

Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly

by

Inspired by the life and work of collage artist Della Wells

Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly by Y York

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Tonia (from Antonia) Bridge, age nine

Theo Moore, age nine

Alma Bridge, early thirties

Leon Bridge, late thirties

Aunt Franny, forties

The characters are African American.

It is Milwaukee, 1964, Fall. The living-dining room of a modest house, in a working class neighborhood.

(TONIA stands on a stool, as her mother, ALMA, pins pleats on the dress. Party decorations and sewing items are strewn about.)

TONIA

...What if we didn't have a party?

ALMA

Stop squirming.

TONIA

...What if nobody comes?

ALMA

Everybody is going to come.

TONIA

...What time is it?

ALMA

Plenty of time, if you be still.

TONIA

...Aren't your fingers getting poked?

ALMA

The only thing getting poked is my patience.

TONIA

We should call it off.

ALMA

What?!

TONIA

Your fingers are sore and your patience is sore, all those screaming children gonna make your ears sore.

ALMA

Tonia, Baby. You been asking for a party for as long as you been talking. We're having it today.

TONIA

I changed my mind --

ALMA

I know what's wrong with you.

TONIA (guilty)

What--? Nothing's wrong with me-- What?

ALMA

You got birthday quivers.

TONIA

I don't have those.

ALMA

Birthday quivers, bad as I've ever seen.

TONIA

Do your fingers need the doctor? We can go on the bus.

ALMA

Nobody needs a doctor, I'm not going to a doctor, it's a party, not a doctor, now be still...Forty-seven pleats. Those little girls are going to be so jealous.

TONIA

Daddy says don't make people jealous.

ALMA

Well...just a little bit jealous won't hurt.

TONIA

When's he gonna be home? Shouldn't he be home?

ALMA

He's off getting...well...never mind.

TONIA

Is it for the party?

ALMA (teasing)

Don't you be pestering him about any package he might be carrying when he gets home. We don't want to spoil the surprise.

TONIA

When he gets home, when Daddy gets home, he might be tired, he might be too tired from his work to have a party. He might go to bed as soon as he gets home.

ALMA

As soon as he gets home he's going to help me with these decorations is what he's going to do.

TONIA

Or we could do science, me and Daddy. He likes to do science.

ALMA

Did you finish Miss Charlotte's book?

TONIA

Yes, ma'am. I used it for my book report.

ALMA

You study that book. That book's gonna tell you how to get by... Turn, please. You are a lovely birthday girl.

(ALMA hands TONIA a doll. It is a little white girl doll, with blonde, short hair, dressed exactly like TONIA.)

ALMA (continued)

Let me see my two little girls together. Look at that, now you look just like Miss Katie Keane, just like I promised. Here, Baby.

(ALMA gives TONIA a little wrapped box.)

TONIA

What's this?

(ALMA takes the doll, while TONIA unwraps her present.)

ALMA

What could it be, a wrapped box on a birthday? I wonder. (to the doll) What do you think it is, Miss Katie?

TONIA (opening it, getting happy)

I thought the dress was my present.

ALMA

Miss Katie Keane needs a present, too.

(TONIA removes a doll's long blonde wig.)

ALMA

That's her "long-hair option." So she can be like the little shampoo girls on TV.

TONIA (waving the wig)

"Silky shiny smooth."

ALMA

It's not a flag, Tonia.

TONIA

Flying behind her as she runs in the wind.

ALMA

Give me that. (She puts the wig on the doll.) Miss Katie Keane does not run in the wind. She sits quietly with her hands in her lap. She is a good little girl who does not squirm while her mama makes her pleats.

TONIA

Katie squirms worse than me.

ALMA (admiring the new look)

A little lady who is never late getting up.

TONIA

She's still asleep when I'm already home from school.

ALMA

A lady who eats everything on her plate.

TONIA

She don't eat nothing but sweets -- I clean my plate.

ALMA

Her teeth so white. This little lady eats her peas.

TONIA

Then her teeth would be green.

ALMA

She never talks back, never makes a fuss.

TONIA

She's a back-talking fool.

ALMA (firmly)

No one would ever take her away.

TONIA

...She can't go somewhere without me.

ALMA

Never taken away to live with strangers.

TONIA

What strangers? We're not allowed to talk to strangers.

ALMA

A lady who is quiet. Subdued.

TONIA

I'm subdued...What's subdued?

ALMA

A perfect little eight-year-old girl, just like you.

TONIA

I'm nine.

ALMA

You are eight. You are eight today.

TONIA

I'm nine today. I'm fourth grade. That's nine.

ALMA

Eight. You are eight. If anyone asks, you are eight years old.  
Do you understand me?

TONIA

I'm n--

ALMA

Antonia Bridge. (fiercely) If I have anything left for you, anything at all, it is this: you are eight years old. Today. That is how old you are. If anyone asks, you say, "eight, I am eight." Tell me how old you are.

TONIA

I'm eight, Mama.

ALMA (to doll)

Your colors are muted, your legs are covered, your shoes are clean and your stockings are mended—just like Miss Charlotte says in her book.

TONIA (reaching for the doll)

Maybe you should put Katie down—

ALMA

Be sure you follow Miss Charlotte's rules, Tonia.

TONIA

I know the rules.

ALMA

I should have followed the rules.

TONIA

You did, you followed the rules, Mama, you did.

ALMA

I didn't learn the rules.

TONIA

Mama...you want tea? You want me to make your tea?

ALMA (exiting to kitchen.)

I am hollow...

TONIA

You're not hollow.

ALMA

Hollow...

(ALMA exits to the kitchen, letting the doll fall. TONIA picks up the doll.)

TONIA

You're not... (sigh) What are we going to do, Katie--?

(THEO leaps out from hiding.)

THEO

You can play with me.

TONIA

Hey--!

THEO

Where's the cake? Can I have cake?

TONIA (whispering)

What are you doing here, Theo? You're going to upset Mama.

THEO

She didn't see me. Can we play "The Adventures of Miss Katie Keane?"

TONIA

Quiet--

(THEO retrieves TONIA's paint box.)

THEO (whisper)

Paint a picture.

TONIA (Takes the paints from him.)

Don't touch my paint box.

THEO

Paint me with Katie Keane.

TONIA (Puts box back.)

I'm not painting a picture --

THEO

You can -- painting is quiet.

TONIA

You have to go--

THEO

I have to stay. (lying) I have to borrow. My Mama sent me.

TONIA

Your Mama doesn't send you here.

THEO

She does to borrow.

TONIA

We don't have it.

THEO

I didn't say what it is yet.

TONIA

We're all out.

THEO

You can show me your science project. I like it.

TONIA

No.

THEO

I'm doing bones. A skeleton. Like in Dr. Sorkin's office. I drew the bones like you showed me so they stand out sharp. The library lady got me a book. Bones are very scientific.

TONIA

Mine is scientific.

THEO

Not as scientific as bones.

TONIA

Yes, it is. And it's beautiful and it's accurate and factual. It's going to win first prize.

THEO

They didn't vote yet -- the Science Fair is next week. Can I stay for the party?

TONIA

No!

THEO  
I like your new dress.

TONIA  
Why?

THEO  
It's new, it's nice, you're pretty.

TONIA  
I hate it.

THEO  
It's just like Miss Katie Keane.

TONIA  
She hates it, too.

THEO  
You and Katie Keane are dress-alike twins.

TONIA  
We have to wear gray because it's subdued!

THEO  
What's "subdued?"

TONIA  
Subdued is...the opposite of red.

THEO  
I like red.

TONIA  
We do, too. Inside we're red. Outside we're subdued.

THEO (barely containing his joy)  
I brought you something...

TONIA  
You did?

THEO  
It's red!

TONIA  
What is it?

THEO  
Something wonderful.

TONIA  
Did you make it?

THEO  
No.

TONIA  
Did you buy it?

THEO  
No.

TONIA  
Something you found on the ground?

THEO  
Not even close.

TONIA  
Where is it?

THEO  
My pocket. It's in my pocket, and I love it, and it's in a box.  
(He opens the box from his pocket.) Good, huh?

TONIA  
It's a Coca-Cola cap.

THEO (proudly)  
It's lucky for tests. And it's red.

TONIA  
It's a lucky charm and...it's a thumb hat.

THEO  
Yes, for rainy days so your thumb stays dry.

TONIA  
It's a thumb hat when it isn't a...pirate patch.

THEO (pirate voice)  
Har-de-har-de-har, me hearties.

TONIA  
Walk the plank, walk it now.

THEO  
No, no, don't make me walk the plank.

TONIA  
Dive down into the deep dark water.

THEO  
I'm drowning...

TONIA  
You won't drown, this Coca Cola cap will be your life preserver!

THEO  
I am saved.

TONIA  
Where did you find this great Coca Cola cap?

THEO  
From the first and only Coca-Cola I ever got to drink. I got a Coca-Cola for my birthday. The cap helps me remember the bubbles. The Birthday Fairy brought it.

TONIA  
The who?

THEO  
Birthday Fairy. She knows if you've been bad or good?

TONIA  
What's she look like?

THEO  
She's pretty and she wears lots of colors and flies like Superman.

TONIA  
I never heard of a Birthday Fairy.

THEO

She doesn't mind. She'll bring you something anyway. Can I stay and see what it is?

TONIA

You have to go.

THEO

But I always get to come to your party.

TONIA

You don't because I never had one.

THEO

Yes. When you got cake all over yourself, and your Daddy yelled at you to use your fork.

TONIA

That was your birthday at your house.

THEO

The time you didn't bring me a present.

TONIA

That was your birthday, too!

THEO

Well then you owe me. You come to my parties, I get to come to yours.

TONIA

Only girls are allowed.

THEO

Not Sarah.

TONIA

How do you know?

THEO

Not Lydia. Not Marcy. I asked.

TONIA

Why did you do that?!

THEO  
Because I did. Who gets to come?

TONIA  
...It's a secret.

THEO  
I won't tell.

TONIA  
You can't be here, Mama don't --

(MR. BRIDGE enters with a bag. THEO hides.)

MR. BRIDGE  
Alma, I brought the-- Hey, Birthday Girl.

TONIA  
Hi, hi Daddy.

MR. BRIDGE  
Hi. (dismayed) Where are the streamers? Aren't we having a party--?

TONIA  
You're too tired for a party.

MR. BRIDGE  
I'm not tired --

TONIA  
We could do science. That would be a nice birthday.

MR. BRIDGE  
I'm not tired and we're having a party --

TONIA  
I can show you my science project--

MR. BRIDGE  
--What is all this sewing stuff doing out?

TONIA  
Mama's sewing.

MR. BRIDGE

She's supposed to be decorating.

TONIA

She made me this birthday dress.

MR. BRIDGE

...Okay...she made a birthday dress. Well, it's very nice--

(He starts to put the sewing items in their basket.)

TONIA

Little tight. It'll tear when I raise my hand. Right in class.

MR. BRIDGE

Don't raise your hand.

TONIA

Mr. Mackie said to raise my hand when I know the answer. Or when I got something to show.

MR. BRIDGE

You keep your hand down. No need to show off.

TONIA

I'm too quiet, like a mouse, he said.

MR. BRIDGE

No such thing as too quiet. A mouse is fine.

TONIA

He says I'm smart.

MR. BRIDGE

That's a secret between you and him. Other kids hate a showoff. Keep your hand down.

TONIA

We're studying light.

MR. BRIDGE

Light. A hundred and eighty-six thousand miles per...?

TONIA

Second!

MR. BRIDGE

Sound! Seven hundred and sixty-eiiiiight...?

TONIA

Miles per hour!

MR. BRIDGE

Correct.

TONIA

You want to see my science project?

MR. BRIDGE

We'll look at it later. Right now, we got to straighten up this mess.

TONIA

But it's right here --

MR. BRIDGE

And don't forget to fix your hair. Your mama doesn't like it messy.

TONIA

She didn't say it was messy.

MR. BRIDGE

It doesn't look right. Fifteen dollars, it ought to look right.

TONIA

I don't go to the beauty parlor any more.

MR. BRIDGE

Says who?

TONIA

...Me.

MR. BRIDGE

Your hair gonna grow straight now that you're nine?

TONIA

'Cause how they burned my scalp.

MR. BRIDGE

That was your fault. Your head starts to burn you tell somebody. You wave your hand, "rinse my head, it's hot."

TONIA

You said not to raise my hand, I'm a mouse.

MR. BRIDGE

You do when your scalp is on fire, you're not a mouse then. Where is your sense?

TONIA

I don't know where my sense is -- I have quivers--. We should cancel the party.

MR. BRIDGE

What are you talking about, quivers? Did your Mama say "quivers?" (brief pause, concern) Where's your Mama? Is your Mama alright?

TONIA

She's in the kitchen making her tea. She needed her tea ...I can call everybody.

MR. BRIDGE

Can't be calling up a dozen people this late. Your mama can rest upstairs when your guests come.

TONIA

We could do science and not have a party at all. That would be a fine birthday -- Daddy! Your bag moved.

MR. BRIDGE

Well, there goes the surprise.

(He takes out a big white live chicken.)

TONIA

Is that for me?!

MR. BRIDGE

For your birthday.

TONIA

I love it.

MR. BRIDGE (petting it)

Your Mama insisted, special for your birthday. I had to cross town to find a live one and then it cost twice as much. She said she'd dress it herself...Well...we'll see. You pick up in here, and put on a bandana. No need to be upsetting your mama. I'm gonna go...help her with her tea.

(MR. BRIDGE takes the chicken to the kitchen. THEO emerges from hiding.)

THEO (whispers)

When it gets bad at my house, you know what I do?

TONIA

You come over to my house.

THEO

I can't at night. I put my fingers in my ears and hum a song. (Demonstrates briefly.)

TONIA

What does that do?

THEO

It's too noisy to hear what they're saying. Then, when it's safe, you stop humming and take your fingers out...it's peaceful. It feels peaceful.

(She tries briefly.)

TONIA

It's not going to work for me.

THEO

Let me see your scalp scar.

TONIA

Please, go home. You're going to make it worse.

THEO

I won't, I promise.

TONIA

Mama thinks you're a spy.

THEO

That's silly. I'm a pirate. (He pokes around on her scalp.)

TONIA

Daddy likes science. I thought we could look at my science project.

THEO

I could look at it.

TONIA

Mr. Mackie says it's "exceptional."

THEO

What's that mean?

TONIA

...Not dumb.

THEO

I wish I had a scalp scar.

TONIA

I wish I had hair like yours.

THEO

Buzz cut. It's exceptional. Mr. Palmer zips me with the clipper.

TONIA

Does he zip girls?

THEO

Ladies.

TONIA

Really?

THEO

The sensible ones. He calls the beauty parlors torture chambers. Calls the hot combs branding irons.

(THEO picks up a red streamer and ties it around TONIA's head like a bandana.)

TONIA

Does a buzz cut draw attention? Daddy says don't draw attention.

THEO

I don't draw attention. (about the bandana) Now you're red on the outside, too.

TONIA (takes it off)

It's not allowed.

THEO

Can I play with your chicken?

TONIA

Mama's dressing her. I hope it's a red dress.

THEO (warning)

There's going to be chicken poop.

TONIA

I'll get a coop, that's where a chicken poops, in her coop! And she's going to lay us an egg every day.

THEO

Can we decorate the coop?

TONIA

Yes. (Picking up fabric.) We can take cloth and make bows and use the streamers after the party.

THEO

And my Coca-Cola cap! A chicken loves decorations.

(They unwind a long streamer together.)

TONIA

Yes, they lay more eggs when their coop is decorated because they're so happy.

THEO

And you can paint it.

TONIA

I'll paint it red.

THEO

You can call her Lassie. She's beautiful like Lassie.

TONIA

"Lassie, you are my chicken and you have to lay me an egg every single day."

(A loud squawk. A loud chop. A brief pause)

THEO

What was that?

(MR. BRIDGE enters with a cleaver. He is wearing an apron with blood spatters.)

MR. BRIDGE

Come help cook your chicken.

THEO

Cook it?!

MR. BRIDGE

What are you doing here, Theo? You better make yourself scarce.

THEO

I'm going, I'm going.

(THEO exits.)

MR. BRIDGE

What's got into you, inviting Theo? Pick up that sewing, and come to the kitchen. Your mama wants you to learn how to pluck a chicken.

(He exits to the kitchen. Tonia is in shock about the chicken. A breath. She picks up and hugs Miss Katie Keane, a brief moment, then she holds Miss Katie Keane at arm's length and chants, to summon her.)

TONIA (chanting)

Katie Keane, Katie Keane, Katie Keane, Katie Katie. Katie Keane, Katie Keane, Katie Keane, Katie Katie.

(The room begins to feel like a very sunny day as TONIA plays with her doll.)

[NOTE: TONIA plays with and speaks for her dolls. It is not necessary that she hold her when she speaks for her. TONIA's doll-play is giddy, joyous & spontaneous; no need to rush.]

MISS KATIE KEANE

Hello Miss Tonia Bridge. Happy birthday, Miss Tonia Bridge.

TONIA

I'd just as soon forget my birthday, if you don't mind.

MISS KATIE KEANE

I don't mind at all. How do I look in my long hair?

TONIA

You look like the shampoo girl on tv. I'd buy shampoo off you any time. And here is a beautiful red sash.

(TONIA wraps the doll in a red streamer.)

MISS KATIE KEANE

My beautiful red cape flies behind me in the wind and my hair flies like a flag. (Tonia flies the doll.) It's strong and silky shiny and clean from shampoo. (Tonia gets an idea and climbs on furniture.) I am Rapunzel. Trapped in the tower by the witchy stepmother.

TONIA (deep voice)

Rapunzel Rapunzel, let down your hair.

MISS KATIE KEANE

Who is calling to me from below my tower in the dark of night?

TONIA (deep voice)

It is I, your Prince Charming.

MISS KATIE KEANE (whisper)

You must go away. My mean witchy stepmother will see you and turn you into a toad.

TONIA (deep voice)

I'll be careful, Rapunzel. Let down your hair.

MISS KATIE KEANE

Alright, Prince Charming. But climb fast and don't pull my hair off me.

TONIA (deep voice)

Climb, climb, climbing climbing, climb, climb. And I reach the top. (witch voice) But I am not Prince Charming, it is I, your witchy stepmother. Ha ha!

MISS KATIE KEANE

Oh no, help me, help me.

TONIA (witch voice)

I am going to cut off your hair so that you can never escape the tower.

MISS KATIE KEANE

You cannot keep me prisoner. If you cut my hair, I will fly, fly away into the night, and no one can ever stop me.

MR. BRIDGE (off)

Tonia, can you set the table?

(The sunny day fades.)

TONIA

...I'm just about to, Daddy.

MR. BRIDGE (off)

You talking to your birthday guests?

(As the light shifts, TONIA sets the table.)