

Warehouse Mixup

By: EL_Refresho

Keely walked down the warehouse's dimmed aisle, fiddling as she did with her phone to call her Uber. She wasn't drunk, exactly, but she could only walk in a mostly straight line. It was enough that she would rather get a cab. She still heard the revelry of the Christmas party going on behind her with seasonal music and raucous laughter echoing through the warehouse. She had things to do in the morning, unlike her co-workers, and left the party early.

It had been a great party and even though it wasn't Halloween almost half of the warehouse employees had dressed up, not merely in Christmas finery, but in Christmas costumes. And Keeley was among them, dressed as she was in a toy soldierette costume, complete with red circle cheeks and a homemade cardboard key. The key itself was the most fun but also the most annoying. She could feel it on her back, bouncing slightly as she walked. It would fall out eventually, or she would have to take it out for her Uber. Keeley thought about taking it out now, but decided against it. Being a toy was simply too much fun.

As she put away her phone and focused, or tried to focus, on walking straight, a burst of glittery pink smoke jumped in front of her face. Keeley shouted and jumped back while waving her hand in front of her face. She swatted at the pink . . . thing, treating it like a bug. And, like a bug, whatever it was got out of her field of

view. Keeley spun around and looked for it, if only to figure out what it was. And then she felt something hit her in her back, just where her cardboard key met her red soldierette jacket.

Everything slowed down. Something was happening to Keeley, but she didn't know what, or why, aside from the pink lights that now swirled lazily around her body. She didn't understand why the key in her back felt solid, heavy, and real. Why her body felt stiff. Why she couldn't seem to pull her fingers apart. And why she was happy and smiling about it all.

She felt her key begin to warm in a pleasant way as tendrils of soothing heat radiated through her back and into her body. Keeley turned to see what was happening, or tried to, when the surprising weight of the key fell away.

It clanged to the concrete floor, its metallic sound reverbing through the warehouse, and Keeley froze mid turn. Her arms were cocked at the elbows and her face a mask of surprised happiness. Her body leaned forward just slightly. Her body and mind slowed and came to a rest like she was sleeping standing up.

Except she could see and hear and think about the world. She saw the AutoCart drive along the caution tape down the warehouse aisle, its little yellow light spinning to warn humans of its presence. Keeley stared at it from her unblinking gaze. It was coming to her. The AutoCart was a bit of a dummy, she knew from experience; it did over half the work in the warehouse, but sometimes it would be totally lost without Keeley or one of her coworkers.

But there were no other coworkers around now, and Keeley couldn't move. Couldn't speak. She couldn't reach out and work the AutoCart's control panel to send it away. So it came to her and raised its scanner. Red light ran over her body for just a second. The robot chirped its 'success' noise and it unfolded its armature.

Keeley's eyes went a hair's breadth wider as the arm wrapped around her middle. She thought for a moment that the fingers would squeeze the air out of her, but the machine was surprisingly gentle even as it

lifted Keeley clear from the ground. She didn't --couldn't-- move on her own while the AutoCart turned her so her back went parallel to the ground, and laid her on its flatbed. Her legs were now at a slightly raised angle and from her awkward angle Keeley could just see the tips of her black soldier boots.

She looked past them, her fixed gaze forcing her to look up and a little to the side at the corrugated metal ceiling and upper most shelves. High up there she saw red soldier dolls meant to go out to stores for decoration.

Oh no, Keeley thought, thinking about the imperfect nature of the AutoCart. The way, without a barcode it could mix up items. The way she was dressed very much like those Toy soldiers. Dressed to be like them. *Oh no, oh no, oh no*, she thought as her key was loaded up beside her. The AutoCart couldn't tell the difference between her and the display dolls and she couldn't tell it otherwise.

The AutoCart rolled back to life, returning back to the shipping area. It took Keeley away from help and toward a new life in a toy store window.

But Keeley couldn't stop smiling.

Keeley imagined the AutoCart was very pleased with itself as it drove her to the shipping area. It made little chirps and warning whistles along the way, taking its slow, sweet time. Letting Keeley stew in her frozen body, staring helplessly up to the rafters, corrugated roof, and pallets of toys in the high reaches of the shelves. She begged quietly for someone, a human, to find her. She couldn't imagine how she could live in a shipping box traveling cross country, but also had a feeling that it was possible. She would have gulped, if she could.

The AutoCart couldn't hear her begging, and wouldn't have cared about them even if it did. It had a job to do: take Keeley to the shipping station. And it did its job very well. This part of the process had nearly

been fully automated and the AutoCart used its armature again, lifting Keeley off its flatbed and onto a white backing board already waiting for her.

Keeley watched helpless as plastic twist ties tied her arms, legs, and waist to the board. She heard the machines spinning and whirring as they worked to safely secure her so she wouldn't move and jostle in the box Keeley knew she was about to go into. Once the ties were finished with her and her key, Keeley was sent down the conveyor belt, now one of hundreds of products being prepared for the morning shipment. Dolls like and unlike her joined in a single line toward a single fate.

Scanners flashed periodically above Keeley, targeting a space over her left shoulder, and the black bars she imagined to be there directed her travels. Soon she found herself in the final boxing station and Keeley was slid off the main conveyor and dropped two feet into a brown packing box of standard size and shape for objects her size. She jostled at the bounce. She tried for just a moment to see if something had shaken loose and if she could move now.

But, of course, moving was too much to hope for. Even without the twist ties holding her down, Keeley was unsure she could move without the key in her back. Like she was a doll. She felt so diminished; so small and helpless to these machines. She wanted to scream at them, break out of the box they put her in and smash every one of the stupid things. But she didn't and she smiled merrily up at the ceiling instead.

Keeley arrived at the final station and came underneath a massive plastic bag filled with packing peanuts. She stared up at it for a moment before the door opened and dropped thousands of white-blue Styrofoam peanuts into her box, filling it to the top and stopping automagically. Now her vision was filtered through the white-blue objects, making everything indistinct. Soon, even the strange filtered light was taken from her as the box flaps were flipped up, sealing Keeley inside her new home for the holidays.

Keeley spent the night in the box in the loading area, waiting for the morning to load her onto a truck and ship her -- a human woman -- across the country. Or even, she thought, to Canada. And while she did desire to see the world, she was less than pleased about the circumstances of her trip. Keeley figured out quickly that something strange had happened to her. That, more than not moving, Keeley wasn't even breathing. Her heart wasn't beating. Or if they were, they were working at such a slow speed it didn't matter. And yet here she was, alive and thinking.

The morning came soon enough and men loaded her onto an eighteen wheeler. She heard them outside, separated from her by less than an inch of cardboard box. If she could talk, she could yell for help. But her mouth stayed frozen in its perfect smile. She had seen the way the loaders packed the trucks to the brim, and knew she would be surrounded by boxes of toys.

I'm just like them. I'm just a toy. Keeley thought.

She banished that idea from her mind as the truck rumbled to life, its thrumming engine vibrating all the little packing peanuts that surrounded her. It was a strangely calming sound and feeling. It was the only thing she felt in her completely darkened box. She was awake and aware for the entire journey, which she could only guess took three days. She could only try and count the times the engine went on and off, and guess for how long. Short stops for rest and food. Longer stops for night. But eventually everything happening beyond her box was part of a different world from hers. It was a world that controlled her, and one that had decided she was nothing more than an object. These were the kinds of thoughts that floated through her mind while Keeley lay helpless in the truck.

Eventually she heard voices again, and also the sound of a smaller engine that was also closer to her. She was now being moved across a city instead of across a country. Then came the driver, jostling with Keeley's box until it was on a handcart. Her now frozen heart tried to race. It failed, but Keeley still grew worried. Surely

whoever saw her would recognize her as human and help her out of her problem. Surely. She held onto that thought as she was quickly taken to wherever the AutoCart had first decided she should go.

She heard voices, but they still seemed distant. One deep. One lighter. They spoke quickly. Then Keeley was off the handcart and on her back again. And then . . . nothing. She heard steps and voices. But nothing directed at her. It was maddening. She was here, wasn't she? At her destination? Shouldn't someone be opening up her box and looking at the doll they had ordered? After four days now in darkness, Keeley didn't care if she was frozen, or if she was a doll. She needed desperately to see light again, to see where she was. But no one cared about the doll in her box, it seemed, and the noises quieted down. The voices and steps went away. And Keeley spent one more night trapped.

It wasn't until the next morning when she heard purposeful steps come toward her. Heavy steps. Then she heard something jab into her box. Then a cutting sound. A sliver of light came through the blue-white Styrofoam. Her eyes had just adjusted when the box lid was pulled back. Sound that had been strange and muffled became clear.

"Let's see what we have here." A man's voice said. Old, Keeley thought, with a bit of a rasp. A hand came through the peanuts and pushed them aside to reveal Keeley's leg. "Wrong side."

The peanuts above Keeley's face began to stir and move, pushed away by a human hand. This was it, she thought. She would be seen, and then she would be helped. She would be free of this box, free of this costume, and free of this spell that held her in place. Then she saw the face of an older man with a pair of glasses perched on his nose, white hair that had long abandoned his head, and a wrinkled face. He blinked as he looked at Keeley.

"Huh. They make 'em more real every year."

She didn't understand at first. It simply didn't make sense that this man looked at her and saw a soldierette doll. Keeley thought it a cruel trick or maybe that he was just blind before, as the man pulled Keeley from her box on her backing board, she admitted the truth.

I'm just a toy. Keeley thought.

Stop it, stop it, stop it! She remanded herself. She watched from the corner of her eye as the man kneeled down next to her and began to undo the twist ties that held her to the backing board. The ties came off and Keeley tested her hands. Her body. Nothing moved. Hope deflated as she stared absently at the fluorescent lights above her, and as the man continued to handle her, pulling Keeley to a sitting position. She now saw she was in a backroom of a store. Gray concrete floors and shelves filled with overstock toys. A plastic table with a microwave and coffee maker. An office door half open. And the remains of the box that had been her home for four days.

A toy store. She had been shipped to a toy store. This was going to be her life, she thought, remembering the large toy soldiers on the warehouse's high shelves. The ones meant for displays. She wasn't going to be a doll for sale, but a doll on display. Hundreds and thousands of people would see her inviting them into the store. They would see her as a toy. Treat her like a toy. Talk about her like a toy.

And then something changed. Everything changed. Keeley felt the metal key that had once been made from cardboard slide into her back. She began to breathe. Her heart began to beat. Keeley sucked in air to fill her lungs. Her eyes went wide and wild. Her body still felt stiff but seemed to move to her commands. She looked up and around, trying to find the man.

"Please help!" Keeley said, twisting around, "I'm a human, not a dooooooooooolll."

Everything froze again. Keeley's voice went away. She felt stiff and off balance, having frozen in an awkward position. She didn't feel the key in her back, and barely saw it in the man's hands, his face pulled in shock.

Keeley fell to the ground, unable to stop herself. The pain and shock felt dull. But she wasn't even thinking about that. She could move! She could talk! She could get out of this.

If, that is, the man put her key in her back again.

Keeley sat on a stool in the toy store's surprisingly large office. She was slumped over slightly, arms dangling down and head cocked just to the side. She could not, of course, move. Since whatever spell had affected her, Keeley had only one brief and beautiful moment when she could move. And then her key had been taken back out and left her motionless at the mercy of a toy store owner.

He sat across from her, and she had just a partial glimpse of his body and face. He sat pensively, worried lines across his forehead. He held Keeley's golden key in his hand and she desperately wanted it back. Keeley was sure she could explain her situation to him, and he would help. But she needed to move first. Talk first.

And after an intolerable time of waiting, the man stood up and gently slid the golden key into Keeley. She felt her body come to life. She felt her heartbeat and lungs breathe. Her muscles all over relaxed, though her fingers remained strangely stuck together. But what was more, her key actually turned now that it was fully attached.

Keeley sat up, slowly and cautiously, but with a wide smile that wasn't just forced onto her face. "Oh, thank you so much." She said to the man.

He frowned and scratched his head as he sat back down across from her. "Can you explain to me what the hell is going on with you?"

Keeley nodded and did her best, telling the man all she knew. And when she was done, she finished with: "So, now that you know, you can help me get back home. I'm sure once I'm there, I can figure things out and get fixed."

The man said nothing for a distressingly long time, holding his fingers up to his mouth as he listened and thought.

"Trouble is," he said finally, "That I paid a lot of money to get a display doll here."

Keeley's smile faltered. "But, you heard my story. I'm not a display doll. I'm human. I need your help to get home."

"I never said I wouldn't," the man said.

"I'm confused."

"I'll make you a deal: until I receive your replacement, you will act like an animatronic doll for my store."

Keeley crossed her stiff arms across her chest. She couldn't really believe she was even considering his offer, but she also felt like she had little choice. "But you have to order the replacement as soon as possible."

The man nodded. "And you will stay frozen at night. No wandering around to mess with my shop."

"But in return," Keeley said, "When the real display doll comes in, you will help me get back home." Then Keeley realized something and she raised her hand, "AND you can't sell me or get rid of me until you send me home."

"Of course. You help me, and I'll make sure you get home."

Keeley bit her lip. Was there something she was forgetting? She hated that she would have to be the store's doll. She hated that she would have to act like a toy. But she saw no other way around it. He wanted a display doll, and it would take at least three days to get a new one. And Keeley, as much as she hated it, couldn't get home without his help.

She finally put out her white gloved hand and he met it. "Deal." They said together.

Pink light and smoke seemed to rise up from their joined hands. Keeley's eyes went wide: it was the same damned smoke that had turned her into what she was. This time, however, it rose up and covered both of them in a thin layer of pink dust that faded into both of their skins.

Something changed inside Keeley. The deal she had bargained for seemed to seep deeply into her mind. It became part of her. She blinked and looked up at her Owner. Owner? Was that right? Keeley wanted to ask

about it, but her jaw remained stubbornly shut. She wanted to move, but her body was once again locked in place. The key was in her back, spinning quietly and smoothly, but she couldn't move.

It was happening all over again, but this time was so much worse. This time it wasn't a brainless robot that treated her like a doll, it was a real person. She felt a constant tightness in her chest that was a spot of worry. Keeley had agreed to be owned and to be a display doll. That seemed all the worse than other people treating her like a toy because it meant that, on some level, Keeley agreed with them.

Calm down, Keeley thought, this is only temporary. My owner will help me.

"Did it work?" Owner asked, looking at Keeley quizzically.

She nodded with a short, almost-robotic, motion.

"Let's see how you work." Owner said, "Wave to me."

Keeley responded by bringing her right hand up and making an efficient, royal wave. She would have gulped if she could. Keeley didn't direct her hand to move like that. It just did automatically. The tightness in her chest seemed to grow in size.

"Salute for me."

All at once, Keeley stood up and snapped her boots together. She gave her Owner a precise and sharp salute with a broad doll smile. She felt humiliated inside. The box, somehow, was almost better than this. That was, until her Owner returned Keeley a shorter version of her same salute. He smiled and nodded. She looked at the man she kept thinking of as Owner. He seemed a kind man, worried as much about his customers as his toys. And for that Keeley, herself more than halfway to being a toy, was glad.

"Very good, doll."

Oh. God. Oh, no. Did I not even tell him my name? Keeley thought.

"Now," Owner said, "march to the display stand in the front of the store."

She nodded, turned, and made a stiff-legged march to her display stand where she would see and greet passersby and customers. Where she would stand, smile, wave, and salute until a new doll came to replace her. She marched with purpose and worry in her mind. Still, though Keeley desperately preferred to be hidden away in her box, she had made a deal and she had to obey her Owner.

Keeley the Toy Soldierette took up her post at the front of the toy store.

When Keeley looked at her reflection in the toy store window, she saw a doll. It was hard for her to make out every detail, but her skin had an almost molded smoothness and sheen to it, even if it still looked like skin. Her smile was bright and red, her eyes sparkling and blue, and the circles on the apples of her cheeks perfect and bold. She didn't know when it had happened, or why, but at some point between the Christmas party at work and being shipped here, she had become a doll.

Keeley had no idea how to stop being a doll. Her replacement was on its way, but even once she got back to the warehouse, what did she do then? Keeley decided not to think about that for now, and focus on the present. And at present, she stood in the toy store window, waving to a ten year old girl. It was something her Owner had told her to do. Wave at children who noticed her. Salute to police officers, soldiers, and security guards. March around the store every hour on the hour. Her movements were surprisingly smooth, if mechanical. When she moved, her body moved at the behest of one central key, so everything moved in sync. It was actually sort of neat.

The key in Keeley's back always wound and wound, except for nights when he was told to wind down. And she spent every night staring at the world, frozen in place. But she dreamed. She dreamed of what her friends were doing, and of being with them. Except in her dreams, she was a toy soldierette. Corporal Keeley

Doll. And in her dreams, everything in the world, not just her, still moved to the tick of her key. Her friends would ask Keeley why she liked being a doll, and Keeley simply smiled.

She was very bad at keeping up with the days and nights, for some reason. More so than when she was in her shipping box. Maybe there was just too much to think about. When to salute, when to march, when to wave, when to bend down and give someone a hug. These were very important things and took up a lot of Keeley's time. So when, after a few days, Owner came up to Keeley, she thought it was because he had thought up a new thing for her to do. It was not.

"Doll," he said, "I have some good news for you." He was a kind owner, and stood in front of Keeley, so she could see the awkward cast in his face, "The warehouse finally got back to me. They had a heck of a time finding a replacement. But they have one now and are shipping it out today."

Keeley did some calculations, as best she could. She had reckoned she was in the box for four days. She had spent another three, or four, or five days in the window. It would be another four days before her replacement got here. And then she still needed to get home. She will have spent almost half a month as a doll, half a December of Christmas parties and cold weather. But she couldn't dwell on that fact. A mother was trying to distract her unruly kids to look at Keeley, and waved for them, a long enough distraction for the mother to get her wits back. Keeley was proud to have helped.

She became more appreciative of her mechanical motions as the days wore on. She didn't have to think, just do as she was told. The key kept her movement smooth and ordered. It was all very calming to a nervous mind, which was also helped by knowing her replacement was hundreds of miles closer.

On what Keeley thought was her ninth day in the window and thirteenth overall, Owner came to her with another update. This time he even showed her his laptop. "There's been a delay due to snow in the Rockies," he said, "your replacement toy won't be here for another two days."

Keeley smiled toward Owner, not that she had any choice in the matter. But she didn't fret over two more days after thirteen. Not that she didn't want to go home sooner, of course. It was just that she didn't feel so embarrassed being a doll anymore. She had to remember that she wore a costume with big yellow buttons on her jacket, a tall red hat, and an oversized key in her back. It was a cute costume; that's why she wore it to begin with. Keeley realized that when people saw her, they saw her at her happiest and cutest. And she liked that.

On the seventeenth day Keeley had spent as a doll, Owner came up to his toy once again.

"Follow me," he told her, and Keeley, of course, obeyed him. She got off her stand and made a perfectly timed march behind her owner, all the while wondering what he wanted to show her. She hadn't been to the back of the store since she arrived in her box. Curiously, the box was still in the spot where she had left it. Except, this time, there was another doll beside it. She didn't even have time to realize what that meant until a cascade of pink glitter fell away from Keeley.

She blinked. Her mouth dropped open in wide surprise. She put both her hands up to her cheeks, all in the rhythmic, timed motion she had become accustomed to.

"I'm going home," she said, speaking the first words she had spoken in almost two weeks. She looked at the doll. But something felt off. The doll she looked at seemed so dull. Keeley knew very well how bright she smiled, how twinkly her eyes were, and how easily she moved. This replacement had a hard plastic body, dull glass eyes, and didn't look like she could raise her arm, let alone wave. Even its soldierette clothes were plastic and part of its mold.

"Can it even march?" Keeley wondered.

"Let's see." Owner said. "Doll, march for me." It took considerable effort for Keeley not to join in as her replacement began a stiff-legged, arm swinging march. Except it never moved from its spot, able only to march in place. Keeley could hear the whirring of the mechanical key, and even noticed an electric cord running from the bottom of her pant leg.

“Well, it’s not as good as you. But it’ll get the job done.”

Keeley shook her head to the time of her key. She could march around the store, wave, salute, hug, whatever Owner needed of her, and she could do so with ease. And yet this doll could not do the simplest march.

A thought came to Keeley in a startling moment of clarity, but she dare not speak it aloud. She knew, somehow, what would happen if she did. Keeley had agreed to be a doll until her replacement arrived. But if nothing could truly replace her...she wanted to let the thought go, but it kept playing over and over in her mind with the turn of her own key.

“Owner,” Keeley said, barely even realizing what she was saying, “you can’t replace me with this doll.”

“Well, uh, I agree, it’s not...”

“Exactly. It.” Keeley said. She put her arms up to her chest, pointing to herself. “I’m a better toy than it is.”

Owner scratched the top of his bald head, and he frowned. “It’s what the warehouse had.”

“Owner, would you rather keep me or it?”

“Well, you’re a person. I should send you back.”

“I didn’t ask what you should do; I asked what you want to do?” Keeley put her hands on her hips, still moving to the time of key. It wasn’t some foreign object now. It was part of her, integral to who and what she was. “Do you want me to stay, or do you want me to go back? I’ll do whatever you say.”

“I want you to be my store’s doll.” Owner said.

Keeley nodded as her body fell back under the spell and back under her owner’s control, content and happy to be his doll. Owner sent the “replacement” doll back to the warehouse.

Keeley would never leave the store again, and spent her life in the display window. She would eventually get her voice back, and would change costumes through the year, but would always remain a doll for the toy store. There was no replacing her.