



Fiction / by Bernard Sabath

IT WAS THE NIGHT before the wedding in the large Merton house on Sycamore Street.

Upstairs in her bedroom, Kathy hung a dress in the trunk that stood among the matching cases. She paused, a slim 20-year-old with a serene expression on her tanned oval face. She watched for a moment while her mother rearranged the contents of a lingerie case on the bed.

Mrs. Merton, pretty and flushed, glanced at Kathy. "Darling, do you know how to use the camera Dad

Night Before the Wedding



He said softly, "Do we live your father's way or ours?"

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bought you? You'll want a record of your honeymoon in years to come."

Years to come, Kathy thought. Why, it really wasn't so long ago that her mother was starting her honeymoon, her marriage. Dad had succeeded in business; Mother had become important in local charities and an admired hostess. Of course, she and Fred would develop their own pattern, for they were starting out differently. Fred was coming into Dad's established business, despite his months of refusing to consider it.

One night several weeks ago Fred had said, "Mr. Merton, I've an offer in Bright Ridge—a great opportunity for Kathy and me—"

Dad had interrupted. "We'll discuss it sometime, just the two of us." But Kathy knew they hadn't got around to discussing the job; or the house, which Fred thought they shouldn't accept; or the honeymoon, which Fred wanted to pay for himself. Fred had tried to corner Dad many times, but he was elusive.

"His generosity embarrasses him," Kathy told Fred.

"But you'll be my wife. I want to do the earning and the giving. I don't want our life to be sponsored."

"You're being unkind," Kathy said. "You know he doesn't mean—" She tried to make him understand her father, but he was a strange young man, even to her. He had come to town, an ambitious, almost-belligerent young architect, determined to bring freshness and distinction into city planning. He'd fought his way up since childhood, when a succession of relatives had passed him around.

Meeting him several months ago when she was home between college semesters, Kathy had thought: I've known boys all my life, but Fred's different; he's a man. I want to be a woman to a man like him.

Now Mother was saying, "What's my little girl thinking?"

Kathy smiled. "I'm thinking about Fred, of course." But she felt a pain somewhere deep. She wanted to say, I'm not your little girl or even your big girl. I'm a woman now—at least I'm trying to be. And she wanted to ask: Mother, how does one become a woman? How?

Mother said, "Tomorrow'll be beautiful. Listen to the crickets and night birds." Kathy nodded. She heard the wail of a distant train, then a swift crack like the sound of summer lightning. She slid some shoes into their case. Next she must—

But the front doorbell was ringing insistently, and Fred's voice came clearly from downstairs. "Let me in." "The screen door's open, boy," Mr. Merton said from the living room.

Mrs. Merton, excited, cried, "Kathy, he can't see you tonight. He knows that." She hurried out of the bedroom and down the steps, calling, "Freddie,

you can't see Kathy tonight—"

Kathy listened to Fred's cold, excited voice, strangely harsh. "Mr. Merton, I've been begging you to listen to me for months. You've been a swell father, but she's going to marry me."

Silence. Then, "I've accepted that job in Bright Ridge."

"Young man, I'm giving you a job." "No, sir. I'm sorry. I've tried to explain—"

Almost without knowing what she did, Kathy hurried downstairs. Fred, her father, and her mother stood like angry statues in the living room. Kathy stood apart, feeling torn, wanting to go to each of them. It was impossible—quarreling here where, calmly and beautifully, the wedding would take place.

"Please, tell them," Fred said. "Tell them, darling." She felt heat in her cheeks, confusion in her throat. "I d-don't know what to say."

He came to her, put an arm around her, and spoke very low. "Will we live it his way—or ours?"

Her mother stood beside her father now. "Oh, Hugh," she kept repeating. "Oh, Hugh."

Kathy's lips trembled. "You don't know how good they are," she told Fred softly. "I love them. I love them."

For a moment something like hate flashed in his dark eyes. "You've had a happy childhood," he said. "And you're still having it." Then, suddenly, he was pleading again. "I like your parents—but I want you from them."

Why must there be a struggle, she wanted to ask. Why couldn't love be peaceful. But she said nothing.

Abruptly he took Kathy's hand, pressed it, smiled wryly at her parents, and said, "I'm a poor loser." Then he was gone.

"Well," said her mother. "I can't imagine what he meant by that."

Her father shook his head thoughtfully. "The important thing is that we won," he said, then muttered something about today's ungrateful youth.

"That's not how it is," Kathy said. She ached with love. Love for all of them—that was the trouble. If only she could explain why it was so important for Fred to earn his own way. But her words wouldn't leave her lips.

A few minutes later she went to the phone and dialed Fred's number. There was no answer. He's out walking, she thought, trying to convince himself that he's not defeated.

THE NEXT MORNING, her wedding day, it was dazzling bright, with the scent of lilacs seeping through her window. The beautiful luggage stood near the door, and the white gown hung just inside her open closet.

Kathy ran downstairs in her pajamas. In the kitchen her mother sat at the table, drinking coffee. "Your

father is sleeping as though this was just any day!"

She poured coffee for Kathy as the phone rang.

"I'll get it, Mother."

Her mother smiled. "It's probably Delia, ready to come fix our hair."

Kathy lifted the receiver and heard the operator's voice. "Bright Ridge calling. May I speak to Miss Katharine Merton, please."

"This is she."

Some coins clinked, then she heard Fred's voice, far away but strong. "Kathy, let me talk." He paused and she did not try to speak. "I've fought for my life for 27 years and I can't stop now, even for you. Kath, I'm in Bright Ridge at the hotel. I won't be at the wedding today. I didn't want to walk out on you, but I've got to stay a man. Kathy, I love you more than anything else in the world. Do you know that?"

Her voice wavered. "I—I know."

"Good-bye, Kathy." She heard the click of the receiver.

"Your coffee'll get cold, dear. Is Delia on her way?"

Kathy's throat was tight. She blinked, but her eyes were dry. "Fred won't be at the wedding. Yet he loves me more than anything else in the world, he says."

Her mother's eyes widened in panic. "What are you saying, Kathy?"

"He's—he's walking out." Her voice was flat, factual.

Her mother stared. "It's not true, Kathy. I won't believe—"

"He's gone, Mother." She thought of the luggage filled with beautiful clothes, the white gown, the camera intended to record a lifetime.

Her mother came toward her with open comforting arms. "All right," she said strongly, "then he wasn't good enough for you. But don't worry. Everything will be all right. Daddy and I will stand by you."

And I'll stand by you and Daddy, Kathy thought mechanically. I'll stand by you, just as I always have—a dutiful little girl who doesn't need, or deserve, a husband.

She drew away from her mother slowly, decisively. Even without a photograph, she thought, I will have this moment to look back on.

"We won't need Miss Delia," Kathy said finally. "Or Reverend Parker. Or flowers for the living room. But I'm going upstairs to pack a small case. Then I'll go to the depot and wait for the next train."

She turned and saw her father in the doorway. Kathy had no idea how long he'd been standing there. "The man's got guts," he said grudgingly. "Maybe he is right for my little girl."

Kathy felt her eyes wet and dim. "Daddy," she said, "I've had a wonderful childhood. Now I'm going to be a woman!"

And she hurried upstairs to pack.

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