

University Barbie and Ken™:

*A generation as seen through the eyes
of a gas station cashier.*

Brian Gerardi

Won't-Leave-Home-Without-Her-Cell-Phone-Barbie hops out of her shiny red Volkswagen with a phone to her ear and bounces up to the doors and then up to my counter. She comes with a new mini-cellular phone, pager and drama-filled life. I smile, but quickly notice the urgency in her eyes.

"Name your trauma," I say.

"Do you have batteries here?" she asks in a whisper. "You see, my pager went dead and no one has been able to get a hold of me. Now my cell phone is low." She turns her phone off and sighs.

"Oooh. That is a trauma," I remark with such concern in my voice that I am certain I saw a tear fall from her glassy eyes.

I wave her over to the middle aisle and lead her to the battery section while she breathlessly tells me about how everything always goes wrong all at once for her. I point out the sale we have going on batteries and leave her turmoil for the safety behind the register.

I have been a gas station cashier for the last two years in this college town. I go to classes and work forty hours a week. I greet with a smile, make witty conversation and give thanks to hundreds of customers a day, many of them like Barbie. "name Your Trauma" is a game I came up with months ago to breathe life into an otherwise mundane job. Trauma is exactly what I see; well, on some level anyway.

Try-This-Credit-Card-Ken™ struts up to the counter and offers no response to my cheerful greeting. He comes with six different credit cards, three layers of shirts, a hemp necklace for when he wants to sport the "alternative" look and the patience of a groom on his wedding night.

"Name your trauma," I say curtly.

"Nothing yet, but let's give the old Visa a whirl," he says with no enthusiasm.

I put Ken's Visa through the credit card swipe and wait for the "Declined" message that usually appears.

"Oh! I'm sorry, Ken! Strike one!" I say playfully.

He grumbles and mumbles something about how he had sent the payment weeks ago. I smile pleasantly, letting him know it is none of my business. He unveils a MasterCard from his wallet and places it in my hand.

At this point he begins chanting some sort of ritualistic chant as I swipe the car.

"Please, please baby! Come on, baby. Come on. Just once is all I ask."

"I hope the credit cards gods aren't too busy for you today," I say.

Just as I gave that vote of confidence to Ken, the card is approved. The

beads of sweat on his forehead subside. He returns to his impatient demeanor. The chant had worked again for Ken.

Ken leaves and I have to quickly recompose from all of the excitement. Co-dependent Barbie™ smile at me and slide a pack of gum and two candy bars onto the counter.

“Name your trauma,” I say.

She giggles a little. “This “Isn't all for me, really it “Isn't!” she says quickly. All of the poofy-jacket girls with her giggle again.

Deluxe-Collector's-Edition-Co-dependent-Barbie™ come with a poofy jacket, a full size-zero Abercrombie wardrobe, a diet that runs the fine line of an eating disorder, and four friends.

I ring her up quickly because her poofy-jacket friends are clogging the line. They too have to pay for a pack of gum and two candy bars.

Next in line is Big-Man-On-Campus-Ken™ who keeps turning to his shiny blue car parked illegally in front of the store. He empties his arms full of chips, pop, cigarettes, and other necessities.

“Name your trauma,” I say.

“That woman had better have put that grand in my account this month!” he says hostilely .

I think to myself that, on previous occasions, he has used far worse names when referring to his mother. Ken comes with lettered garb for every day of the week, a blue Camero, and a mom that works seventy hours per week.

He hands me his debit card and exalts loudly, “It had better go through!”

I bite my tongue and think quietly: Or what? You'll have to get a job, Ken?

The transaction is a success and Ken takes his big bag of staples out the door.

The rush is nearly over and the last in my line is Has-Been-Ken™ who puts down a can of soup and a pack of cigarettes. I don't know what happened to this guy. He had lost his glow months ago. He comes in after work with a name tag still on his shirt and barely says a word.

“Name your trauma,” I say.

“I pulled a double today,” he says hesitantly.

“You work now?”

“Yep. No more allowance for me.”

Has-Been-Ken™ come with a part-time job, major credit card debt, and Prozac.