

Joe, Without Ken

Joe's fingers shook so much, the cigarette case fell off his hands. He picked it up, trying not to focus on the tiny red speck that had made an appearance there, on the tip of his camo denim Sperry topsider, like a previously undetected island waiting to be discovered. He crossed his feet, placing the speck safely behind his ankle.

"I'm telling you! He fell off the boat and he got stuck with something in the bottom... I don't know, I couldn't see him. By the time I got to him he wasn't breathing! I couldn't get him into the boat. He's so heavy!" Joe lit his cigarette.

Just like him, the fucker. Even now, making fat jokes. Barbie knew she was done with him a long time ago. Why, why the hell did she always end up with the asshole? It was her mother's fault, always so nice, so flower-power, the world is

beautiful and everybody is good at their core. Shit. When was she going to learn to see the truth for what it was? She needed to learn. *She*, Barbie, needed to learn because, The Cosmos knew, it was too late for her mother, being underground and eaten by worms and all.

Barbie looked out the window. The sea still seemed unreal to her, that Caribbean green-blue color that made you forget you were still on Earth, the sparkly white sand. She remembered how, from the plane, she and Ken had wondered how they could see everything between the surface and the bottom of that sea. They had never seen water this clear.

“But the water, the water is so clear.” Her voice was but a whisper. She hated how she could be a smart assertive woman with everyone but him.

He took a drag of his cigarette. “I tell you, we were in the shade. There was no sunlight. We’d just come out of the cave, we’d took off our tanks and visors, and boom! He goes down. I think he had a stroke or something. Maybe he was out of shape.”

“He was not—,” Barb bit her lip. “How could you just leave him there?”

Joe stood up and walked towards her. Breathing shallowly, she waited to see what he’d do. “Sweetie. What good would I have been there all by myself, trying to get him onto the little boat, where he wouldn’t fit by the way, being limp and flabby; and then what, row here by myself with all that extra weight? I’m not

strong enough! And! A team of professionals is picking him up right now, making sure he comes back in a nice cozy ba—gurney.”

Her eyes darted to him. He’s so comfortable in his fucking skin. I hate him. Why did I even come here with him? I should have left him at home, like Ken suggested, but then that would have confirmed what he’s always blamed me for. The truth, the truth is he’d never understand my relationship with Ken. It’s always been Barbie and Ken, Barbie and Ken, for years, decades even. But what are we? We are more, and we are less than anything anyone could define. But lovers?

She should have never let them go alone together. This was all her fault. She was such a lightweight at parties, but then, yesterday everything seemed perfect, and why not? She had to give them the benefit of the doubt, assume the best of them both. She had her Margaritas, and she tried that weird drink with the beer and the tequila shot inside and upside down. And then they tried those weird cigarettes they were offered, what had they called them? *Nevados*? And what *were* they... She seemed to remember the guy sprinkling a white powder into the rolled tobacco... was it even that? She had no idea... If she was being honest with herself, she didn’t even know how she got back to her room. So this morning, kayaking, underground caves, and fishing sounded a little too intense for her. How did *they* even have the energy? All this, rushing through her head in one drag of Joe’s cigarette.

“What are you thinking about?” He blew out smoke.

She blinked out some tears, wiped her face. “Last night.”

“Yeah.” He nodded, eyes distant. “About that. When the police comes—”

“What?” Barb almost fell off her chair.

“Chill out! Remember what we said last night? There are laws in this good ol’ Mexico Ma-hee-co, but nobody cares to follow them. There’s no problem here. Just don’t mention the snow. You know? On the joints.”

“What?” Barb wiped her eyes. “Why would the police come?”

“Well, there was a death, there’s bound to be an investigation.”

“In this lawless land? Why if nobody cares to follow the rules?”

“You don’t want to end up in jail here. Believe me.”

That thing in his eyes that told Barb she better shut up. Now. Why would she end up in jail? She slept all day! She stayed on her chair and made herself smaller.

“Could we take a walk? Maybe see if they found him and brought him back?” Barb needed to get out of that room, *pronto*.

Joe stood up and grabbed Barb’s hand. “Let’s go.”

They walked through the hotel, an open building of arches and palm trees, of warm breeze and sunshine, where music played in the background like an afterthought and the ocean sang in counterpoint; she walked barefoot, having had

no time to get her flipflops, and the cool tile felt smooth on her soles. She took a deep breath and realized she felt completely empty inside.

Down the hall by the stairwell, she spied two staff members, a man and a woman, in a dark corner. She could make out their bronzed skin, their white uniforms. Their faces were very close together; and by their smiles she knew they were up to something sweet and mischievous. In his hand, the man held the woman's long braid tenderly. But to Barb, it also seemed as if he were holding on to his very existence.

A sudden gust of wind hit Barb in the face.

“What the fuck?” Joe lost his balance, looked around. “Where did that come from?”

Barb didn't answer. Instead, she kept her eyes steady on the hidden couple. The man's hair rippled with the wind and the woman's stayed steady in his hand.

His body in a bag, Ken rested, a slight bluish hue to his tan skin. Barb gasped at the sight of him, her hand covering her mouth. Tears came rushing down her face. He was her Ken, her beautiful, perfect Ken, with his square jaw and straight nose and those killer baby blues. Behind his forever fixed eyelids. She would never see them again. So what if he had let himself go a little these last few

years. That was no reason to mock him. That only showed that perfect people were imperfect too. And he, he was perfect, no matter what.

Like the gust of wind that had come before, Barb's anger rushed into her. She looked at Joe. Why did Joe hate Ken? Joe was the combat guy, always proud of being ex-military, even though he never really did anything there. Always with his *G.I.* shit, his camo and head bandannas, Joe was kind of stuck in the eighties. But Ken had never once mocked Joe, never once made any comment about Joe's fashion sense, or even when Joe's hard muscles turned into softer bulk. Why then, was Joe being like this?

She took a deep breath and closed her fists tight. It was time. It was time for her to not be like her mother. For Joe, without Ken: there was no way. She couldn't stand in this situation. Because now, she realized, she was stuck in a situation rather than a relationship.

"The police will want to talk to you soon." The hotel staff member stated.

"Take me where it happened," Barb said, once they were alone again. Let's have a drink for Ken, and tomorrow, you take me where it happened. To say goodbye."

Joe eyed her, but agreed.

The next morning, Barb and Joe left early in the little boat. They rowed swiftly away from the shore.

“We’ll have to swim from here. There are too many algae in this area. The water’s pretty dark.” Joe protected his eyes against the sun with his hand. “The police might be at the site now.”

“Good, we’ll talk to them there, then.” It seemed to her that Joe was not very convinced with this idea. “I don’t understand. Didn’t he drown around here, trying to get back on the kayak? You said he fell off of it. By the caves. Where are they?”

“You don’t want to end up in jail in this country,” Joe said, again.

Barb glared at him. “Why do you keep saying that?”

“Just saying.” Joe, all shifty looks, raising his eyebrows.

“Let’s just go.” Barb fought back tears.

Joe jumped into the ocean first. Barb looked at him huffing and puffing, enjoying the cool, fresh morning water. He hooted twice. “It feels so good! Come on in, Barbie, honey. There’s barracudas in this area. Let’s go!” He stretched his hand to her.

“Yeah let me grab that,” she said, and grabbed his hand strongly, in a sudden snatch. She took a robe from under her, and expertly tied a constrictor knot around his wrist.

“Wh...Where the fuck did that come from!” He fought her, punching her hand and pulling at the knot, but she had been Barbie: Construction Worker, and Barbie: Wilderness Guide in past years; she had acquired many skills throughout her life in the many jobs she had been assigned. While Joe played soldier with his guns. Expertly, Barb pulled a couple of concrete blocks from under her and hit Joe in the forehead with one. While he regained his bearings, she tied them to the other end of the robe and threw them in the ocean.

“I thought you felt heavy toda—”

Barb looked around at the calm water, the perfectly blue sky. She had no idea where Joe had taken her, but this was surely not where Ken lost his life. She could still see land there, in the horizon, so she started rowing back. The breeze felt extra cool on her tear soaked cheeks, but this time she let them flow freely, without wiping. She had to go back, pretend Joe had split before speaking to the police. Then, she could feel proud of having done what her mother never could, and giving Ken the loving farewell he so deserved.