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BARBIE LAND

THE
UNAUTHORIZED
HISTORY

TARPLEY HITT

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“Am I to become profligate as if I were a blonde?”
—Frank O’Hara, *Meditations in an Emergency*

PART I

INTRO

.....

Barbie's real home, the corporate office of Mattel, Inc., sits in a nondescript business park in El Segundo, California, a place that got its name more than a century ago when Standard Oil moved in to open its second refinery. El Segundo means "the second." The refinery, now run by Chevron, comes first in other things, like water pollution. From time to time, it catches on fire. It takes up almost a third of the town.

Mattel's campus sits two miles from the refinery and looks about as inviting. The on-site Starbucks is private. Only the lobby and a ground-level toy store are open to the public. Security personnel roam the grounds to ensure visitors don't stray. The neighborhood has the air of a military base, which makes sense. The Los Angeles Air Force Base is three blocks away. Barbie's home is surrounded on three sides by defense contractors—Boeing to the north, Raytheon to the south, Northrop Grumman and Lockheed Martin to the east. El Segundo calls itself the "Aerospace Capital of the World," and the capital is only getting more concentrated. Investors like tech industrialist Peter Thiel have made "the Gundo," as they're trying to call it, a mecca for start-ups with sci-fi ambitions, like producing pharmaceuticals in space. This town was the childhood home of Chris McCandless, the nomadic adventurer whose fatal experiment in going off-grid inspired the book *Into the Wild*. His parents both worked in aerospace. Walking around, it's not hard to understand why he wanted to leave.

I drove there on a dry day in April, passing the first Mattel building on a broad avenue called East Mariposa. The architecture here is concrete and low-slung. It looks riot-proofed, and maybe it is; a guard

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told me the “Mattel Inc. Handler Team Center” is among the highest-security buildings, being the home of research and development. One street over, I drove by the main office, its fifteen stories dwarfing the nearby warehouses. My destination was a third building one road farther, a flat construction with mirrored windows at the end of an unmarked driveway. I parked beside a handful of sedans and minivans and one bright pink Corvette. The Barbie movie was slated to come out in three months, and the marketing campaign had been underway for a full year. The Corvette sat roped off under a cardboard proscenium, where a 2D Margot Robbie smiled down from a pink step-and-repeat. The other cars likely belonged to people who’d been officially invited for the day’s event. I had not been.

A guard in a crisp white shirt manned the door. I told him my name was Ann, which wasn’t untrue. It is one of my many legal names, a side effect of having southern Episcopal parents, who favor long strings of appellations handed down from grandmothers and great-aunts. The idea, they liked to say, was to give me some “normal backups” in case the other name which everyone called me proved too unusual. In this case, I thought maybe it had. I’d made several attempts to contact Mattel before my visit. Each had been coolly rebuffed. *Please note we aren’t able to participate in titles that are not licensed*, a spokeswoman had told me. *Without a license, any use of Mattel intellectual property, including but not limited to trademarks and logos are [sic] prohibited and it would need to be clear that this item is not in partnership or authorized by Mattel*. Even ex-employees, people who had left the company decades ago, seemed reluctant to talk. Most of my calls and emails and LinkedIn messages had been fired off into the void, the recipients too anxious or indifferent to respond. Many of those who did reply did so only under the guise of anonymity, citing binding exit packages or the specter of retaliation. The company’s pervasive secrecy had started to make me paranoid. I imagined they had my too-unusual name on a blacklist somewhere, or signs with my face on it crossed out in red Sharpie, like bodega printouts of shoplifters caught on CCTV. My delusions of grandeur proved somewhat overwrought. The guard led me into the lightly air-conditioned atrium and left me waiting by a hostess stand. The scene was less CIA than walking into an exclusive restaurant without a reservation.

At the same time, my concerns weren't entirely made-up. Mattel's proximity to national security's toy makers was not just some accident of real estate, but the natural by-product of a corporation that has always invited comparisons to the defense industry. ("The M-16 rifle is based on something Mattel did," a Pentagon spokesman once told the *Times*.) The company's founders, Ruth and Elliot Handler, sold one of their first products to Douglas Aircraft; they designed their fifties facilities with defense work in mind. The toy world, like the Pentagon, is highly secretive, obsessed with the threat of espionage and the potential theft of secrets. At trade shows, many toy makers silo their upcoming lines in private showrooms, limiting entry to a select few, assuring silence with embargoes or NDAs or posters worded in stern legalese. Mattel takes a particularly aggressive approach. The company has operated with a private showroom for decades and highly restricts attendees. It has brought hundreds, maybe thousands, of lawsuits and legal actions against alleged Barbie infringers, from Nicki Minaj's "Barbie-Que" potato chips to a latex and leatherwear store in Calgary, Canada, called "Barbie's Shop." (The owner's name was Barbara.)

But even those precautions don't always safeguard against theft. The company's intense oversight of Barbie rivals would culminate in a two-decade-long lawsuit, beginning in the 2000s, in which Mattel would accuse a rival of stealing a billion-dollar doll—Barbie's greatest threat in decades—straight from its El Segundo office. The rival, meanwhile, would unearth evidence that Mattel had maintained a long-running corporate espionage operation from within the same facility. For at least fourteen years, the lawsuit alleged, Mattel had sent members of its "Market Intelligence" team into competitors' showrooms to steal trade secrets, posing under fake names as buyers for fake companies, collecting intel on unreleased products. "She used a fake business card for a store that didn't exist," Mattel's own lawyer admitted of one spy at trial. So I didn't feel too bad about doing the same thing.

"Are you on the list?" the hostess asked. I said I thought so, which was a lie, and that I worked for a magazine, which was true. She took a note and paged someone. The atrium was lined with bags and folders, the detritus of various guests, a couple loose lanyards. It led into a larger hall that was blocked off by black room dividers. I had an idea of

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what was behind it. This building held Mattel's private gallery, and in it, the upcoming season's still-secret toys. For years, the company had been reducing its presence at the major trade fairs; among the major toy brands, the invite-only showrooms of New York and Nuremberg and Hong Kong seemed to have become too risky. Mattel had opted instead for its own presentations, whose grandness seemed to grow even when they withdrew from public expos. This year, the company wouldn't even bother coming to New York's Toy Fair at all. They were having their private show now, in that gallery, behind those dividers.

As I waited at the check-in, executives strolled in unimpeded. The hostess and the guard looked at me with a familiar face, the steely tight-lip of an unimpressed bouncer. A hand on my elbow steered me toward the exit. It seemed so goofy, all this secrecy. And yet it was in line with what I'd come to expect from Mattel, which once had a lawsuit dismissed partly for "not having a sense of humor." The company made many of its billions on Barbie, whose tidy image is half of her appeal. Her life is frictionless, her house pristine. There is no clutter in the Barbie box—every accessory has its proper place—and there's still less outside it. Barbie now has no parents, no in-laws, no continuous lore—at least as far as Mattel is concerned, having long since ditched any biographical detail, down to all but a last name. The billion-dollar-doll is less a character than a template, a set of signifiers attached to an essential blank.

CHAPTER 1

.....

THE GAMBLER

Ruth Handler, born Mosko, short for Moskowicz, had, on many occasions before this one, gambled and lost. Risk was a matter of pain tolerance, and Ruth's threshold was so high it seemed hereditary. Her father, after all, had died at a card table, just slumped in his seat one night, over Hold'em or Razz or Seven Card Stud, and stayed there. Now, in the near-spring of 1959, Ruth Handler had no parents, but two children—and something like a third on the way, a new doll which was about as big a bet as Ruth had ever wagered. At forty-two, Ruth was compact and tidy, everything cinched and curled. A strand of pearls sat at her throat, as if the nacre had been secreted right there from her own neck. She was rarely far from a cigarette, depending when you asked (some weeks she'd quit smoking; others she'd quit quitting), and on the morning of March 9, she had enlisted several cigarettes in her siege on pain.

Ruth was in Manhattan for the city's fifty-sixth annual Toy Fair, where she and her husband, Elliot Handler, were preparing to unveil their latest designs. It was not the Handlers' first rodeo; their rodeo-related products had sold quite well in Toy Fairs past. But in fact, it was a first in other ways: the Handlers' first attempt to enter the market for young girls and Ruth's first stab at a doll of her own devising, a figurine barely longer than a forearm that almost everyone had dismissed as a sure loser.

The way Ruth told it, she had come up with the idea more than a decade earlier. In 1945, the year after her father died, she and Elliot had started their own company, Mattel Creations. Ruth had given birth to their first child, a daughter, in 1941. They called her Barbara. Their son followed in 1944. His name was Kenneth. Motherhood didn't suit Ruth,

who liked her children but loathed staying home. She was a bad cook—her fallback was French toast drowned in canned peas, canned tuna, and canned cream of mushroom soup. But in the toy economy, motherhood could be a kind of market research. Barbara—they called her Babs, sometimes Babsie—rarely played with baby dolls. In that, Ruth could relate. “I was a tomboy,” she said. “I hated dolls.”

But Babs liked some dolls, the paper kind. She liked folding tabs of two-dimensional gowns over their two-dimensional shoulders, playing games about the kinds of grown-up errands performed by grown-up women, the type of independent woman Ruth was and Babs would one day become. Ruth would say that it dawned on her then that young girls were hemmed in by societal expectations, even in the toy aisle. Three-dimensional dolls, the non-paper ones you could squeeze or carry around or bring to tea parties without sogging up, were all babies. Where were the women? (There were, Ruth told a friend, some supposedly teenage dolls on the market. But they had “big bellies” and “these ugly clothes.” They were built “like fat, ugly, six-year-olds.”) The demand was there, she thought, for a doll that resembled a woman, not a baby—which meant, in the symbolic vernacular of figurines, a doll that had breasts.

A stacked doll initially struck the Mattel men as market napalm, a perversity that would never sell. But Ruth pressed on. She spent three years developing her model. She dispatched staff to far-flung places to find workers willing to toil for the lowest possible price. She set up shop in Japan in an era when “offshoring” sounded more like a boat vacation than anything involving labor. She studied plastics and odd polymers and obscure tooling techniques to find fake flesh that a kid could really grab onto. She wooed a woman from Los Angeles’s Chouinard Art Institute, a fashion designer named Charlotte Johnson, to design tiny outfits with tinier buttons that looked plucked from the runways of Paris. She hired a Hollywood makeup artist who’d painted faces for so many major motion pictures that *Man of a Thousand Faces*, the 1957 film whose makeup he also did, may as well have been about him. She deployed her top deputy, Jack Ryan, a former Raytheon missile designer and a sexual libertine whom you might call an autodidact in female anatomy, to perfect the doll’s appendages. He patented her hips. When demos arrived with delineated nipples, he filed off her areolas by hand.

The result was a slender hunk of polyvinyl chloride, chiseled into a triangular torso, elliptical hips, and two pin gams. The doll looked out sideways, under arched eyebrows, above a surgically small nose. Her synthetic hair was rooted, not glued, directly into her skull, pulled taut into a blonde ponytail with tight coiled bangs. Her arms extended into articulated fingers, topped with tiny red nails. The legs sloped into pee-wee feet permanently arched for stilettos—so slanted they could not support her body. Her soles came pre-stabbed so she could be speared onto a stand. As for her breasts, twin sources of so much agita, they sat just below her collarbones, perfect hemispheres unmoved by gravity.

There were already toy Barbaras and Babses on the market, so Ruth settled for an alias that had not yet been copyrighted. She would let reporters believe that it had been one of her daughter's other epithets. But that was not quite true. It was because of the doll, not the girl, that, at age eighteen, Barbara Handler came by a new nickname. I think it's fair to say we all know what it was.



Ruth and her husband had not started their toy firm in New York, the domestic axis of the toy economy, but in Los Angeles, city of movie sets and sanatoriums. The American toy world was something of an adolescent—all but nonexistent before the twentieth century, it had swollen in six decades and secured itself firmly to the States' right coast. Its home base was stationed at 200 Fifth Avenue, catty-corner from the Flatiron. A former circus theater called Franconi's Hippodrome, the address had once been frequented by "gamblers, rowdies," a "dancing horse named Johnston," and later, Mark Twain. But in the intervening years, the square complex had become so overrun by toy makers and doodad hustlers that the city nicknamed it something simpler: Toy Center.

The Handlers were not from New York. They did business in Los Angeles, but they weren't from there either. Both Ruth and Elliot had grown up in Colorado, on the landlocked Front Range. Ruth's father had fled there from Warsaw during the pogroms in 1907, building wagons until he saved enough to send for his wife and six kids. The family lived in a home under a bridge in Denver, and there the Moskos had four more

children. Ruth, born in 1916, was the last. By then, her mother was too sick to care for another toddler. Ruth was raised by her eldest sister, Sarah, and her husband, who ran a drugstore and soda counter.

Ruth met Elliot in the thirties, at age sixteen, in a scene straight out of *West Side Story*. “We lived at opposite ends of the wrong side of the tracks,” she said. Elliot was from the Jewish West Side; Ruth and her older sister lived in the more mixed East. He went by “Izzy” then, short for Isadore. Elliot was his middle name. Once, Ruth drove by him in her Ford Deuce Coupe, eyeing his “oversize head with these exquisite, gorgeous black ringlets.” She honked; he recognized her from a picture at her brother’s house, where he’d played craps. Elliot was in a gang called the “Gigolos,” though the most dangerous thing they seemed to do was dance. Two weeks after the drive-by, he spotted Ruth at a carnival and asked her to join him. Each dance cost a nickel and Elliot only had one. He crowdsourced change from the Gigolos to keep going.

Elliot’s family, also Jewish immigrants but from Ukraine, was less upwardly mobile than the Moskos. And Elliot’s dream of becoming a cartoonist did not inspire confidence in his future fortune. Her sister worried Ruth would “starve to death in some garrett.” Ruth tried to stay away. She started school at the University of Denver and considered becoming a lawyer. She hitched a ride to Los Angeles to visit her sister’s friend Evelyn, whose job at Paramount sent her on regular run-ins with celebrities. Ruth pestered Paramount until they hired her as a stenographer. In 1936, Elliot followed her out West. He had come for art school, he told her. The Denver Art Institute was mediocre, he said, and Chicago’s was too cold. *Sure*, Ruth thought. They married two years later, Ruth in a satin gown with a lace hat, Elliot in a rented tux.

Ruth’s stenography job, she later recalled, was “terribly exciting”—the mad dash of typing up scripts and running them through the mimeograph, knitting during downtime, taking messages for Lucille Ball. But she was also “appalled at the waste of money and poor management.” She liked celebrities but found the workers lazy. Once, she snuck Elliot onto the set of *Thanks for the Memory*, a comedy about a wife who goes to work while her husband stays at home, failing to pursue a life of the arts.

In school, Elliot gave up on illustration for industrial design. He

took odd jobs, moonlighting at a lamp factory. He became obsessed with plastics, the new synthetic polymers that could be molded into any shape, modeled after anything. He fiddled around with Lucite and Plexiglas, fashioning them in his downtime into furniture and other knickknacks—coffee tables, candelabras, picture frames, small boxes for Ruth's cigarettes. He was cripplingly shy. "He was the kind of guy that if we walked into a restaurant," Ruth said, "he was embarrassed to place an order." Ruth was his opposite: brash where he was quiet, driven where he was laid-back. She was cutthroat and pragmatic. It was her idea for Elliot to drop his nickname, "Izzy." It sounded so Jewish, she said. It was her idea too, to start selling his designs. One landlord let them use an old laundry on Olympic Boulevard—\$50 for six months. Elliot quit school and Ruth became his best salesman, toting a suitcase full of plastic samples everywhere from upscale shops to military contractors. Elliot made Plexiglas clocks for Douglas Aircraft that were built into model DC-3 planes.

The Handlers were not inventive with names. They called their first venture "Elzac"—a blend of Elliot and his partner, Zachary Zemby. In 1945, Elliot started another, with Harold Matson, a tree-sized Swede he'd met at Elzac. ("A kinda stupid guy," Ruth said. "Very stupid in many ways.") They named their new company another portmanteau, this time of Elliot and Matson—Mattel.

Mattel's first product was practical: plastic picture frames. It made a certain sense in the motion picture capital. Synthetic products for an acetate city. The Handlers turned to toys almost by accident. Ruth was in her car when she heard the bad news: all plastic would be restricted to military use. World War II had become, effectively, America's only industry. "There will be no other use permitted," the radio seemed to sneer, "not even from plastic scrap."

Instead, they made their frames from wood. When scrap did reappear, it was just enough to whittle into miniature furniture—tables so tiny they would only fit a doll. The Handlers had good timing. Many toy makers had been enlisted in the war effort. Elliot himself was not exempt. He was drafted in the spring of 1945, but stationed close enough to come home on weekends. While many major competitors were churning out bombs and bullets, Ruth managed to sell their doll furniture to a chain of

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clothing stores. But the fact remained that with no New York connection, the Handlers still had no idea how the business worked.



I must have walked past the New Yorker Hotel hundreds of times before I found out it was the place where Barbie was born. Across the street from Penn Station, diagonal from Madison Square Garden, it's hard to avoid, and yet still easy to miss: a faded Art Deco façade, forty-three-stories of limestone and brick. These days, fewer than half of its shabby rooms are available to the public. The rest are reserved for members of the Unification Church, better known as the "Moonies." The hotel is the U.S. headquarters for the cultish religious movement founded by Korean anti-communist Sun Myung Moon, whose crusade to save humanity from sin involved marrying thousands of couples in mass weddings called "Blessings." Not that you'd know that from the street; the hotel is operated as a franchise of Wyndham Resorts.

But the building, opened in 1930, once represented the height of New York glamour: the "hotel of the future," outfitted with its own gilded bank vault, a secret tunnel to the subway, and a retractable ice rink. By the time the Handlers booked a room there in March of 1959, each suite had its own four-channel radio and a "Protecto-Ray"-ed bathroom, whose combo of high-intensity U.V.-light and cellophane sealing promised the cleanest in cutting-edge toilets.

Ruth spent that March morning chain-smoking. There were some two dozen Barbies stationed in little dioramas, one designed for each outfit. Barbie was as much a New Yorker as anyone, in that she came from somewhere else. But the mood of Ruth's room was more stereotypically Californian, crowded as it was with impossibly small plastic women sporting barely there outfits, most of which seemed, even on a rather warm March day, better suited for summer. The "Original" wore a zebra-striped bathing suit, while another covered up in a sheer "Nighty Negligee." Her "Barbie-Q" ensemble paired an apron with a pink sleeveless dress. The "Gay Parisienne" scene found Barbie in a bubbled taffeta gown and a pearl necklace similar to Ruth's regular strand. Barbie embraced diversity only in hair color. Even still, Ruth's biographer observed, "blondes outnumbered brunettes two to one." Because Barbie traveled from so far abroad,

Ruth had ordered ambitiously: sixty thousand dolls were to be delivered each week from Japan for more than six months, and those were just the bodies. Ruth figured they could sell three or four outfits along with every doll. They had an enormous amount of stock to unload.

Outside, the hallways of Toy Fair seemed warm with collective relief. The “heavy volume of orders,” one paper observed, proved a welcome change from “last year’s caution,” when the country had been plagued by recession. The recession was more than over; it had been steamrolled by the boom in births, the babies now kids of five or six or seven, old enough to tug on shirts and ask for toys. This new generation seemed smarter, more worldly than their squalling predecessors, inoculated with the tech savvy of the space age. The toys showed it—to-scale replicas of a subsurface missile launcher and a nuclear reactor, as if toddlers were being drafted into the Cold War. (Per one headline, they were: “Toy Makers Are Helping Uncle Sam in Science Race with Reds.”) Even those less keen on science offered a certain moral instruction—as with one vendor’s “foot-high model of the Crucifixion.”

But the reception in the Handlers’ hotel room did not measure up to Ruth’s imagination. “For the most part, the doll was hated,” one sales rep said. Another fashion doll had debuted the year prior, and she had languished on store shelves. Now the buyers weren’t biting. “They saw these large inventories left over from this other doll and said fashion dolls are passé,” Ruth remembered. The bigger complaint concerned parents. Barbie promised no strategic advantage in science; she would be useless against the Russians. Nor did she offer any educational value. If anything, she seemed to imply the opposite, an unmarried tart with too many shoes. “The American mother,” the wholesalers said, “will never accept this doll.”

Not even half the browsers ordered Barbies that day. The representative for Sears, the “Mr. God of the toy industry,” as Ruth later put it, wouldn’t even take a sample. The press ignored her outright; no major papers mentioned the doll in their roundups. Ruth immediately contacted the Japanese supplier and slashed Barbie orders almost in half. That night, Ruth sat in her suite and sobbed. “She was very upset,” Elliot recalled. “She did not cry often, but she cried.”

The doll she had spent so much time designing did not seem destined for the record books. At most, Barbie might be a footnote in some fringe

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business history. Her best bet was to kill the line. But the toy maker, even close friends would concede, struggled to admit any tactical error, preferring to bulwark herself in fortresses of self-justification. It was among her greatest strengths, or her greatest shortcoming, depending on whom you asked. Ruth had a way of willing things into existence, wrangling an idea until she made it real. She shared that with her card-sharp father: she had a problem with walking away.

CHAPTER 2

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THE KING

If the Handlers wanted to break into New York's toy empire, it was obvious who they'd have to dethrone. At the time, "there was only really one big name in the U.S. toy business," wrote trade historian Sarah Monks, "and that was Louis Marx and Company." Louis Marx was a short man with a large bald head. The "Henry Ford of the toy industry" specialized in small tin play sets and toy soldiers. He made novelty figures of famous and infamous men: Dwight Eisenhower, Douglas MacArthur, Robert E. Lee, himself. He made several of himself, actually. In one of those mini self-sculpts, Marx looked like the wry butler at a British manor—rotund and squat in a gray suit, extending a cigar. In another, he was dressed like Napoleon. In a third, as Genghis Khan.

Even at five-foot-four, Marx could make himself seem much larger. "Louis Marx was not very tall, but very imposing," one friend recalled. "When you were with him you felt, you know, vibrations." Which is perhaps to say he yelled a lot. Born to a German tailor and Austrian homemaker in New York, he spoke with an accent long after he forgot his first language, the sound an erratic mix of Teutonic consonants and Brooklyn vowels which emerged most audibly during his regular soliloquys.

Magazines dubbed Marx "America's Toy King," and he played the part. He lived in a Georgian mansion in Scarsdale—a white-pillared estate equipped with nine fireplaces, fourteen baths, sixteen dogs, a four-car garage, both a tennis and a paddle court, and a caretaker's cottage, itself large enough for a family of five. In the fall, Marx would drain his full-sized swimming pool, fill it with lawn furniture, and host meetings from his Adirondack in the deep end.

Marx worked from dawn until well past dusk, when he would pace for hours enunciating multipage pseudo-philosophical memos into his handheld Dictaphone. He maintained a “mink-lined foxhole” at the Waldorf Astoria in Manhattan, where he’d sleep after late nights in his office at Toy Center or the 21 Club, the Prohibition-era speakeasy-turned-starlet hot spot. His bodyguard was a painter and martial artist who’d taught jujitsu to the FBI. A fanatical jogger, he built his own track on the roof of Toy Center, where he could often be found running in circles as he read vocabulary terms from his black journal, an obsessive habit he developed to make up for missing college.

Marx had what you might call a pragmatic approach to the concept of property. His childhood sports were “baseball, basketball, ice-skating, and shoplifting.” Once, Marx and a friend snuck into a department store and walked off with a full-sized canoe—heaving it over their heads and slipping out the delivery entrance unnoticed. He left high school early after allegations of cheating, which he would continue to deny long after anyone cared. His first job in the toy industry was itself an apprenticeship in mimicry: he worked for Ferdinand Strauss, a densely browed Bavarian who’d pioneered some of America’s first mass-produced mechanical toys—including a climbing monkey called “Trixo” and an unsightly offensive minstrel named “Jazzbo Jim.” Under Strauss’s tutelage, Marx learned that success in the toy world stemmed less from original inventions than from a capacity to reproduce others’ at scale. Soon, Marx took old Strauss ideas and updated them, adding a bell or whistle or brighter paint and passing it off as the next big hit. “There is no such thing as a new toy,” Marx liked to say, “only old toys with new twists.”

Strauss had another advantage. He was from Germany, which, for decades, had been the epicenter of global toy production. Commercial toy-making had existed there for at least five hundred years, and it had heavily industrialized over the last century. An industry of guilds and master craftsmen had given way to massive operations staffed largely by low-paid “outworkers”—women who worked at home. Those women regularly worked seventeen-hour shifts. Their children, some as young as six, often put in another eight or ten hours on top of school. But then, as now, labor horror stories did little to assuage the desire for cheap goods. In 1903, the German Empire exported nearly thirty-five

thousand tons of toys, per *Scientific American*. “Toys constitute one of the more important branches of German manufacture,” the magazine reported. “There is hardly any country in the world to which German toys are not exported.”

The American toy business, meanwhile, was what one trade group called “late to the party.” Craft dolls were among the earliest American immigrants: settlers brought a wooden doll to Roanoke in 1585, as a “gift” for the Native tribes. And for three hundred years, they mostly stayed that way: imported, at least among the rich, mostly from Germany. Everyone else made their own or bought the occasional figurine. Even as the growing middle class gave children more time to play, Americans largely gave up “trying to compete with the Germans.” Instead, they numbered among Germany’s biggest customers, second only to the Brits.

But when World War I stranded toy soldiers at German ports, the U.S. market flooded with toymen on the make. In Connecticut, a doctor and part-time magician named Alfred Carlton Gilbert debuted a construction-themed kit called the Erector Set. In 1915, a political cartoonist named Johnny Gruelle secured a patent for a simple doll named Raggedy Ann. The next year, the architect Frank Lloyd Wright’s son, John, started selling toy sets to construct wood cabins using interlocking “Lincoln Logs.” The new class of American toymen organized quickly to stamp out any competition from overseas. In 1916, they formed a trade group, the Toy Manufacturers of the USA, to combat German imports. Fearing peace would also bring an excess of unshipped product from the “German menace,” the new allies launched an ad blitz to make Raggedy Anns and Lincoln Logs a matter of national interest. A poem ran in papers across the country: “*The pennies spent on little toys / For Uncle Sam’s own girls and boys / In turn, of course, go back again / To our own loyal working men.*” The group’s first logo featured a cornucopia of toys bursting from Uncle Sam’s hat (and a perhaps ill-conceived abbreviation: “TOY M’F’RS USA”). “The word *toys*,” Gilbert said in 1919, “does not mean ‘made in Germany.’”

When the trade group founded a “Toy Industry Hall of Fame,” Louis Marx numbered among its first inductees. By the time the Handlers arrived on the scene, Marx was entering his third decade as Toy King. He represented not only the nation’s emergence into the global play sector,

but also the first wave, and soon the old guard, of American curios. His innovation was pumping out playthings at the lowest possible cost. He hunted for newer, cheaper materials. Like Elliot Handler, he'd been quick to dabble in an emerging medium called plastic. He mastered mass production, automating machine lines long before his peers. He obsessed over cutting labor costs. Early to offshore his operations in the thirties, Marx set up the first American toy outpost in Japan. By mid-century, he had plants in seven countries, and the first American subsidiary in Hong Kong, the Elm Tool and Machinery Co. ("Elm" stood for his initials, but also, people said, the "Excellent Louis Marx.")

To any up-and-coming toy maker, Louis Marx would be the blueprint, or at least someone to steal from, though that was one of his trademark moves too. "When they copy you, it's piracy," Marx told *Time* magazine. "When you copy them, it's competition." There was a joke in the industry, years later, that Marx's research and development team was "a Xerox machine and two patent attorneys."



The Handlers were not yet fluent in the toy world's vernacular of theft. But they picked it up quickly. In 1946, they found their first hit in Arthur Godfrey, a boyish broadcaster who played the ukulele with the skill of "a hunt-and-peck typist." His biggest hit was a "comedy" single called "Too Fat Polka (She's Too Fat for Me)." The lyrics were about as delicate as you might expect. But the instrument suited Godfrey, the so-called "Huck Finn of radio."

No toy maker had yet tapped into the growing demand for Godfrey's signature accessory. Elliot mocked up a model from plastic, a blue-and-coral ukulele kids could use to plunk out simple songs. In January of 1947, Ruth rushed thousands of ukes into production, with a plan to sell them for \$1.49 a pop. But the new saleswoman had made a mistake. New York's Toy Fair, already the biggest event for toy buyers, was not until March. When Elliot showed up to advertise what Mattel was calling their new "Uke-A-Doodle," the toy had been on the market for nearly two months, and without a patent. In the meantime, a rival company, Knickerbocker Plastics, had nicked the idea. "They had the gall to buff off the Mattel name and were using our Uke-A-Doodle as

a sample to pre-sell their *own* ukelele [sic],” Ruth later wrote, “which would be an exact copy of ours.” The toys were identical, only Knickerbocker’s cost thirty cents less.

The two companies entered a price war and a race to the bottom—an incident so rattling that Harold Matson, who had invested his life’s savings in the start-up, cashed out of the company. The battle was so disturbing to Ruth, so formative in shaping her business philosophy, that she would refer to it, with less irony than anger, as the Ukulele War of 1947. “We won that war,” she fumed five decades later. “We held our own, and we beat Knickerbocker down.”

As the company grew, the Handlers made originality a righteous cause. In interviews, they cited four important lessons for aspiring toy makers—and two concerned copying. “Products have to be unique, original, and different in appearance and operation,” went Lesson One. “You cannot succeed by copying or by making products too easy for others to copy,” added Lesson Two. (The third was something about children; the fourth about avoiding “disastrous price competition.”) Mattel began to treat toy concepts as state secrets. As Ruth put it, “stealing designs was a common practice in the deceptively bright, cheery, and innocent world of toymaking.” The entire industry, one reporter agreed, was “wrapped in super-security, anti-social for real fears of espionage.” No one spoke in the Toy Center elevators, one exec said: If you [mentioned] your new product line on the sixteenth, it would be knocked off before you got to the ground floor. It was as tough to get a toy maker to divulge their inventions, another wrote, as “to get Russia military blueprints from the chief of staff of the Soviet Army.”

The Handlers’ security borrowed heavily from the military. They plucked their most infamous designer, Jack Ryan, straight from Point Magu Naval Air Missile Test Center, where he was designing the Hawk and Sparrow missile systems for arms manufacturer Raytheon. They outfitted their factories like fortresses and circulated a book of their design specs among prospective military clients. (“In addition to doing toys,” Ruth said, “we felt that we could do defense work.”) The company “constantly checks its plant for bugging,” the *Los Angeles Times* reported, “to be sure some unplayful competitor is not listening.”

Memos were shredded; models were destroyed after use. The Research

and Development Department was limited to only its employees, each outfitted with numbered badges to check in at designated turnstiles. Some areas were restricted to only top personnel, with select guests accompanied by escort. Armed guards surveilled the section 24/7. Aerospace companies visited Mattel just to study their security. “We were literally locked up,” one designer reported. “We were sworn to secrecy. We weren’t even supposed to talk to our families about what we were working on.” The Handlers had been stolen from before, they had made a moral virtue of not doing it themselves, and they would be aggressive in ensuring it did not happen again.



Marx had one particularity: he had never believed in advertising. In 1955, while his company was grossing more than \$50 million, Marx boasted that he had spent just \$312 on ads. “He didn’t believe in trying to manipulate a child’s desires,” one vice president said. “If a toy couldn’t make it on its own, he got rid of it.” So far, it hadn’t hurt him. Of all the toys sold in the U.S. each year, some 10 percent were his.

But the Handlers, headquartered in the movie capital, sensed that the country was entering a different kind of visual age. In 1954, they hired Carson/Roberts, a Los Angeles public relations firm well suited for children’s media. Their logo was a smiley face. The year Marx bragged that his ad budget cost less than a used car, Carson/Roberts proposed another tack. Disney was developing a new children’s show at ABC, an hour-long program that would air at five p.m., five days a week. The Disney cartoon library had never been aired on television, and the network was cocky: “ABC promised it would reach almost every child in America on a daily basis.” They were calling it *The Mickey Mouse Club*.

The expense was gargantuan, and Disney needed sponsors to front the capital for fifteen minutes of airtime each week, corporations that could easily commit to year-round, noncancelable contracts. Mattel was not yet that kind of place. The sponsorships cost \$500,000—then Mattel’s entire net worth.

But the Handlers were interested. Elliot was “convinced that no one could reach children as well.” This too was a borrowed idea: two years earlier, a product called Mr. Potato Head had become the first toy advertised

on television. But no toy company had ever sponsored an entire show, advertising year-round to their primary customers, kids. Ruth called in their comptroller, Yasuo Yoshida, an accountant who had become Ruth's right hand. She was blunt: "If we spend \$500,000 for fifty-two weeks on television, but the program doesn't produce the extra sales we need, will we be broke?" Yoshida shook his head. "Not broke," he said. "But badly bent."

Ruth gambled. They splurged on the sponsorship. At Toy Fair that spring, Mattel screened its first commercial for the "Burp Gun," a replica of a machine gun used by paratroopers, which could "rapidly fire fifty shots on one pull of the trigger." When *The Mickey Mouse Club* hit the airwaves in the fall of 1955, kids across the country watched a boy stalking elephants with what resembled a plastic Kalashnikov. By Christmas Eve, "there wasn't a Burp Gun to be found anywhere at Mattel," Ruth said, save for two that had been deemed defective. Even those were quickly claimed—one to a sick boy in San Francisco, the other to the White House, "so as not to disappoint a young grandson named David Eisenhower."



Marx reacted as he knew best, by copying. The Toy King began pushing his own products on shows like *Howdy Doody* and *Captain Kangaroo*. He announced a "saturation campaign" blanketing all three major networks with six Marx-sponsored programs, and a suite of ads on local stations. "Some people say it's the biggest thing ever done on TV," Marx told the press.

In response, the Handlers sponsored another series, *Matty's Funday Funnies*, a cartoon variety show hosted by a boy named "Matty Mattel," who intermittently played with Mattel products. They called him, coyly, "the King of Toys."

Marx still had more in his arsenal, not least a mascot of his own ("Magic Marxie"). He also had an army. The toyman liked to collect five-star military generals as friends. During the Depression, he'd helped a future cofounder of the RAND Corporation find an obscure toy part. He'd repaired a model train for a young Dwight Eisenhower. By the fifties, "all his friends were great Generals and Air Force people," a Marx

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executive recalled. He went fishing with the director of the CIA. He sent toys to J. Edgar Hoover. He bet on boxing with the namesake of the Marshall Plan. These were more than casual acquaintances: four of Marx's six sons were named for famous generals, including Eisenhower, who doubled as his namesake's godfather.*

These connections, cultivated over years, helped Marx find his real edge against Mattel. A decade before the advertising feud, over the spring of 1945, Eisenhower had enlisted Marx to conduct a five-week tour of German toy makers, or at least the ones that remained. Officially, Marx had spent this tour as a "consultant to the Allies," advising his friend "on how toy manufacturing could aid reconstruction efforts." At the same time, Marx, who'd lent his own factories to the war effort, reconfiguring production lines to pump out "carloads of ammunition," was inspecting nearly two hundred facilities to ensure the Germans weren't still doing the same. But Marx was also, one biographer wrote, evaluating the plants "for his own purposes, of course," acquainting himself with German toy sculptors and painters, some of whom he later hired. It was likely there that Marx encountered a German toy maker known as O&M Hausser, the firm that would become his strongest ally against Mattel. Their shared weapon would be a doll that bore a striking resemblance to Barbie.

*At least one of the toymaker's children inherited his interest in the military, though not in the ways Marx may have hoped. His daughter Patricia, an anti-war activist, would marry RAND Corporation analyst Daniel Ellsberg, not long before he leaked the Pentagon Papers, a trove of classified documents revealing the Lyndon Johnson administration's deceptions about the scale of the Vietnam War. It was reportedly as a favor to Marx that J. Edgar Hoover declined to probe Ellsberg's psychological records during his trial. Marx, however, considered the leak treason and slashed his daughter's inheritance. He never spoke to his son-in-law again.

CHAPTER 3

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Almost exactly sixty-four years after Barbie's first Toy Fair, I flew to Berlin. It was March 4, 2023. I was staying in the second bedroom of an old fourth-floor walkup with a former DJ in her thirties, who now ran a seasonal arepa stand. The apartment was sandwiched between a street named for Karl Marx and one whose namesake discovered an inflammatory disorder that can cause rectal bleeding.

I had just read a trend report, predicting the year would be marked by what it called "franchise fatigue," the collective exhaustion brought on by the "constant and inevitable churn" of spin-offs and reboots. The movies and TV shows of the past decade had been dominated by sequels, remakes, and familiar storylines repackaged from video games, bestsellers, and tweets. One site had declared 2022 "The Year of the Reboot," and the new year showed no signs of slowing down. Just three of 2023's forty "most anticipated" releases, per one list, would be based on new material; the others broke down into "17 sequels, eight reboots and remakes, and four spin-offs." If anything, the adaptations seemed to be getting more brazen. That spring alone was slated to bring three movies about inanimate objects (the BlackBerry, Air Jordans, Cheetos), and two about games (D&D, Tetris). Fatigue seemed inevitable. It was "entertainment's law of diminishing returns," the trend report observed; the sequel was always worse. And yet in the midst of all this, Hollywood was reviving another familiar media property, this one certain to make a fortune. A Barbie movie was coming out that summer and opening with it a fire hose of merchandise. The trailer alone had already started a craze.

To some extent, it was obvious why Barbie was about to make a lot

of money. Any adult can reel off the fad toys of their childhood that did not make it past their puberty. But kids continue to buy Barbie, year after year. At one point, by Mattel's count, two Barbies were selling every second. She spent decades as not only the top-selling doll in the country, but the top-selling toy in the world. She had become not just a child's accessory but a symbol, as synonymous with American consumerism as the Golden Arches and French fries. She was "forever," like diamonds or microplastics. (Given that she is made from a cocktail of at least five fossil fuel-based polymers that secrete nanoplastics easy to inhale and ingest, it's plausible that someone, as one friend put it, "has Barbie in their balls.") She was everywhere, unavoidable, and yet kept coming back.

The trailer depicted Barbie as not merely an icon but as an origin story—an alien construction whose descent to Earth, like the monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, catalyzed a new era in human civilization. In Stanley Kubrick's version, the monkeys who stumble upon the monolith learn to use weapons, thus bringing about, per the title card, the "dawn of man." The trailer's homage to that scene, a nearly shot-for-shot re-creation, posits Barbie as instead the genesis of modern girlhood. "Since the beginning of time, since the first little girl ever existed, there have been dolls," the voice-over explains. "But the dolls were always and forever babydolls, until . . ."—until, that is, Barbie.

If the tone was tongue-in-cheek, the assessment of Barbie's impact was blunt and sincere: Barbie, the first adult doll, had molded American girlhood, a modern Prometheus making children from clay.

But Barbie's cultural dominance was somewhat mysterious to me for the fact that she was not—as the trailer claimed and as Mattel has maintained—the first adult doll brought into toy stores. She was not an original invention, or even the original Barbie really, but a knockoff, copied from another doll, in another country, and not subtly either. The two dolls were virtually identical. Nor had the original been some relatively unknown quantity, rebranded before anyone got a clue. This other doll had been distributed all over Europe, sold not just to children and women, but to grown adult men. She'd had a department store aisle of accessories; she had been made in marzipan; she had been photographed with Errol Flynn. This doll too had been made into a movie, a film to which an entire nation paid attention, whose promotional campaign had

wormed its way into everyday consciousness. All that had happened in Germany, which was not America's favorite place in the 1950s, if it was thought about at all. But this doll was popular enough that she had been covered by American newspapers. She had, in fact, been shipped across the Atlantic, distributed at stores, and displayed at Toy Fair a full three years before Barbie's debut.

But she had mostly been forgotten. Barbie had somehow beaten out one of the most famous dolls in the global toy capitol and kept it hidden for decades, disappearing her predecessor into a marketing parable about Mattel's supposedly novel adult doll.

Perhaps most curious of all was the fact that this proto-Barbie had not originated with some small craftsman or mom-and-pop, but from the operations of the most powerful newsman on the continent, an executive whose control over the information ecosystem of postwar Europe drew more comparisons to monarchs than publishers. "No other man in Germany, before Hitler or since Hitler, has accumulated so much power," one of his rivals said, "with the exception of Bismarck and the two kaisers." This man was, in other words, not the type to get stolen from and move on. His middle name was Caesar, and he acted like it. He often answered the phone, sans irony: "This is the king himself speaking." I was in Berlin to visit his court.



I was commuting each day to an unusual office building—a black glass cube, with horizontal wedges cut out at the corners and lined with white columns as thin as baleen. The German president had declared the new construction a "symbol of the radical transformation" of a "company in perpetual motion." But from the street, the façade looked like a sinister Pac-Man with teeth.

The building was the headquarters of Axel Springer, a media empire that had been based on that street, called Axel-Springer-Straße, since the fifties. The founder, also named Axel Springer, had built his headquarters just twelve meters from the border between East and West Germany—a portent of their eventual reunification, but also of his publishing ambitions. He wanted a national monopoly. After the Second World War, with little competition remaining, Springer assembled a stable of German

papers, covering news morning, evening, night, on every topic, but especially those dearest to him. As he saw it, the liberal papers of earlier years had failed to stop fascism, and then the war had wiped them out, along with most of bourgeois life. The stage was set for a new kind of journalism, a lighter mode of addressing the public: emotional, spiritual, conservative, if not yet openly so.

Springer had always been careful about exposing himself to allegations of agenda-pushing. During the war, he had not been a Nazi, albeit though on a technicality, having secured a medical exemption from military duty. Instead in 1934, Springer, age twenty-one, had joined the National Socialist Motor Corps—ostensibly, he said later, to make him “a Nazi-uniformed buffer for the family.” The organization, he alleged, “made no great ideological claim,” but merely “combined politics with the motor sport that I loved so much”—though one prerequisite for admission was an “inner willingness to fight,” and the group had been founded to actualize Hitler’s belief that mobile operations were essential for disseminating “National Socialist ideology and election propaganda.” But his father, a publisher in Altona, near Hamburg, kept printing well into the regime. The family’s careful avoidance of anything political kept the Springers’ newspaper alive until 1941, and their book press open for years after.

After the war, Springer’s attitude toward national affairs was unambiguously right-wing; the pro-austerity capitalist and German nationalist would become, as *Tablet* put it, “the closest thing the Germans had to a Rupert Murdoch.” But in print, he masked overt politics behind an unrelenting cheeriness—blending human interest, celebrity gossip, animal-centric stories (“Cat Adopts Blind Dog”), and the horoscopes that Springer himself, who had a private astrologer on his payroll, followed obsessively. “It was clear to me since the end of the war that one thing the German reader didn’t want was to think deeply,” Springer told an interviewer. “And that’s what I set up my newspapers for.”*

*Springer had a strong instinct for marketing, promoting his papers with “happiness” campaigns of surprise publicity stunts, like the time he ordered 120,000 bouquets and passed them out to women on the street. He held an annual national contest to find the “ideal German woman,” a maybe tone-deaf exercise in postwar nationalism that

I'd come to look at the archives of maybe his most influential outlet, a daily paper called *Bild Zeitung*. Founded seven years pre-Barbie, in 1952, *Bild* was a knockoff in its own way—a German version of an English tabloid Springer had seen on a trip, called, aptly, the *Daily Mirror*. Picture-heavy, offering shorter stories and bolder headlines, the coverage was so sensational that in 1949, a judge sent the top editor to jail for three months over potentially prejudicing a murder trial. But it spoke to what Springer called the “simple people”—in the fifties, it was the best-selling paper in the U.K.

The *Mirror* was also, notably, sexy. The paper's comic, Jane, was a pinup whose wardrobe malfunctions seemed to take the term comic strip literally. Originally titled *Jane's Journal, Or the Diary of a Bright Young Thing*, the cartoon followed a “curvaceous blonde secret agent,” who “tangled with Nazi spies, tumbled down cliffs and became caught in tree branches in episodes that invariably concluded with her stripped down to her underclothes.” The series, launched in 1932, was Britain's precursor to American pinups: the drawings of illustrators like George Brown Petty, whose sketches of half-naked women started appearing, just months later, in a new men's magazine called *Esquire*. As American soldiers ogled the so-called “Petty Girls,” it was Jane who appeared pasted above the beds of Brits. “One admiral told me,” the cartoon's model once said, “that there wasn't anybody on the ships, from the lowest rating to the highest in the fleet, who didn't have a drawing of Jane in his pocket or on his bunk.”

The *Mirror* struck Springer “as the printed answer to the electronic age,” a visual medium primed to contend with a burgeoning competitor called television. In 1952, Springer set out to replicate its success with a tabloid for Germany. He wasn't inventive in names either. *Bild Zeitung* translates to “picture newspaper.”



nevertheless attracted thousands of applicants. He understood, in particular, the power of a mascot. Springer gave his radio paper, *Hör zu!* (Listen!), a Mickey Mouse-like hedgehog named Mecki, hiring a small person to dress as a porcupine and tour the country in a small propeller plane.