

Price Tag

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A Ye Olde Toys Story

Today, Ronni was a toy. A ballerina toy in a costume of white frills, puffy sleeves, and a big bow on her head. She had a bright smile, big glittering eyes, and circles on her cheeks. Of course, she wore a tutu with pink layers and a frosting white top. Her friend Abby thought it made Ronni “look like a cupcake,” an image which delighted the ballerina.

They moved through a mostly quiet mall concourse, Ronni walking behind on pointe slippers that she hadn’t been allowed to break in. It was an uncomfortable walk, but as a dancer, Ronni knew how to work past discomfort. Abby had gone studiously quiet while she checked and played with her camera, the whole point of this excursion. Abby had gotten the idea for this photoshoot three months ago, imagining Ronni as a toy in various settings. They had already finished shoots in Ronni’s attic and in Abby’s sister’s room. But Abby was adamant to get some pictures of the ballerina doll on a toy store shelf, with “a big price tag tied to her wrist.”

Ronni, of course, jumped at the chance.

It had been years since Ronni had gotten to be a dancer, being too focused on working and dating that she had long lost her passions. And while she wouldn’t be dancing, putting on a tutu and pointe shoes still awoke memories of standing on the wings waiting to go on stage. Ronni’s heart fluttered and she couldn’t keep the silly, giddy smile off her face.

For Ronni, putting on a costume was part of the process of becoming. She had been flighty fairies, regal ladies, and dancing snowflakes. The costumes changed the way Ronni danced and the way she saw the world, and who she was. Today, Ronni was a toy.

They came to the “Ye Olde Toy Shoppe,” a local toy store that always had an air of magic to it. The carpeting was soft and a kingy red, the shelves were wooden and cut with silhouettes of toys, and life-sized doll decorations gave the store an air of importance above and beyond any other store Ronni had been to. In her costume, she felt immediately at home stepping into the shop.

Ronni looked around and saw Keith at the front counter. His eyes lit up and Ronni’s smile grew twice as wide and the butterflies in her stomach doubled their fluttering. He had never seen her in a ballet costume, though he knew she had been a dancer. He walked up to her casually in his red apron, and she in response did a little pointe pirouette before coming down into a curtsy.

“Wow,” he breathed, “Babe, you look . . .” his words trailed off.

“Cute?” Ronni asked. “Playful? Adooooorable?”

“Sellable,” he said with a teasing smile.

“Oh!” Abby said, snapping her fingers, “that’s right. Do you have her price tag?”

“Yes, I didn’t forget to do the one thing you asked me,” Keith said as he produced a price tag as big as Ronni’s hand. Big and white with a pink border, the back had an actual barcode on it and the front had written:

Ballerina

\$25.⁰⁰

Seeing it made Ronni laugh. “Oh, that’s so cute!” She said while she held out her arm and let Keith tie the tag to her wrist.

“Check this out,” he said, and he got the scanner gun from his belt. He triggered it on the barcode and it chirped. “You’re officially in our system.” He showed both Abby and Ronni the results on the scanner:

Ronni Ballerina

25.00

1/1

Aisle 3 Bay 9

Ronni looked up at Keith and kept a coy smile on her face, "Would you buy me?" She asked.

"Trust me, I'd buy you, babe." He said.

As she looked at him, she bit her lip and then rose to her toes, gripping him on his arms and kissing him.

It was a romantic image that she had never gotten to do before, but was slightly ruined when Abby jumped between them.

"Hey, hey, hey!" She pushed Ronni down, "You'll smudge your makeup and mess up your slippers."

Ronnie rolled her eyes, though she relented. "Yes, ma'am," she said while she continued to play flirty faces with Keith.

Abby turned to him. "Is the shelf set up?"

Keith nodded. "Yep, I also remembered to do that."

"Then let's go, dolly," Abby said, grabbing Ronni's wrist.

"She's so bossy when she's like this," the ballerina said to Keith before following her friend.

Keith laughed, "Hey, babe, I'm going to get some lunch. Do you want anything?"

Before Ronni could respond, Abby jabbed a finger into the air. "NOT while she's in costume!"

They rounded the corner down an aisle of pretty dolls that Ronni resembled, and the ballerina spoke quietly to Abby. "Hey, you're getting better. You didn't insult my boyfriend once in that whole conversation."

"Well, he did everything right. This time," Abby said, and Ronni laughed.

"You two will get along just great one day."

But Abby just shook her head.

They came to a spot in the aisle with a lot of light and an open space on the shelves, in a bay tall enough for Ronni to sit up straight. Abby looked around. She had a few more ideas for photos of Ronni walking around the toy store, but she was so close to getting her money shot; the shot she had been dreaming of for months now.

"We'll start with you on the shelf. Then, we can do other stuff around the store. Go ahead, climb on up. I'll take some test shots."

"So bossy." Ronni teased. But, again, she did as she was told, hefting herself up to the shelf, which was high enough that her white legs and pink shoes dangled well off the floor. She smoothed out her tutu while thinking about how to sit. Abby waited and readied her camera.

"Try a very passive pose first," Abby said. Ronnie nodded and held her arms out, hands resting on the top of her tutu as if she was holding a pumpkin. She pointed her feet down and let her eyes face forward in that endless doll stare. Her smile relaxed and widened at the same time. "Great, just like that."

But Abby still repositioned Ronni's price tag to be more visible, and then little touches here and there. Perfect was never quite perfect until Abby had her say, though Ronni was used to it, and she wanted these pictures to come out great, too. Then Abby stood back, brought up her camera, and . . . frowned.

"Ah, shit, are you kidding me?"

Ronni broke her pose to look down at her friend, "What's the matter?"

"I forgot. Damn it. I forgot my SD card. I don't have any room . . ." she trailed off and Ronni watched her eyes go back and forth, "I think I have one in the car. Ok. Okay, yeah, I think I have one in the car. Okay, stay there. Stay right there. I don't want to come back and find out you've twisted your ankle jumping down."

"It's like two feet." Ronni said, motioning to the ground below her dangling pointe shoes.

Abby jabbed a finger at Ronni. "Stay there."

Ronni gave her a salute. "Yes, ma'am."

"I'll be right back," Abby said, hurriedly walking away and vanishing around the shelves. Ronni listened for her to leave, then looked over her tutu and down to the floor.

"It's like two feet," She said, shaking her head. But she stayed where she was and relaxed her body. Ronni looked around and soaked in her surroundings. It was a bit of a strange viewpoint, being in the same space as the toys, rather than separated from them. The plush doll next to her was also a ballerina, but was long and flat, her costume dyed into her cloth skin rather than worn. The toy to her right was a blue fairy in a tulle skirt and floppy wings. A medium sized teddy bear in a doctor's coat sat across the aisle. Ronni wanted nothing more than to get off the shelf and hug him.

So she did. She slipped off the wooden shelf, without spraining her ankle, and walked across the aisle. Ronni imagined herself as a doll, and let her curiosity about the bear fill her. She stepped lightly and let her back leg linger, bringing her hand up to graze the bear's soft brown face. Ronni kept her fingers tight as if they were a mitten. She tilted her head and looked into the teddie's plastic black eyes. What made her able to move and think, and not him? What was it that made her different from the bear?

"Toy! What do you think you are doing?" A harsh voice called from the back of the aisle. Ronni jumped as her eyes went startling wide. A short shout left her mouth before she clamped her hand down over it. She saw an old buzzard of a man with a balding head and hunched body wearing the red store apron. He was tall and lanky, his mouth and wrinkles seeming to be in a permanent frown. "Get back on your shelf." He jabbed a finger to the empty space where Ronni had been sitting.

She backed up toward the shelf, but didn't get on it. "Uh, but I'm not really a doll," Ronni said.

That got the old man's mouth to turn further down. "You certainly look like one of my dolls. You even have a . . ." he made gestures to her wrist, "price tag."

"That's fake, sir. I'm not a doll."

He stalked forward, and Ronni fell back against the shelf, craning her neck up to look at the tall man. "Are you trying to tell me that I, after owning this cursed toy store for more than a century, can't tell the difference between a doll and a person? You are a doll. Now, get back on your shelf." He spoke and spittle went flying. Without Keith or Abby, Ronni felt out of sorts. She didn't want to cause trouble, and besides, Abby had told her to stay on the shelf.

"Ok. Okay. I'll go. Just . . . Please stop yelling at me."

The old man pushed his mouth out and narrowed his eyes. He tapped his foot as he waited for Ronni. She turned quickly and climbed back into her spot. The old man looked at her appraisingly. Then he reached out, took hold of one of Ronni's legs, and crossed it with the other. His hands were quick, but forceful. He pointed her feet down, then positioned her arms.

"Not a toy my ass," The old man muttered. Ronni, startled and surprised, kept facing forward with wide eyes. She let the old man pose her, even as she thought of running. She should run, but she still wanted to get the photos done. The others had already come out so well, and this shot was supposed to be Abby's dream. So Ronni let the old man control her and pose her like she was a common doll.

"Stare straight ahead, but look at nothing. Make sure your tag is always visible so someone can buy you." Ronni did so, almost nodding to him. But she thought he might not approve of even that small motion. "Now, stay there. I'll be keeping my eyes on you, toy." With that, he walked off out of sight. Ronni dared not move an inch. She thought it might be in the man's character to test her and wait for her to move before coming back.

Yet, she found that sitting on the shelf and smiling absently helped Ronni calm herself after the encounter. In fact, it was surprisingly easy to slip back into rest. This little cubby hole of the world was soft and comforting. She felt among friends who had also felt the store owner's controlling touches. The other dolls had sympathy for Ronni, and she for them.

Besides, Abby would be back soon to take Ronni's picture, and Keith would be back to be at Ronni's side. So it didn't matter that for now, she stared ahead at the plushies and dolls and let her mind fall into stillness.

Ronni heard a woman's voice soon after, an excited, joyful voice that grew louder as it moved down the aisle. It should have frightened her, but instead thrilled her. It was like standing in the wings waiting to go on stage, all bundled nerves and bursting emotions that had to be controlled. Watching the other dancers, focusing on her breath, putting herself into the mindset of the character she was to be. Imaging her first steps onto the stage. This felt no different. Her heart raced excitedly, but her body stayed still. Focused. She calmed her breathing, continued to stare ahead, and became the ballerina toy she was dressed as.

"I know I don't *need* any more dolls. I just want more dolls," The woman said. Ronni risked a glimpse with and saw a woman in a suit, but couldn't see much else. She was moving down the aisle of toys, and had stopped a few feet down from where Ronni was sitting.

"You've seen the dolls here. There's something . . . magical about them. I can't explain it."

The ballerina sitting next to Ronni began to shake as the woman moved it. She inspected it, twisted it around, played with its floppy arms and legs. The woman was talking into a phone, but was fully focused on the doll. She was short, even in her heels, in a skirted business suit and had a cute face with a little upturned nose. While her hair was cut in a professional style, it was colored a shiny light pink. She looked at the price tag of the doll and then a last look at it before moving down the aisle. She stopped in front of Ronni.

Without a moment's hesitation, the woman appraised the ballerina. She squeezed Ronni's leg, moved her arms and separated her fingers. And Ronni let her, content to play the part of doll. When the woman let go of her fingers, she had them move back together. When she let go of her arm, Ronni let gravity have it. And though it was strange to be treated as such, it wasn't unpleasant. "Listen, I'll call you back." The woman tilted her head as she looked up at Ronni. "I think I found something."

The woman stood up a little and cupped Ronni's chin in her hand, turning it left and right. She leaned in and studied the pink circles on the ballerina's cheeks. "Oh, aren't you just the cutest toy?" While that worried Ronni, she stayed gazing forward.

Then, the woman looked down and pulled at the tag on Ronni's arm. "Holy crap!" She nearly jumped out of her shoes, and Ronni nearly jumped from her seat. When their eyes met again, there was a frightening determination in the woman.

Surely she saw that Ronni wasn't a doll. Surely. The costume was good, yes, but Ronni still had skin. She still breathed and still had a pulse. And yet the woman treated her just like the doll she had just seen. And now as the woman stared at her, Ronni knew she had to speak up.

"Uh, hi. I'm just here as a model. I'm not for sale."

But the woman was undeterred. Rather, she broke into a smile. "Wow! What else can you say?"

Ronni started to speak again to explain simply, clearly, and finally, that she was not a toy, when hurried steps came down the aisle. "Is that toy giving you any trouble, ma'am?" The old buzzard of a man came into view and he glowered at Ronni, who fixed her mouth shut for the moment.

"Oh, no. She's a lovely doll. Is she for sale?" The woman turned fully away from Ronni, as if she wasn't even there.

The owner was confused, and his face showed it. "Really? I thought I heard you shout."

"I did! I was surprised at the price for her."

The buzzard man smiled, "Oh, yes, I price my toys to move. If you like, I can ring you up here. Save you the trouble of taking it to the front counter." There was a kindness in his voice that Ronni hadn't thought possible. Even so, she had to put her foot down and end this charade.

So, she jumped down from her shelf, put her hands at her hips, and said, "I am not a doll, and I am not for sale."

The woman's face lit up again, even while the store owner glowered at Ronni. "Ma'am, I am deeply sorry. Sometimes my toys can be . . . lively. I assure you it will come to accept its fate once bought."

"Is she like that toy from that one movie? The one who doesn't know he's a toy?"

It was a baffling question and Ronni couldn't believe a grown woman would ask it. "I'm not a toy, but if you want to waste your money on this charade, that's your choice." She said, "But I warned you. I'm not really a toy."

"I'll take her," the woman said, her determination and delusion clear in her voice.

The store owner sniggered and took hold of Ronni's price tag. She let him with a sigh. He scanned it with his phone. The price flashed on screen. "That's . . . \$27.19 with tax, and I can take your card here, if you like," he said with a smile. Ronni snatched her arm away and put it back on her hip, watching this farce take place before her. She was going to walk out of her and she and Abby would find a not-crazy toy store to do the shoot. But first, she was going to wait and watch this delusion take place.

The woman dug into her purse and pulled out a blue credit card. Ronni kept her eyes on the woman, in a sort of disbelief at what was happening. How could she not see that Ronni wasn't a doll? She heard the old man swipe the card. The phone gave a little beep.

"She's all yours. Would you like a receipt?"

Ronni shook her head and turned to leave, a move to prove her independence. She looked past the mad woman who had bought her, down the aisle and toward the front of the store. And then the whole axis of the world shifted. Dizziness overcame Ronni and her stomach dropped. She reached out a hand to steady herself, and the woman was right there. Ronni's eyes came open and she looked at her. The woman smiled with relief. The woman who bought her.

Her . . . owner?

"Are you okay, toy? How do you feel?"

"I . . . you . . . bought me," Ronni said breathlessly.

Her owner gave out a nervous laugh, "I did, yeah." She caressed Ronni's pink cheek, "you're my toy now."

Behind her, Ronni heard a satisfied chuckle. But she didn't turn away from her owner. There was something impossible about this. Yes, her price tag was scanned and she had been paid for. But Ronni was human. None of that should matter. She should be able to just leave. Except that thought didn't make sense anymore.

Ronni defined herself in relation to her owner. She thought she could leave. Just walk away. But without Owner, then she would be lost. Where would she go? How would she get there? She could go home, but it wouldn't change the fact she wasn't with her owner. She could wait for Abby to come back, but wasn't that just awaiting a new owner?

"What's her name?" Owner asked, but not to her toy. She looked to the shop owner. The buzzard man.

"It's called whatever you want to call it." He said.

"Ronni," the ballerina said quickly, "my name is Ronni." She had to say something; had to keep some part of herself.

"Ronni Ballerina. That's very cute."

The doll looked away, toward the glass windows and open door to the mall with breathless disbelief. *Leave, just go. Why can't I go?* She wondered. Then, she glanced back at Owner, and had her answer. She had been bought, she was owned, and would always be possessed. Yes, she had been human, still had skin and bones, a heart and a mind. None of that changed the fact that she was a toy. It was all so impossible, but all so undeniable.

"Can we . . . can we go?" Ronni asked. She didn't want to leave the store with her owner, though she knew she had to go with Owner. But Ronni wanted to be gone before Keith or Abby got back. The thought of

explaining to them what had happened set her stomach into knots. They were her favorite people in the world and she wanted them to remember her as a human, and not the girl who got herself bought. The girl who became a doll.

“Of course, Ronni. I can’t wait for you to meet my other toys. I just know you’ll love living in my playroom.” She wrapped her hand around her doll’s wrist and led her from the store, through the aisle of toys.

“Are they like me?” Ronni asked, glancing at the teddy bear that had enthralled her earlier.

“No, you’re just like them.”

Those words should have chilled Ronni and sent her running away. But they were a comfort, instead. As she walked from Ye Olde Toy Shoppe, Ronni was no longer playing, or imagining. She was being. She was a doll, and her owner had found her. Forever, Ronni was a toy.