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Kathleen Ward
College of DuPage

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Shelf Talk

Kathleen Ward

Aynna sat on an edge, watching the customers pass without looking at her. She sighed, knowing that the opportunities to truly prove her worth were slim and far between. And yet, she believed that she would have her chance. If she could only get a glance, she was sure no one would be able to pass her up.

She froze as a man walked towards her. He stopped and looked over her thoroughly. His eyes judged everything about her, from her big eyes to her tiny waste and long legs. Aynna noted his expensive dress shirt and clean, neat haircut. *Keep looking, please. Take me home*, she pleaded in her mind. But then he moved on down the line, pausing now and again at a pink dress or a small smile. He shook his head, turned the corner, and was out of sight.

Damn it. I need to find a way to stand out, and not blend in to the rest.

“Gold hair. Why did they have to give me gold hair? So that I could be like everyone else in this place?” Aynna moved to sit next to Karly, enviously eyeing Karly’s beautiful green dress, trimmed with sparkling silver and red velvet.

“I don’t know. Being a brunette isn’t all that spectacular. Sure, we’re different but the little girls are all brunettes, or at least dirty blondes, so they envy unrealistically perfect long golden hair, which is why all you blondes have been on the market so long.” Karly stood and walked to the end of the shelf. “If I only had bendable limbs like those gymnastic dolls, I’d climb down from this place and get out of here.”

“Why?” Aynna asked, mildly surprised.

“Because the holidays are almost over, and then there I’ll go, back into storage until I’m marketable again.”

“At least you’re too expensive to be put on clearance.”

“True, but then at least I could get out of this place. You have no idea what its like being stored in the dark all year long. It gives you plenty of time to think.”

Aynna pushed her unbendable legs up and ran, shoeless, to her friend, her beach bash bathing suit clinging to her plastic body. She couldn’t hug Karly, but she put her arms around her anyway.

“Oh, don’t wish for clearance. You are so lucky to be expensive! All the girls value you above the rest of us. You are guaranteed to be bought by a wealthy family, one who puts you on a high shelf to be admired by all. Odds are, dolls like me will end up smashed in a toy box, chewed up by a pet dog, or left in the dirt of the backyard to be demolished by a lawn mower.”

Karly laughed. She stepped back and walked to her spot on the edge of the shelf. “I thought you were the optimist.”

“I think sometimes too, you know,” Aynna said, following her.

Karly slumped against the wall. “It’s all terribly unfair, really.”

“What is?” asked a voice behind them.

The dolls turned to see Josephine all decked out in a tutu and pointed shoes that were impossible to balance on. Aynna laughed inwardly at the memory of the ballerina directly after her manufacturing. She stumbled around, cursing her life and existence, all the while trying to learn how to stand up, let alone walk.

“If I had control of things,” she said angrily, “I’d get rid of these stupid shoes. Then I’d make everyone have the same shoes, because this is getting ridiculous. Please explain to me why *my* feet have to be pointed all the time, and you, Aynna, get to run around bare foot!”

“Ironic you should say that,” said Karly, ignoring Josephine’s unsurprising bad mood. “I was just saying how all of this,” she indicated the shop, “isn’t fair.”

“Well, of course not. We’re Barbies.”

“Dolls!” Karly and Aynna shouted at once.

“We don’t use that degrading trademark,” Karly said, her stern voice echoing throughout the shop.

“Whatever. That’s still what comes up from our barcodes. Don’t get so upset about who you are if you don’t want to do anything about it.”

Karly shook her head at the naïve doll. Aynna smiled, knowing that Karly had little tolerance for Josephine’s stuck up, controlling nature.

Karly continued. “Anyway, as I was saying. The system isn’t fair.”

“Because...” Aynna said, encouragingly.

“Because we spend our entire shelf life being the best product we can be. Look, we are just commodities.”

“As opposed to...”

“Us! We’re looked at as nothing else but a commodity, a product. No one sees who we truly are. We are given value by how much is spent on us, and how much people are willing to pay to purchase us. And that’s what we’re taught to care about, right?”

Josephine looked at Karly skeptically. “They may teach you that, but you have to fight it. We need to find a leader, someone to—”

“I’m not talking about revolution,” Karly interrupted. “I’m talking about our value. I’m not bought because it costs the three dollars for my plastic, one dollar for my brown hair, and four dollars for my dress.”

“Your dress only costs four dollars?” Aynna asked excitedly.

“I have no idea. I just made that up. But lets say that’s how much it would cost to produce me. Does it matter? No. I’m worth what consumers are willing to pay for me. That’s exchange value. It’s why clearances even exist.”

“Clearances are our punishment for obeying the system,” said Josephine, sitting on the shelf. She tried to reach her feet, desperately attempting to rub them, knowing full well that her plastic arms would never reach. “I’m telling you, we should band together. If we follow my ideas, we’ll take over for sure.”

“The point is,” said Karly, beginning to lose her patience, “our entire life revolves around having the most exchange value that we can, so that we can market

ourselves to the wealthy. That will promise us a better home life.”

“So what’s so wrong about all that?” Aynna asked, her attention now unwavering.

“Don’t you see it? Freedom! We have no freedom!”

Aynna looked at Karly surprised. This was something she could picture Josephine saying, but Karly?

“Here me out,” said Karly, sensing Aynna’s shock. “We live in a system where we are seen as nothing but commodities, and we’re taught that that’s the way things should be. We are taught right away that we are nothing more than products on a shelf. Who we are as a doll is completely ignored, and this does not surprise us because that’s how it has always been. There is no freedom for our individuality or personal choices. We have to be products, and good ones at that. Because if we don’t, we’ll end up slowly disintegrating in a garbage dump somewhere, buried in filth. And what’s worse, this confined, prison of a system, is completely unfair.

“I’m beautiful and expensive, but I’m shoved into a box all year. That gymnastic doll is lazy, ugly, and if you ask me, masculine. But she’s different with her bendable limbs, so she is purchased over us. And think of all the dolls still in the back room. They haven’t even gotten a chance to shine. What did they do to deserve that? Nothing! And its not like they haven’t tried to be desirable. They just haven’t gotten a chance. Odds are, they’re going to be sent away to an outlet mall.”

Aynna and Josephine gasped at the horrible thought. No one wanted to end up in that awful, trashy place, where a doll’s price was significantly reduced and customers were not the type of people that dolls wanted to be bought by.

“There, your exchange value is pretty much nothing,” Karly added.

Aynna pondered for a moment and then said, “So we have no choice but to spend our lives trying to be a great product until we are purchased. But our effort, in the end, will have little to do with our success.”

“Exactly. No freedom.”

“It’s wrong. It’s just wrong,” Josephine mumbled. “We could bond together. We could work together.” Josephine’s eyes lit up. “We’d need a leader, of course, to keep us all in check. And then, if we were all the same *Barbie*, with the same pink dress and blonde hair, no one would be excluded or better than anyone else. Competition would be eliminated. And everyone could use the skills that they have for the good of everyone else, so we’d be completely efficient. No one would end up in storage or in a garbage dump, because we would be free of this gilded cage of a system.”

“That wouldn’t work,” laughed Aynna. “That’s the stupidest proposal I’ve ever heard.”

“Why? The only thing that breaks us apart is competition. That keeps us from working together.”

“That’s true,” said Karly.

Aynna shook her head. “Maybe that would work if we weren’t *dolls*. We could all work together, without competition, jealousy, the need for recognition, wealth, or

comfort. Without, dare I say, dreams. Personally, I have no desire to live like that. I would much rather live in a shop society where everyone works towards the best sale they can achieve, with themselves in mind. And I realize that's very selfish, but I don't believe dolls can survive as *ants* in an anthill. Sure, there are flaws in the system. Karly just brought up the fact that it's not fair and we aren't truly free. But at least we have the opportunity to *dream*."

Karly stared at Aynna, stunned.

"Hey, like I said, sometimes I think too."

"Wait, wait, wait," Josephine protested. "Why wouldn't it work? Why is dreaming better than working together?"

Aynna turned on her and said, with a commanding, harsh voice very unlike her character, "Because even if everyone did work together, there would still be the dolls that would secretly dream. And while everyone else worked as one, their competitive nature would find a way to make themselves better than the rest of us. Then, we would be at their mercy."

Josephine stood, angrily. "That's ridiculous! Everyone would want what is best for the community!"

"Not everyone! This leader that you keep mentioning, whom I imagine in your mind is none other than yourself, is a perfect example. Once you've got the power, why would you step down? You wouldn't, Josephine, because you're just the sort of doll who would *love* the power."

Karly stood quickly and moved between the two dolls. "Listen, Aynna, you're right in that Josephine's solution would never actually work. But like you said, this present system has its flaws, and all of those dolls in the back, who have never experienced the fluorescent light, would certainly agree."

Josephine glared at both Aynna and Karly. "Without freedom, what's the point?"

"Get over it and work hard with the opportunities we can find?" suggested Aynna haughtily. "Maybe this system isn't perfect, but it certainly gives me the chance to dream and work towards accomplishing goals for myself, instead of working solely for lazy, stupid, ignorant, unskilled, or power hungry dolls like yourself without any reward for *me*."

Karly gave Aynna a reprimanding look. She then turned to Josephine. "What we can do is support and promote a fairer system, because freedom is impossible. I cannot see any real solution. We will always be commodities. But maybe we can have equal opportunities and start at the same point, with equally valued outfits and equal shelf life. It can't happen over night. It probably won't even happen while we're on this shelf. But one day, I hope, every doll will have an equal chance to achieve a wonderful lifestyle, with the obvious exception of those stuck up Disney Princess Barbies."

Aynna laughed. "No kidding."