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Katherine's Story

by Kage Baker

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Science Fiction

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1937

She knew the marriage had been a mistake by the time they stepped off the train.

All the same, she smiled and waited obediently as Dick got their suitcases from the porter. This was a pretty place, at least; big green mountains and trees, and the little train station quite rustic if not exactly charming. Lean men in overalls, red clay thick on their workboots, waited in a silent line as goods were unloaded: sacks of feed, sacks of fertilizer, wire cages full of baby chicks. The chicks peeped and poked their tiny beaks through the mesh. The heat was shimmering, sticky.

Dick approached with the luggage. She turned to smile at him but he was looking past her, grinning and hefting one suitcase in a wave.

"Pop!"

One of the lean men was loading cages into the back of an old truck. He turned and saw Dick, and nodded in acknowledgment. Dick ran toward him and she followed.

"Hey, Pop!"

"Hey," the man responded, looking them up and down. "You're early."

"I got the train times wrong," Dick said.

"Well, that's you." Mr. Loveland shook his head. His gaze moved briefly to Katherine. "This the wife?"

"Yes -- "

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Loveland, I've heard so much about you," said Katherine, smiling as she twisted the strap of her handbag. He just nodded, considering her.

"We got your room ready, anyways," he said.

"Oh, thank you -- "

"You may's well put those in the back," he told Dick, gesturing at the suitcases. Dick stepped close and hoisted the suitcases into the truck bed. As he did so he kicked one of the wire cages and there was a pitiable cheeping from the chicks inside.

"Oh, Dick, you've hurt one of them," Katherine cried, stooping down. "It's this black one, look! I think his little foot is squashed. There's blood -- "

"Oh! Sorry -- "

"Things happen," said Mr. Loveland.

* * * *

The ride to their new home was silent and uncomfortable. Literally; she rode perched on Dick's lap, which would have been funny and romantic under other circumstances. They bumped along unpaved roads for miles, up into the mountains, far out of town, before turning down a gravel drive to a frame house set back among trees. There was an enclosed screened porch running the length of the front.

Katherine hopped out and waited, clutching her handbag, as the men unloaded the cages and carried them around to the chicken pen in the side yard. Mr. Loveland remained with the chicks, opening the cages and dumping their contents into the pen. Dick got their suitcases again and she followed him into the silent house.

To her dismay, she saw two cots set up on the porch and an old chiffonier, clearly intended

for them.

"Are we living out here?" she whispered.

Dick looked down at the cots. "Oh," he said. "I guess so. Well, it's hot, ain't it? We'll be all right." He dropped the suitcases and pushed through the door into the house. She followed him, wondering where she was going to put her things when they arrived.

"Ma!"

The kitchen was small and dark, and the woman kneading biscuit dough at the table filled it effectively. She looked up at them. She had Dick's strong jaw. She did not smile as she said: "Oh."

"Hey!" Dick edged forward and embraced her.

"You'll get your good clothes floured," Mrs. Loveland told him, looking over his shoulder at Katherine. "You're Kathy, I guess."

"Yes, Mother Loveland, Katherine," she said, smiling and nodding. "I'm awfully glad to meet you -- though I guess we're a little early. I hope that's not an inconvenience."

"_Katherine_, huh?" Mrs. Loveland looked coldly amused. "Now, that's funny. Dick told me you were born in Chapel Hill, but you sure don't talk like it."

"Well, I was," Katherine stammered, "But I grew up in New York, you know. I studied at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, did Dick tell you?"

"No," said Mrs. Loveland.

* * * *

She was miserably homesick, through the weeks of Indian summer. Without his football sweater Dick no longer looked much like Nelson Eddy; and he'd changed, as a son will change in his mother's house. The other illusion, about coming home to the South and having a big, loving family instead of living in boarding houses with Mother and Anne -- that was fading too.

She saw clearly enough that she'd better make Mrs. Loveland like her, but her attempts to help out were dismissed -- she didn't know how to cook. She and Mother and Anne had eaten in restaurants or heated Campbell's soup over Sterno cans in their rooms. She took on the task of feeding the chicks, but her decision to make a pet of the crippled black one earned her contempt even from Dick. She persisted; made it a separate pen, gave it special care, named it. It lived and grew, to Mrs. Loveland's disgust.

Her things came, in far too many crates, and Dick and Mr. Loveland grumbled as they stacked them in the barn. With them came the letter from Mother, and she cried as she read it. She could hear the weary patient voice so clearly, she could see Mother looking up at her over her spectacles, as term papers waited for grading.

Beloved daughter,

I hope this finds you well and settling in. It may be difficult at first, as the life is not one to which you are accustomed. "I slept, and dreamed that life was Beauty; I woke, and found that life was Duty". Please believe, however, that I wish you happiness with all my heart.

I have sent all your books, and some of the things from the Goldsborough house that you loved, as well as the rest of your trousseau. If there is anything else you require, I will send it along at the first opportunity as soon as you let me know what you lack.

Your sister and I continue well. Anne is now understudy for the ingenue as well as in the chorus. I had occasion to meet Kurt Weill, the composer, who was dining at the table next to mine. His music is considered quite avant-garde but I found him to be a very nice little man, quite shy. What I have heard of his work so far impresses me mightily.

I must go now, but send sincerest wishes for your continuing joy, and the earnest hope that you will find with Dick the domestic happiness for which I know you have always longed. It is not given to all of us, but may it be given to you.

Your loving

Mother

So she couldn't write to Mother about how miserable she was, not without seeming like a worthless failure, and worse; Mother would gloomily conclude that the shame and scandal of The Divorce had rubbed off on her children after all.

She endured. Most of her clothing was inappropriate for daily life on a farm. Under Mrs. Loveland's blank stare she was stupidly inept, burnt things while ironing them, broke things while washing them.

The warm weather ended and it rained, and in the leaking barn her books got soaked. She carried them into the house frantically, armloads spread and opened before the stove to dry, weeping as she peeled back wet pages from the color plates: the _Child's Garden of Verses _with its Maxfield Parrish illustrations, Kay Nielsen's _East of the Sun and West of the Moon, Myths and Enchantment Tales, The Volland Mother Goose, Lamb's Tales From Shakespeare. _When Mrs. Loveland

saw them her jaw dropped.

"You still look at _picture books_" she said.

* * * *

1938

The winter was mild, so she and Dick continued to sleep on the enclosed porch.

One night she dreamed that she was back at college, that Mother had left her at the entrance to the dormitory and she'd gone in to find that the building was dark, deserted. Everyone had gone home for Christmas. She turned in panic and hurried outside again, and to her horror saw Mother driving away.

She ran after the car, after its red winking taillights. She chased it for miles. There was brilliant moonlight, so bright it hurt her eyes, blue-white. She lost the car at last and stood there alone, sobbing, and then a strange little girl came to her and told her everything would be all right.

Then she woke, and found herself alone on a country road in her thin nightgown, in the terrifying silence of the night. Had she been sleepwalking? She was more than half a mile from the house. Teeth chattering, she hobbled back, and Dick did not wake when she crawled back into bed.

* * * *

By April she knew without doubt that the baby was on the way. She gave up any attempt to be a good farm wife, and nobody seemed to care. She luxuriated in her freedom; took long walks alone, now that spring had come and the dogwoods were flowering. Where the red clay road cut across the hills she imagined she'd walked into a Thomas Hart Benton painting. This was the only part of the South that was the way she'd dreamed it would be.

One afternoon she was passing a house set close to the road, and heard music: Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No.1, to her astonishment, sounding scratched and tinny as though it were coming out of the horn of an old Victrola but still flowing magnificently on. She leaned against the split rail fence, listening, rapt. Someone was moving inside the house, through the window she saw someone dancing. Wild, free-form, arms flung out. A second later the woman pirouetted close to the window and saw her. She stopped dancing immediately.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Katherine, blushing. "I just -- well, the music was so beautiful. I love Tchaikovsky, but there aren't any classical radio stations here -- "

"I know," said the woman, pushing up the window the rest of the way and leaning out. Her face was pale and sharp, her gaze fixed. "It is an absolute purgatory for anyone of any culture. Or decent breeding. Tell me, are you a devotee of Beethoven?"

"Well, yes -- "

"Please, come in. Will you come in?" said the woman. She ducked inside and slammed the window. By the time Katherine had come reluctantly up the path, the woman was standing at the open door.

"I am Amelia DuPlessis Hickey," she said, inclining in a queenly sort of way. "I would introduce my dear husband, but he is currently traveling abroad on necessary business. Please, do come in! And you would be?"

"Katherine MacQuarrie," she replied, and then added, "Loveland."

"I see," said the woman, as the music behind her wound down to hissing silence. "Would that be of the Greenville MacQuarries? With the DeLafayette MacQuarrie who perished at Gettysburg?"

"I don't think so," said Katherine, stepping across the threshold. "I'm afraid I don't know a lot about my father's people -- "

"Ah! Well, things happen," said Mrs. Hickey graciously. "Won't you stay for tea?"

"Why, thank you," said Katherine, and recoiled as something sprang up out of a packing box beside her and screamed.

"Now, Peaseblossom, that won't do!" said Mrs. Hickey. "I really must apologize, Mrs. Loveland. Pray allow me to introduce my beautiful little geniuses: Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth and the baby, Mustardseed!"

She was referring to the pale and sullen children who crouched together in the corner. The two boys wore only overalls, rolled up thickly at the ankles; the girl wore a flour-sack dress. They had retreated behind what appeared to be a wooden model of the Brooklyn Bridge. From the pieces scattered on the bare floor, it seemed that they themselves had been constructing it. They were fox-faced, emaciated, staring with enormous dark eyes. A whimper from the floor drew her attention to an ashen baby waving its skinny arms from an apple box.

After a moment of appalled silence Katherine said:

"How clever. You named them after the fairies in _Midsummer Night's Dream, _I guess?"

"I adore Shakespeare. Another passion of mine. My grandfather, Zadoc DuPlessis (for we are

of the Chaney County DuPlessises, you see) had the good fortune to see the immortal Junius Booth in Charleston where, I believe, he was portraying Hamlet," said Mrs. Hickey, stoking up the stove. She put a saucepan of water on the burner. Katherine looked around. The room was as filthy as a bare room can be. There were ancient books stacked everywhere, piled against the walls, and three crates of phonograph records. In the corner by the window was, yes, a Victrola with its morning-glory trumpet.

"Gosh, how lucky," said Katherine. There were no chairs, so she wandered over to the children. "How are you all today?"

They shrank back. The little girl bared her teeth.

"I do beg your pardon," said Mrs. Hickey, coming swiftly to her side. "They are terribly shy with strangers. We have, alas, nearly no social life. Now, you come out here and be ladies and gentlemen for our caller! Perhaps then we'll go out for a Co-colee."

The children blinked and scrambled out, lining up awkwardly against the wall.

"They do love Coca-Cola," said Mrs. Hickey.

It was two hours before Katherine could get away. Mrs. Hickey told her life story: her family had once owned most of three counties, but of course The War had altered their circumstances, though not so grievously she hadn't been raised with the best of everything and taught to appreciate all that was exquisite in the arts.

And she'd given it all up for love; so now she rusticated here, teaching her brilliant offspring herself. The boys were clearly destined to be engineers, why, they'd made that bridge themselves from nothing more than slatwood, all you had to do was show them a picture and they'd build anything! And little Peaseblossom had inherited a love of great literature, she just devoured books. The children listened to all this silent and expressionless.

Later, back at the Lovelands', Katherine went out to feed the chickens. She picked up the little black hen and buried her face in its feathers, feeling her hot tears spilling, and prayed that she wouldn't turn out like Mrs. Hickey.

* * * *

Summer came and went, and Autumn arrived with cornshocks and pumpkins, and in the early hours of October 30 Katherine went into labor. Dick joked about the baby being a little Halloween goblin as he drove her to the hospital in town. She wasn't laughing by the time they got to the hospital. The pains were terrible.

The nurses got her into a room and Dick told her he had to get back, that he'd come see her that evening. She begged him to tell the nurses to give her something for the pain. The head nurse came in and told her they were having difficulty locating Dr. Jackson; as soon as they heard from him they'd give her something.

All the interminable morning and afternoon, they were unable to find him, had no idea where he might be, and at last they gave Katherine drugs anyway. The relief was blissful, unbelievable, and she received with floaty equanimity the news that the baby was turned wrong. "Well, just turn it around," she told them, smiling.

The bright window darkened and it was night. She floated in and out of a dream about Halloween, big yellow pumpkins on gateposts, little children scurrying in the dark with papier-mache faces. But that wouldn't be until tomorrow night, would it? They gave her more drugs. Trick or treat!

Suddenly there was a nurse screaming and crying, praying to Jesus. Her sister had called from New Jersey. She'd been listening to Charlie McCarthy and when Nelson Eddy came on she'd switched away. (Katherine felt mildly outraged; how could anyone switch off Nelson Eddy?) The man on the radio had said Earth was being invaded by Martians! They'd come in a big cylinder and were burning people up! State troopers too! It was the end of the world!

The baby was turned around now but the head was too big. The head was stuck. There was a colored lady talking to her soothingly, wiping her face with a cold cloth. You have to work, honey. Nobody could find news of the invasion on the little radio in the cafeteria but strange lights had begun to appear in the sky, were swooping and circling the town, had they landed yet? There was one. It was right outside the hospital. It looked like a soup plate on fire. The colored lady was crying now too but she stayed right there.

Sometime in the night the doctor came at last. Not Dr. Jackson. It was a strange doctor.

* * * *

It was afternoon before Katherine woke up. Nobody said anything about Martians, and she assumed it had all been a crazy nightmare. Her little girl was fine, just fine, they assured her; but she had to ask and ask before anybody would bring the baby for her to hold.

When they did bring her in, Katherine's first thought was: _Why, she looks like Mickey Mouse. _Both her eyes were blacked and all the dome of her head was one black-purple bruise.

"Oh, that's normal, sugar," the nurse told her, too quickly. "She just had a big head, that was all. It'll go away." The baby lay quiet and waxen in her arms, barely moving, but they told her that was normal too.

1939

It wasn't normal. Bette Jean was an exquisite baby, with delicate white skin, with perfect little features, with enormous solemn eyes the color of an aquamarine. Her hair was black and wavy. She looked like a doll, but by her first birthday she was still unable to sit up.

When it became impossible to deny that something was wrong, Katherine wrote to Mother. Mother sent money -- Anne had the lead in a Broadway show now, she could afford to -- and told her to take the baby to a specialist.

There was a doctor in Chapel Hill who saw "slow" children. It was most of a day's drive in the old truck but Dick took them, tight-lipped and miserable. Bette Jean stared at the trees, the sky, the mountains, and exclaimed in her funny little unformed voice, a liquid sound like a child playing with panpipes.

In the waiting room were retarded children, spastic children, children blank and focused inward on private and inexplicable games, gaunt listless children sprawling across their parents' laps. Overalled fathers silent, shirtwaisted mothers staring like wounded tigers. Dick took one look and murmured that he had to see the man about the mortgage, and he left. "It's all right," Katherine whispered to Bette Jean, who wobbled her head and looked astonished.

Through the transom she heard a man's voice raised. "She's still not thriving. You can't be following my orders! I told you she needs lots of green and yellow vegetables. What on earth have you been feeding her?"

"Corn bread," replied the raw cracker voice, defensively. "Corn's yellow, ain't it?"

Katherine shuddered.

The doctor was tired, and perhaps not as kind as he might have been. He listened to Katherine's story, interrupting frequently as he examined Bette Jean. When he had finished he leaned back against a cabinet and took off his glasses to rub his eyes.

"Well, Mrs. Loveland -- your baby has spastic paralysis. I'd conclude she was brain-damaged at birth, either by the forceps or the fact that birth was delayed so long. There is no cure for her condition, unfortunately. Given that the family is of limited means -- I'd recommend you put her in a home."

"Oh, I couldn't!" Tears welled in Katherine's eyes, but the doctor raised his hand.

"She'd receive excellent care. Do you understand that her illness is only the result of an accident? You're young; there is no reason why you can't have healthy, normal children after this. When you do, you'll find yourself increasingly hard-pressed to give this abnormal child the attention she'll require every day of her life. You owe it to the child, to your other children -- and, I need hardly say, your husband -- to put this unfortunate occurrence behind you."

Katherine wept and refused. The doctor wanted to speak to Dick, too, but he never put in an appearance. He was nowhere in sight when Katherine carried Bette Jean out to the truck. They waited another half-hour before he came up the street, unsteady, and climbed into the cab. He'd had a drink or two. It was a long ride back, in the dark.

* * * *

When they understood the diagnosis, Dick and his parents argued at once that the only sensible thing to do would be to follow the doctor's advice and place Bette Jean in an institution. Katherine screamed her refusal, wrote a tearful letter to Mother. Mother received the news with her customary stoicism and responded by inviting Katherine to bring Bette Jean to New York for Christmas, thoughtfully sending money for the train fare.

* * * *

It was almost Heaven. No boarding houses any more: a fashionable apartment. Anne's name was now in lights, and there was talk about Hollywood. And, oh, the Metropolitan Museum! The bookstores! The music! The shows! Katherine took Bette Jean to Central Park to watch the ice skaters, and Bette Jean stared and stared from her arms in wonder, never cried at all.

But there were telephone calls, there were letters and visits from all her aunts and uncles, who'd loaned Mother money over the lean years, who'd shaken their heads over The Divorce. Every one of them told her to put Bette Jean in an institution, for the sake of her marriage if nothing else. After the latest such call she put down the phone and wandered disconsolately out to the sitting room, where Anne had Bette Jean on her lap at the big Steinway piano and was pretending to play a duet with her. Bette Jean was whooping in delight. Mother looked up from her book, peering at her over her glasses.

"And what did your Uncle James have to say?"

"Just -- more of the same." Katherine sank down to her knees by Mother's chair. She drooped forward and leaned her head on Mother's arm, wanting to cry.

Mother stared straight forward.

"Don't do it, child," she said at last. "You'd regret it the rest of your life."

* * * *

Bette Jean caught a cold on the train going back; she was feverish and wailing when Bert picked them up at the train station. Katherine sat with her in the rocking chair beside the kerosene heater, rubbed her tiny chest with Vicks Vapo-Rub, desperately fought off pneumonia. She slept sitting up with the child's head cradled on her shoulder. Dick bought a steam vaporizer and set it up beside them, with the pan of water and eucalyptus oil simmering over its little flame. It was a week before she felt safe leaving Bette Jean long enough to attend to any chores.

Scattering feed for the chickens, she looked across at the pen where she'd kept the black one and saw that it was empty. When she questioned Dick he looked away, and said at last:

"Ma had me kill it. It couldn't hardly walk, Katherine, you know that."

She wouldn't let him see her cry. She went into the house. Bette Jean was awake, and her eyes tracked to follow Katherine as she came close and sat down on the edge of the bed.

Ma-ma.

Katherine was so shocked she just sat staring. After a moment the voice came again, odd and artificial-sounding as a doll's but with a note of pleading. Bette Jean's mouth was slack, did not move, but her eyes were intent.

Mama.

Trembling, Katherine reached out and took Bette Jean's hand. Her little fingers, long and white, were ice cold. Katherine raised them to her lips and kissed them.

* * * *

It was so strange she wouldn't think about it, but it kept happening; little silent greetings, complaints, questions, observations. Nobody else heard them.

1940

A long letter from Mother: Anne had been offered a contract at RKO studios in Hollywood. Mother had quit teaching and was going out on the train to look for an apartment for them. It promised, she said, to be quite an adventure for a lady her age.

Katherine sat reading the letter over, uncertain how she ought to feel. Wonderful news for Anne, surely, but ... She had a momentary vision of red taillights winking, receding, leaving her in darkness.

_Mama. _Bette Jean was staring at her, and one little white hand beat against the blanket with a motion like a leaf fluttering. _Mama!_

* * * *

Mother sent the money. Katherine made it easy on Dick; it was only for the child's health, after all. She needed a warmer climate. The divorce would come later, and they both knew it, but it was better not to talk about that now. He was so relieved he became kind, attentive, made the last days almost nice.

* * * *

The journey was interminable on the train, but her heart was singing the whole way. Bette Jean sat propped beside her, in her best dress. With her tiny feet stuck out before her in their patent leather shoes, she looked more like a doll than ever. She whooped and moaned in excitement, staring at everything, fascinated; and the silent voice kept up its running commentary too. _Mama, nice! Mama, happy now._

They came into California and Katherine felt as though she'd escaped into her books at last, because it all looked like a Maxfield Parrish illustration: the smooth golden hills crowned with stately oak trees, the glimpses of Spanish-style houses with their red tiled roofs and white walls, the green acres of orange trees in blossom. The fragrance came through the windows of the train for miles.

"We're going to Hollywood, Bette Jean!" Katherine told her. "We'll see all the movie stars. We'll be together, and we'll never be cold any more, and this is such a beautiful place, don't you think? Maybe we're about to have adventures!"

Hollywood was where miracles happened to ordinary people. Maybe there was a place in Hollywood for extraordinary people.

As they neared the station, the porter came to see if she'd need any help getting Bette Jean down to the platform.

"Well, Hello, Miss Big Eyes!" he said, bending to look into Bette Jean's face. "My goodness, that baby's got pretty eyes."

"Thank you," said Katherine, smiling.

"My sister's boy was born like her," he said, standing straight and pulling down Katherine's suitcase.

Katherine started to say _Oh, I'm so sorry_. She paused and said: "They're wonderful children, aren't they?"

"Yes, Ma'am, they surely are," the porter replied. "And I surely believe they're sent down here to Earth for a good reason."

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