

A Fair Maiden

Joyce Carol Oates

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JOYCE CAROL OATES

An Otto Penzler Book

Quercus

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So slowly, slowly, she came up
And slowly she came nigh him.
And all she said when there she came,
Young man, I think you're dying.

—*The Ballad of Barbara Allen*

PART I

1

INNOCENTLY IT BEGAN. When Katya Spivak was sixteen years old and Marcus Kidder was sixty-eight.

On Ocean Avenue of Bayhead Harbor, New Jersey, in the thickening torpor of late-morning heat she'd been pushing the Engelhardts' ten-month-old baby in his stroller and clutching the hand of the Engelhardts' three-year-old daughter, Tricia, passing the succession of dazzling and dreamlike shops for which Ocean Avenue was known – the Bridal Shoppe, the Bootery, the Wicker House, Ralph Lauren, Lily Pulitzer, Crowne Jewels, the Place Setting, Pandora's Gift Box, Prim Rose Lane Lingerie & Nightwear – when, as she paused to gaze into the Prim Rose Lane window, there came an unexpected voice in her ear: 'And what would you choose, if you had your wish?'

What registered was the quaint usage *your wish*. *Your wish*, like something in a fairy tale.

At sixteen she was too old to believe in fairy tales, but she did believe in what might be promised by a genial male voice urging *your wish*.

With a smile she turned to him. In Bayhead Harbor, it

was generally a good idea to lead with a smile. For possibly she knew this person, who'd been following her, keeping pace with her in the periphery of her vision, not passing her as other pedestrians did as she dawdled in front of store windows. In Bayhead Harbor, where everyone was so friendly, you naturally turned to even a stranger with a smile, and it was something of a disappointment to her to see that the stranger was an older, white-haired, gentlemanly man in a seersucker sport coat of the hue of ripe cantaloupe, white sport shirt and spotless white cord trousers, sporty white yachtsman's shoes. His eyes were a frank icy blue, crinkled at the corners from decades of smiling. Like a romantic figure in a Hollywood musical of bygone days – Fred Astaire? Gene Kelly? – he was even leaning on a carved ebony cane. 'Well! I'm waiting, dear. What is your wish?'

In the Prim Rose Lane display window were such silky, intimate items of apparel, it seemed very strange that anyone who passed by could see them, and yet more unnerving that others might observe. Katya had been staring at a red lace camisole and matching red lace panties – silk, sexy, ridiculously expensive – worn by an elegantly thin blond mannequin with a bland beautiful face, but it was a white muslin Victorian-style nightgown with satin trim, on a girl mannequin with braids, to which she pointed. 'That,' Katya said.

‘Ah! Impeccable taste. But you weren’t looking at something else, were you? As I said, my dear, you have your choice.’

My dear. Katya laughed uncertainly. No one spoke like this; on TV, in movies, maybe. *My dear* was meant to be quaint, and comical. *You are so young, and I am so old. If I acknowledge this with a joke, will I come out on top?*

He introduced himself as ‘Marcus Kidder, longtime Bayhead Harbor summer resident.’ This too sounded playful, as if Kidder had to be a joke. But his smile was so sincere, his manner so cordial, Katya saw no harm in volunteering her name, in abbreviated form: ‘I’m Katya. I’m a nanny.’ Pausing to suggest how silly, how demeaning the very term *nanny* was – she hated it. She was spending July and August until Labor Day working for a couple named Engelhardt, from Saddle River, New Jersey; the Engelhardts had just built a split-level house on New Liberty Street, on one of the harbor channels. ‘Maybe you know them? Max and Lorraine? They belong to the Bayhead Harbor Yacht Club.’

‘Doubtful that I do,’ Mr Kidder said with a polite sneer. ‘If your employers are among the swarm of new people multiplying along the Jersey coast like mayflies.’

Katya laughed. Dignified Mr Kidder didn’t like the Engelhardts any more than she did, and he didn’t even know them.

Was he going to offer to buy her the nightgown? It seemed to have been forgotten, for which Katya was both grateful and mildly disappointed.

Though there was no doubt in her mind how she'd have reacted: *Mr Kidder, no thanks!*

'Well, I have to leave now,' Katya said, edging away. 'Goodbye.'

'And I, too. In this direction.'

And so Mr Kidder fell into step with Katya, walking with her on Ocean Avenue and making sparkly conversation with Tricia, a shy child, now a not-so-shy child, beguiled by this charming old white-haired man who, so far as a three-year-old could know, might be a grandfatherly friend or acquaintance of her parents'. Now in the succession of shop windows Katya was aware of two reflections – her own, and that of the tall, white-haired Mr Kidder. You would think, *An attractive pair!* Katya smiled in the hope that passersby might imagine them together, maybe related. She was thinking how unusual it was to see a man of Mr Kidder's age so tall, at least six feet two. And he carried himself with such dignity, his shoulders so straight. And his clothes – those were expensive clothes. And that striking white hair, soft-floating white, lifting in two wings from his high forehead. His skin was creased like a glove lightly crushed in the hand and was slightly recessed beneath the eyes, yet no more, Katya thought, than her own bruised-looking eyes when she had to push

herself out of bed at an early hour after an insomniac night. Mr Kidder's face was flushed with color, however, as if blood pulsed warmly just below the surface of his skin. He appeared to be of an age far beyond that of Katya's father, yet she couldn't believe that he was her grandfather's age: that terrifying limbo of free fall when specific ages become, to the young, beside the point. To the young there are no meaningful degrees of *old*, as there are no degrees of *dead*: either you are, or you are not.

Katya noticed that Mr Kidder winced just slightly, walking with his cane. Yet he meant to be entertaining, telling her and Tricia that he had a 'new, one-hundred-percent non-organic plastic' right knee: 'Have you ever heard of anything so amazing?'

Katya said, 'Sure we have. People can buy new knees – hips – hearts – lungs – if they have the money. Nothing needs to wear out, if you're rich. Tricia here will live to be one hundred and ten. Her parents expect it.'

Katya laughed, and Mr Kidder joined in. Exactly why, neither could have said.

'And what of you, dear Katya? How long do you expect to live?'

'Me? Not long at all. Maybe until I'm . . . forty. That's old enough.' Carelessly Katya spoke, with a shiver of distaste. Her mother was over forty. Katya had no wish to resemble *her*.

‘Forty is far too young, dear Katya!’ Mr Kidder protested. ‘Why do you say such a thing?’

He seemed genuinely surprised, disapproving. Katya felt the warmth of his disapproval, which was so very different from the chill disapproval of her family. *Katya has a mouth on her! A mouth that wants slapping.*

‘Because I have bad habits.’

‘Bad habits! I can scarcely believe that.’ Mr Kidder frowned, intrigued.

Why she sometimes spoke as she did, Katya didn’t know. *The mouth speaks what the ear is to hear.*

Wanting to impress this man, maybe. Flattered by his interest in her, though she guessed she knew what it was, or might be; yet somehow she didn’t think that was it. Older men often looked at her – Mr Engelhardt often gazed at her with a small, distracted smile – but that was different somehow. Katya could not have said why, but she knew.

Now they were passing the large, lavish display window of Hilbreth Home Furnishings, and Mr Kidder touched Katya’s wrist lightly. ‘And in this window, Katya, what would you choose, for your dream home?’

Dream home. Another quaint usage that stirred Katya’s pulse.

The first time she’d looked into Hilbreth’s window, Katya had felt something sharp turn in her heart: a stab

of dismay, resentment, dislike, anger against those who bought such expensive things for their expensive homes, and a childish envy. Yet now, at Mr Kidder's playful urging, she gazed into the window with a small smile of anticipation. Such elegantly spare, angular furniture! Here there were no comfortably cushioned sofas or chairs, no bright chintz or floral patterns, scarcely any colors. Instead there was a preponderance of chrome; there was sleek black leather, low tables of sculpted wood, heavy slabs of tinted glass. Wheat-colored cushions in profusion, flat dull rugs, gigantic table lamps and skeletal floor lamps that didn't seem to require light bulbs . . . In Vineland, New Jersey, which was Katya's home town, inland in the scrubby Pine Barrens, you would not encounter objects remotely like these, just soft, formless, graceless things, soiled and sagging sofas, worn vinyl chairs, Formica-topped tables.

'Anything from this window,' Katya said, smiling so that her words wouldn't be misinterpreted as sarcastic, 'I would need a special house for.'

With an ambiguous smile of his own, Mr Kidder said, 'Maybe that could be arranged.'

Katya shivered. Though Mr Kidder was joking, of course, in the dazzling display window her reflection shimmered like a fairy figure in water.

Mr Kidder had not inquired where Katya was taking

the children, and Katya had not volunteered the information. Yet he expressed no surprise when Katya crossed Chapel Street, and now Post Road, when Katya pushed the stroller into Harbor Park. Here Tricia would feed the noisy waterfowl for twenty minutes or so and, if circumstances were right, mingle with other children in the park. Here were a half-dozen swans, many fat waddling Canada geese, platoons of smaller geese and mallards wriggling their feathered bottoms as they rushed forward to be fed. Tricia delighted in tossing bread bits to the waterfowl, which was, like their daily outings to the beach, a high point of her day. Katya had quickly come to dislike 'feeding the geese,' which seemed to provoke hunger more than satisfy it and made the birds contend with one another in a way that was crudely comical, too pointedly human. In Harbor Park much of the grass near the lake had been dirtied by the birds' myriad droppings; the lake was really no more than a large pond, shrunken in midsummer. Other nannies – most of them Hispanic, and older than Katya – brought small Caucasian children to the park to toss bits of bread at the clamorous birds; Katya had begun to recognize some of these women. As if she'd been trekking to Harbor Park for months, not less than two weeks.

Katya provided Tricia with bread for the birds and cautioned her not to get too close to them. As Tricia ran off excitedly, Mr Kidder, looking after her, said, 'You wish,

don't you, that they would always stay that age . . .' He spoke sentimentally, leaning on his cane.

Katya said, 'No. I hated being so small, and I hated being so weak. It was scary – adults are so *tall*.'

'And now we're not so tall to you?'

'Yes. Those of you who matter. And I'm still afraid of you.'

'Afraid of *me*, dear Katya? Surely not.'

Katya laughed. If this was a flirtation – and it felt like a flirtation – it was like no other flirtation in Katya's experience: with a man old enough to be her grandfather? (Though in fact very different from Katya's grandfather Spivak, stooped and tremulous from a lifetime of heavy drinking.) Meaning to shock him mildly, she said, 'Know what I'd like right now? A cigarette.'

'A cigarette! Not from me.'

She'd begun smoking when she was twelve. One of Katya's bad habits.

In middle school she'd begun. If you were a girl and good-looking, older boys provided you with cigarettes as with other contraband: joints, uppers, beer. Katya would not have smoked in the Engelhardt children's presence, of course. She would not have dared to smoke in any circumstances in which her employers might observe her, or in which she might be reported back to her employers, for at their interview Mrs Engelhardt had asked if she

smoked and Katya had assured her no. And she didn't drink. ('Why, I should hope not' – Mrs Engelhardt's prim response.)

In a wistful tone, Mr Kidder was saying that he'd smoked for many years – 'Deplorable, delicious habit, like all habits that endanger us.' He smiled, as if he had more to say on this intriguing subject but had thought better of it. 'But, dear Katya! It pains me to think of you smoking so young. Such an attractive girl, so healthy-seeming, with all your young life before you . . .'

Katya shrugged. 'That's why, maybe. That long way ahead.'

Again Katya felt that she'd shocked this man, unsettled him. Their conversation, which appeared to be so wayward, casual, haphazard and spontaneous, like the children's cries as they tossed bread to the waterfowl, was more accurately following a deeper, more deliberate route, like an underground stream that, from the surface of the ground, you can't detect. All this while Katya was gently jiggling the stroller in which the baby was strapped, a mindless rhythmic action that made the baby smile moistly up at her, as if with love. Easy to mistake for love, Katya thought.

In Vineland, Katya frequently looked after small children, including her older sister's children, and she had come to the conclusion that she wanted no children of her own,

not ever. But here in Bayhead Harbor, where the children of summer residents were so prized, and exuded an unexpected glamour, she had to reconsider.

‘How old are you, my dear? If you don’t mind my asking.’

How old are you? Katya bit her lower lip with a sly smile but said instead, ‘How old do I look?’

In her T-shirt and denim cutoffs, with her smooth, tanned bare legs and arms, streaked-blond ponytail, and calm, steely gray eyes lifted provocatively to Mr Kidder’s face, Katya knew that she looked good. She was five feet five inches tall, slender but not thin, the calves of her legs taut, hard. Mr Kidder’s eyes moved over her with appreciation. ‘I assume you must be at least . . . sixteen? To be trusted as a nanny? Though you look younger, in fact.’

‘Your granddaughter’s age?’

Mr Kidder’s smile tightened. Curtly he said, ‘I don’t have a granddaughter. That is, not a blood relation.’

Katya felt the sting of a rebuke. The icy blue eyes, tight fixed smile. With the tip of his cane Mr Kidder had been tracing invisible patterns in the ground at his feet.

‘Kidder. Is that a real name, or just something you made up?’

‘Kidder is certainly real. Marcus Kidder is painfully real. Let me give you my card, dear Katya.’ Out of his wallet Mr Kidder drew a small white printed card, and on the

back of the card he scribbled his unlisted – ‘magic’ – number.

*Marcus Cullen Kidder
-17 Proxmire Street
Bayhead Harbor, N.J.*

‘Come see me someday soon, Katya. Bring little Tricia and her delightful baby brother – if you wish. Tomorrow, tea-time?’

Katya slipped the little white card into a pocket. ‘Yes. Maybe.’ Coolly thinking, *I don’t think so.*

Just then the waterfowl erupted. One of the children had tossed down a large chunk of bread, provoking a skirmish among the excited birds: flapping wings, agitated squawks, an angry confrontation between Canada geese and the more audacious of the mallards. ‘Tricia! Come here.’ Katya ran to lift the frightened little girl into her arms as she began to cry. ‘Sweetie, you aren’t hurt. These are just noisy birds. They get hungry, and they get excited. We’ll leave now.’ Katya felt a stab of guilt, that she’d been distracted by talking with Mr Kidder: what if one of the larger birds had pecked at Tricia’s bare legs – worse yet, her arms, her face . . .

‘Shoo! Shoo!’ Mr Kidder waved at the birds with his cane, scattering them and sending them back to the water. Like a comical yet gallant figure in a children’s movie, a

protector of the young. He meant to be amusing, to make the frightened children laugh, and their nannies. But Katya did not laugh.

‘Tricia, come on. Let’s go back to the house.’

She’d had enough of the park, and she’d had enough of her white-haired gentleman friend. She’d had enough of Katya Spivak preening for his benefit and felt a wave of revulsion and dread, that she’d made a mistake in spending so much time with him and in having taken his card. As she hurried away with the Engelhardt children, Mr Kidder called urgently after her, offering to summon a taxi for them or, if they walked over to his house – ‘Close by, a five-minute walk’ – to drive them back himself. But Katya called over her shoulder, ‘No! No thanks! That isn’t a good idea right now.’

My darling, I thought then that I had lost you. Before I even knew you.