae's. Mine was kind of beige. Mama called it dirty blonde, even though I washed it when it needed it.

I wrapped the yellow towel around my hair, which actually was dirty that night. Yeah, blonde was definitely more fun. I looked a lot like Ellie Mae, except my chest was flat as a flitter. And naked. I grabbed another towel and wrapped it around my body one time. My cousin, Carol, could wrap a towel almost twice. Mama said she was too skinny, but I thought she was just right.

I held the towel up with my arms clamped down tight and headed to the kitchen.

"Mama, did you get some more Mr. Bubble at the store? I think Josh used it all," I said.

Mama didn't even turn from the sink where she was washing stinky old collards.

"Look in the pantry."

I found the pink box and headed back toward the bathroom.

"Mary Faith Hopewell, you're getting too big to walk around half

naked in front of your Daddy and Josh," she said.

"I'm all covered up," I said.

"Don't argue. One day when you're old enough, I'll explain," she said. "Now go take your bath and study your Sunday school lesson. Why do you have a towel on your head when you haven't even washed your hair?"

"It's my long, blonde hair," I said, pirouetting. I nearly lost my other towel.

"You've ruined two towels and you haven't even washed. Do you think I don't have anything better to do than stand over that washing machine all day? I declare, you younguns are going to send me to an early grave."

"Hush up. I can't hear the TV," Daddy said without taking his eyes off the screen. Little Joe Cartwright was kissing some girl. She was as good as dead.

"I wouldn't kiss Little Joe, even if he is the cutest man on TV, and even if he has the prettiest horse," I vowed. "All the girls that kiss him wind up shot or sick and dead by the end of the show. They ought to kiss Hoss. Nobody ever kisses him and nobody dies."

"Nobody ain't gonna kiss you anyway," Josh said from the floor, where he was taking apart the new GI Joe Jeep he got for his birthday.

"I said hush up. Can't I watch one show in peace?" Daddy said, turning in his recliner. "Josh, do you have to tear up everything? Put them wheels back on that truck."

"It ain't a truck, it's a..."

Josh stopped when he saw the look on Daddy's face.

Daddy started to turn back to Little Joe's doomed romance when he caught sight of me.

"Girl, you're getting too big to run around in front of Josh and me like that," he said. "Go put your clothes on and don't let me catch you prancing around half naked like that no more."

"But I have to take a bath," I said.

"Don't sass me. Do what I said. Why do you younguns always talk back? If I'd talked back to PawPaw Hopewell like that he would've knocked me winding."

I hurried toward the bathroom. I didn't exactly know what it meant to be knocked winding, but it didn't sound good, not tonight and not all the other times Daddy said it to make us behave like good Christian boys and girls who made Jesus proud.

"Why haven't you told her about that stuff?" I heard him ask Mama. "She's old enough."

I couldn't hear the rest, but I could imagine my mother's face. She'd roll her eyes and shake her head like she just couldn't bear one more second of that man's bossiness. I'd heard her say that to Aunt Marge.

"That's just the way men are. Get used to it, sis," Aunt Marge had said. "If they ain't telling somebody what to do, they ain't happy."

Sinking down into my warm bubble bath, I vowed for the umpteenth time that I would never ever get married.

Nosiree.

I started to feel a little bit nervous and sad all at the same time. That's the way I always ended up feeling when Mama and Daddy would fight or talk loud.

But I got over it when I came up with the idea to give myself some real long blond hair made of soap lather. It was better than a towel because I could shape it into all kinds of hairdos. I wiped the steam off my Barbie hand mirror and decided I'd look real good with a tall poufy hairdo. Daddy called it a stupid ugly beehive when Aunt Marge did her hair that way, but I thought it looked good, especially when she stuck a poke-a-dot bow in it.

The warm water made me a little drowsy, so I decided to rinse my hair and get out. But I started imagining myself with a fancy hairdo, sprayed and teased and all, and I was all grown up with titties and a bra and high heels. I'd have lots of boyfriends, but I wouldn't marry any of them, even when they begged.

I kept that story going in my head until the water got cold.

It was time to get out and study my Sunday school lesson. It was a good one. Joseph's daddy gave him a special coat last week, and all of his mean brothers got mad. I couldn't wait to see how Joseph would pay them back for being so mean to him.

After that night I made sure I didn't walk around half naked, most of the time. I had a bad habit of jumping in the bathtub, playing or reading or making up stories and just losing track of where I was. Then when the water would get cold, bringing me back to myself, I'd remember that I forgot to get my pajamas out of the drawer. I'd wrap my towel around me good and tight, making sure all my girl parts were covered, then I'd run down the hall to my room.

Mama and Daddy never caught me, but Josh saw me one time. He had gone into my room, thinking he'd sneak some of my Barbies out while I was in the tub. He always wanted me to play war with him and pretend like Barbie was the scared woman that GI Joe would rescue from the Russians or Communists or Viet Cones or somebody. I'd play along, but we always got in a fight at the end. After Joe saved Barbie from the dungeon or pit or wherever the bad guys put her, I'd want her to give Joe a big old hug and kiss, right on the lips. But Josh said no, GI Joe don't kiss. He's tough. I would point out that the girls always kiss the soldiers in the movies.

"I know. That's why I always close my eyes at the end. I hate that mushy stuff," he said. "Them girls are always prancing around with their chests hanging out, saying 'darling' and 'honey' and stuff. I hate that. It makes me feel funny. I think the soldiers should just rescue the stupid girls and then get back in the Jeep or plane or tank and just go on. I bet that's what real soldiers do. You don't ever see those Green Berets on the news kissing and stuff."

"Well, not in real life. But in the movies..."

"Yeah, well, this ain't the movies and I'm in charge of GI Joe, and I say he don't kiss no girls."

"Oh, go on and play with your stupid doll," I said. "I'm gonna read anyway."

"He ain't no doll. I keep on telling you GI Joe ain't no doll. I don't play with dolls. That'd make me some kind of sissy, like you, always talking about kissing and reading and stuff."

Well, maybe Josh thinks he don't play with dolls, but when I came out of the bathroom that day, he was in my room, holding Barbie in one hand and GI Joe in the other. Then he made them kiss, right on

the mouth.

“What are you doing?” I asked. Josh dropped both dolls and hooked his thumbs into his pockets.

“Nothing.”

“You were too doing something. You were making Barbie and GI Joe kiss. I saw.”

“You didn't see nothing cause I didn't do nothing. And I'm gonna tell Mama and Daddy that you were going around in front of me without your clothes on. They said you couldn't do that cause Jesus don't like naked girls, or something like that,” he said.

“When did they say that?”

“One night when you were flouncing around in a towel trying to be fancy or something. They thought I'd gone to my room, but I was hiding under the couch because that's where the Russians were getting ready to ambush the troops, and I had to make sure GI Joe was ready to ...”

“I don't care where you were or what you were doing with your stupid doll. What did they say?” I asked.

“For the last time, he ain't no doll,” Josh yelled.

“Okay. Just tell me.”

“Mama said something about you not knowing what looking at naked girls does to men, that you didn't mean it, you were just playing around. And Daddy said it was hard enough to be a Christian man when all the women are running around in mini skirts and no bras without having his own flesh and blood acting like a harlot.”

“What's a harlot?”

“I think it's a bad woman. It's in the Bible, though, so it must not be a bad word,” Josh said.

“Hell is in the Bible but that's a bad word,” I said. “Dung's in there too, but you won't catch me saying it. Daddy'd knock me winding.”

“He'll knock you winding worse than that if he finds out you were talking to me and being naked at the same time. But I promise I won't tell if you promise you won't tell,” he said.

“Tell what?”

“That you saw me making Barbie kiss GI Joe. I wasn't really doing that, but that's what you think, so don't tell nobody and I won't.”

“Cross your heart and hope to spit?” I asked.

“Yeah. May I be boiled in oil if I ever tell. That's an oath. Bobby's big brother taught us.”

“Deal.”

Josh kept his bargain, and I kept mine. Mama and Daddy never found out I was running around half-naked, and I never made Josh look like a sissy who plays with dolls.

But I kept getting in trouble over all that boy-girl stuff anyway. Most of the time I could figure out how to behave. I spent most of my day trying to keep my eyes on Jesus so I wouldn't sin or make anyone else sin. I tried real hard not to worry Mama when she was busy or tuckered out. She was always one or the other.

And most of the time I didn't leave my Barbies' high heels laying around where Daddy'd step on them and say bad words that made Mama yell at both of us.

But that boy-girl stuff got everybody more riled up than anything, and half the time I didn't even know what I'd done wrong.

Like that one time when I was dressing Barbie for a date with GI Joe. I had paid Josh a whole quarter to let me play with him. I had Barbie's skirt on, but I was having trouble getting that sparkly top on. Then I had to pee so bad I couldn't stand it, so I dropped Barbie and her skirt in the middle of the floor and high-tailed it for the bathroom.

That reminds me of that joke Josh learned at Boy Scout camp. He got in trouble for telling it. It goes: If a bean's a bean, what's a pea? All the dumb boys yelled out "a pea," of course. But the answer is a relief.

I didn't get it at first. Josh explained it real good, though. That's when he got in trouble. He had to go to his room and think about how Jesus can't use nasty-mouthed children to do his good works.

I came back from the bathroom, all relieved and everything. Josh had come in from whatever smelly place he'd been, and he was just staring at Barbie.

"How come her knockers are so pointed?" he asked.

"I don't know. I reckon that's the way titties are supposed to look," I said, trying to squeeze her into that fancy shirt.

"Do yours look like that?"

“Not yet. I reckon they will when I grow up.”

“You’ll look silly then,” Josh said. Then he stuck his hands under his T-shirt and made him some pointy titties with his fingers.

“Look, I’m Barbie,” he said in a high voice. I reckon he was trying to sound like a girl.

“Me, too,” I said in my own voice, since I’m already a girl.

We kept poking our pretend titties out while we flounced around the den. Then Josh got the idea to stand on our tippy toes so we’d look like we were wearing Barbie’s spiky high heels. We wiggled our bottoms, too, since that’s the way women walk when they wear those things.

“What in tarnation are you younguns doing?” Daddy roared. He always came home early at the wrongest times.

“Nothing,” we said together, taking our hands out and plopping down on the couch.

“I know what you were doing. That nasty mess will not go on in this house. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

Josh was crying.

“Boy, hush up. It’s bad enough for you to be pretending to be a girl without all that sissy whimpering,” Daddy said.

“We’re sorry,” I said, patting Josh on the shoulder. “We were just playing.”

“That ain't no way to play. Now put that doll's clothes on and don't let me catch you sashaying around like that no more. You're lucky I didn't give you both a whipping.”

Josh was about to choke from holding his crying in. He was gonna get a whipping for sure if I didn't fix things real fast.

“Daddy, why don't you make us go to our rooms and read our Bibles and think about our sins and wickedness.”

“Go on,” he said.

I jumped up and pulled Josh with me down the hall. Our legs made a funny sound because they were stuck to the couch. We were both real sweaty from all that sashaying and flouncing.

I bout shoved Josh into his room. As the door closed, I heard him let out a whimper like a puppy when you rock on its tail.

Then I remembered I forgot Barbie.

Daddy didn't say nothing when I picked her up. Her blouse was hanging on to one arm.

I tugged and tugged until I got that top on. I don't know why somebody'd make a doll with big pointy titties and then make their clothes so little. At least they stay on once you figure out how to do it. Their stupid high heels won't stay on for half a second. I let her go barefoot most of the time, but that looks dumb when she's wearing her spangledy outfits.

When I started back toward my room, I saw Daddy looking at me. Well, he was mostly looking at my chest, right where my pointy pretend titties had been. I was afraid he was remembering my nastiness, so I hurried to my room before he could yell at me again.

I put Barbie in her deluxe carrying case, then I looked at my chest. It looked the same as usual, but I could sort of see my ninnies poking out, just a little bit, through my shirt.

I stretched open the neck and looked down. I reckon they had grown a little bit. I wasn't all the way flat no more. I didn't have big titties like everybody said Carol would have someday, but it was a relief to know I was going to have something up there.

I thought about asking Mama if we could buy me a bra, but she'd have to ask Daddy for the money. Since titties seemed to upset him so much, maybe I'd be better off pretending I was still flat.

After that day I'd always check to see if my titties were showing through my shirt. Sometimes I had to change shirts two or three times to keep them from showing. Sometimes I had to wear two shirts on top of each other. That worked good, but it sure was hot.

I started wishing I was a boy. Josh still had a flat chest and he could take his shirt off when he got hot. Nobody ever told him to cover up or nothing.

