

miss katy three

by . . . Robert F. Young

He had lived all of his young manhood in a gray world—cut off from joy and beauty. Then, in an android's eyes, paradise flamed.

An editor has to maintain a certain measure of critical sobriety even when he has an impulse to stand up and shout. But for once we stoutly refuse to be restrained by any ordinary yardstick. You can't be analytical about a story like this, with its high poetry; and the singing flame of its human warmth, and its great and memorable beauty. Ray Bradbury once moved us in much the same way, with a story of robots who were very nearly human in a fashion strangely wondrous. Accept, Robert Young, Bradburian laurels!

The problem of stewardesses dates back to the middle of the twentieth century when flight was confined to atmospheric levels. Tradition insisted that they be beautiful, but time would not cooperate. They grew old like everybody else, and since they could not be prematurely retired, it was inevitable that tradition should suffer.

At first, space flight presented the same problem, but a parallel technological development soon resolved it. It was only natural that the first space-line stewardesses should be androids, and, conversely, that the first androids should be space-line stewardesses. But like many another technological solution to a problem, the human element was ignored. Despite the historical fact that men had fallen in love with Cadillacs and Fords, and women with washing machines, it never occurred to anyone that a man might fall in love with an android.

—Viellieu's

MID MILLENIUM JOURNEY

SHE WAS THE first stewardess Arnold had ever seen and he fell in love with her instantly. She was quite tall, and she had short coppery hair that curled at the ends, and large china blue eyes. She appeared just before blast-off to make sure that everyone was properly strapped into the adjustable acceleration couches, and later, when the ship was being readied for transphotic, she came around again, saying reassuring words to each of the passengers.

"Now don't you worry one bit, sir," she said to Arnold. "Everything's going to be all right."

Of crane she said precisely the same thing to the man on the couch ahead of him, and to the man on the couch behind. But still it was the nicest thing that anyone had ever said to him in all his life, and it marked the beginning of a new phase in his existence.

The previous phases had been rather gray ones: First childhood-school-college (a not too oppressive gray) and then the long years imprisoned behind the bars of the teller's window, obeying the edicts of Mr. Fenton. Mr. Fenton functioned as both jailer and bank president, and he would have made an excellent commander of some peace-time army post had he chosen a military instead of a financial career.

Exceeding that grayness in drabness were the nights in his room above the noisome delicatessen, watching the antics of amorphic entertainers who sometimes seemed to step right out of the screen and into the room, but who never seemed to make the room any brighter. No wonder he had sometimes left his room in despair, and walked alone along crowded empty thoroughfares glimpsing pretty faces. . . .

Finally there was the Sunday afternoon when, unable any longer to endure the confines of his room or

the too-familiar patterns of a nearby park, he had walked to the outskirts of the city, and seen the shining ship that stood like a brave promise in the sun. Then and there he had decided that the hardships of a colonist's life, no matter how rigorous, would be vastly preferable to the changeless security of the gray maze in which he had been wandering all his gray miserable life . . .

The name of the shining ship was the *Capella Queen* and her carefully charted trajectory was supposed to terminate on Alpha Aurigae Six where the new colony was. However, transphotic was still relatively new, and precalculated trajectory promises did not always coincide with actual terminations. The *Capella Queen* ended her career on a Terran-type planet of an uncatalogued Go star where there wasn't any colony at all.

The transphotic interval was misleading. It had all the aspects of a pleasant dream. Stars misted and coalesced on the viewers, and the objective years scampered past like frightened deer. Every so often a goddess in a star-stippled uniform walked through the dream and said kind things to you and brought you coffee, if you asked, and a little straw to suck it through.

But pleasant dreams have unpleasant awakenings. There was the timeless moment when the *Capella Queen* returned to *a priori* space, and then the swiftly mounting panic in the passenger compartment when the big planet that had abruptly appeared on the viewers began to grow like a malignant green cancer on the ebony breast of space. Finally there was the chaos of the crash—

Arnold lay unmoving for a long time, listening to the record. It was a horrible record that someone had left on the automatic record player and it kept playing over and over.

Its *leitmotiv* was a chorus of dissonant screams repeated against a cacophonous background of metal grinding against metal, of metal being torn and jack-knifed and twisted. Arnold hated the record and he tried again and again to turn it off, but he could not find the switch in the darkness. Presently he realized that his eyes were closed. When he opened them the record stopped.

At first the silence seemed absolute. Then, gradually, two sounds manifested themselves.

Something close to his ear was going *drip-drip-drip*, and somewhere behind him there was a peculiar scraping noise.

Sunlight seeped through a great rent in the *Capella Queen's* side, lay in a ragged pattern on the warped deck. In its unmerciful radiance the passenger compartment took on some of the characteristics of an abattoir. An unmoving passenger was sprawled across Arnold's legs and there was an incarnadine bundle of rags crumpled against the bulkhead that looked horribly like the remnants of another. Looking closely he discovered that the bundle was the source of the dripping sound.

He shifted his legs tentatively. They were numb, but they still were functional. After a long time he managed to extricate them, and after an even longer time succeeded in standing up. His head pounded, and raising his hand he found that his hair was matted with blood.

The compartment spun, steadied, then spun again, and he nearly fell. A steel rib protruded grotesquely through the twisted deck and he collapsed against it, hanging on grimly and fighting back his vertigo.

"Can I be of assistance, sir?" He realized that he had closed his eyes again. With an effort he opened them.

They filled with mist when he saw her. She was on her hands and knees in the grisly aisle, laboriously dragging herself towards him. Her star-stippled stewardess uniform was half torn from her body, her beautiful face was bruised, and one of her legs was broken. Sobbing, his vertigo forgotten, he picked her up and carried her down the aisle, through the rent in the *Capella Queen's* side, and out into the sunlight.

The leg was broken at the knee, badly broken. But there were sturdy saplings in the summer valley and he was able to fashion a splint of sorts. He bound it tightly with copper wire salvaged from the ship. The bruise on her face distressed him. A quantity of the synthetic tissue of her left cheek had been torn away, exposing the tiny reinforcing wires just beneath, and there was nothing he could do about it.

However her memory banks were still intact and her reactions still perfectly synchronized, for when he finished binding her leg and helped her to her feet, she said quite naturally:

"Thank you, sir. I'm sorry to be so much trouble."

"But you're no trouble at all," Arnold said.

"Stewardesses are created to serve, sir, not to be served. It is our function. And since you are the only surviving passenger I shall have to serve you until I am otherwise assigned . . . Can I get you something now, sir? A container of coffee, perhaps?"

Tears had come into his eyes again and he could not see very well. It was like looking at a woman through a diaphanous curtain and seeing her tall and shimmering, as poignant as spring. A fragrant wind blew down the green valley and ruffled her coppery, hair, stirring the valley grass around her into gentle waves and eddies. The alien sunlight caught her face and glimmered on her cheek where the silvery wires showed.

"I asked if you would like some coffee, sir," she insisted.

"I'm Arnold," he said. "Not `sir.' Not ever 'sir.'"

"Would you like some coffee, Arnold?"

"No, not right now," he said. "Later perhaps . . . Do you have a name?"

"Just a number, homonymic of course. KT-3."

Katy Three, he thought. Beautiful, broken Katy Three. He stepped forward diffidently and touched the bruise on her cheek.

She regarded him enigmatically with her china blue eyes. "Now don't you worry one bit, Arnold," she said. "Everything's going to be all right . . ."

On that first day he buried the dead and said the Twenty-Third Psalm over each new-turned grave. Katy Three stood beside him with bowed head. That night he made a new and better splint for her leg, shaping it to fit the contour of her knee. But she still limped when she walked and sometimes she fell, and he had to lift her back to her feet. At such times he kept his eyes averted so that she would not see the tears in them.

On the second day he began construction of a cabin at the end of the valley, utilizing whatever material he could salvage from the ship but depending mostly on the forest. Katy Three hobbled beside him, helping him with joints and braces, handing him nails when he needed them, and even picking up his tools when he dropped them.

By the end of the second month the cabin was finished. It nestled at the base of a steep hill, facing the forested floor of the valley, and about it the autumn leaves fell like slow golden rain, covering the ground with magic carpets that rustled when you walked on them, and flew away when the wind grew stronger. A little later the first snow fell.

Arnold spent a full week carrying in supplies from the ship. The *Capella Queen* had been provisioned for a round trip, and there were enough rations scattered through the wreckage to last two people half a lifetime. Since Katy Three did not eat, the food problem was no problem at all.

But there was the very real problem of the long winter evenings with only the sound of the wind in the eaves and the crackling of the fire in the hearth to break the monotony. He would say, "Listen to the wind, Katy!" and she would answer, "Now don't you worry one bit, Arnold. Everything's going to be all right."

Then he remembered that the *Capella Queen* had a complete micro-film library, and an equally complete collection of micro-record albums. Several of the battery-fed film projectors were still intact, and one of the record players. He carried them carefully back to the cabin. The films and the albums required several trips. Katy Three helped him, hobbling beside him through the snow.

And then in addition to the wind in the caves and the crackling of the fire in the hearth there was the deathless music of Mendelssohn and Beethoven and Beiderbecke, but even better than that there was the music of Katy Three's lovely voice reading to him from the screen. Reading and retaining all that she read, her memory banks filling with the worlds of Dickens and Hardy and Maupassant and Hemingway; with the fine shining brightness of Shakespearean structures; with the sensitivity of Keats and Shelley, and the noble passion of Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Her mind grew. In the spring she said, "The poetry of earth is never dead." Early in summer when they were walking in the woods she said:

Ah, love, let us be true

*To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light—*

And once, when a bird soared over them in the blue summer sky.

*Higher still and higher
From the earth thou springest
Like a cloud of fire:
The blue deep thou wingest,,
And singing still dost soar,
and soaring ever singest.*

As the soil of Alpha Aurigae Six was identical to Terran soil, the *Capella Queen* had carried a sizeable shipment of seeds. The soil of Arnold's planet was identical to Terran soil too, and he spaded up the clearing in front of the cabin and taught Katy Three all he knew about vegetable gardening. He discovered that he knew very little, but that little turned out to be enough. Katy Three had a green thumb.

Her corn was magnificent, her string beans gold and crisp, her radishes and onions burst the soil around them, and her beets grew as large as pumpkins. She spent each summer morning in the garden, weeding, hoeing, watering, babying each maturing plant the way a mother babies a favorite child, seeking nothing in return.

Arnold approached her one morning, intending to tell her not to overdo. But when he touched her shoulder and she looked up at him, and he saw the new quality in her china blue eyes he only smiled instead, patted her shoulder and walked away.

Happiness in any form is miracle, he thought, and man certainly has no exclusive right to miracles. For all we know a stone in the sun can be happy, or a hillside in spring.

For there was no doubt about it! Happiness had come to Katy Three ...

Autumn arrived again, with its mists and mellow fruitfulness. The nights were cool and the stars stood out, sharp and clear, undimmed by the presence of a moon. One of the stars was Sol, but Arnold did not know which one, and sometimes he did not care.

He got into the habit of walking alone evenings down the valley to where the ship lay, overgrown by the forest now. Down to where the mounds of the graves were, covered by grass and windblown leaves, and then back up the valley to the cabin. Before leaving he always instructed Katy Three to sit in the window by the lamp, so that when he returned he would see the light first, shining through the trees, and then Katy's head and shoulders in the warm yellow radiance.

Suddenly a new quality would be added to the quiet night, and he would walk proudly up to the door and knock. When she answered the door he would see her quick smile, and the little dancing stars in her china blue eyes.

Once, just before leaving for his walk, he inserted a Strauss album in the record player, and left to the strains of "Artist's Life." Returning, he saw that the window was empty. Alarmed, he ran up to it and peered into the cabin. The little room was overflowing with "Tales from the Vienna Woods," and Katy Three was whirling over the floor, as graceful as a nymph despite the stiffness of her leg, and quite utterly beautiful . . .

Winter again, with the wind in the eaves and the fire in the hearth, and Katy Three lending the beauty of her voice to the rhymes of Byron and Wordsworth of Tennyson and Longfellow, of Sara Teasdale and Edna St. Vincent Millay, driving the shadows of the room into the corners where shadows belong . . .

Arnold had ceased to believe that a rescue ship would ever come, and when one did come, during the second winter, he could hardly believe his eyes. He opened the door one bright morning and there it was, a glittering shard of light in the distant deeps of the blue sky.

A heavy snow had fallen during the night, ceasing with the dawn, and the valley slept beneath a thick white counterpane with its contours softened beyond recognition. At first he thought, *they won't be able to see us, we'll be stranded here forever!* So thinking, he nearly ran out into the snow, intending to wave his arms and shout, do anything at all to attract attention—

And then he paused.

Behind him in the snug little room Katy Three was preparing breakfast. There was the pleasant clatter of dishes and the sizzling sound of frying bacon. There was the familiar broken sound of her footsteps as she hobbled between the stove and the table, and the sweet sound of her voice raised in diffident imitation of one of the little tunes she had heard from the Pop album they had played the night before.

He wondered suddenly what the reaction of modern civilized society would be to an android whose face was scarred, who walked with a limp, who recited classical poetry and who tried to sing. He shuddered involuntarily.

Even as a human being Katy Three would have been a misfit.

He shrank back into the cabin, out of sight of the approaching ship.

He thought of Terra, of the gray maze that once had constituted his life. He thought of the drab bank, and the militant Mr. Fenton, of his small gray room and the gray streets, and the over-crowded airbuses. He thought of the people with bleak faces who looked at you and never really saw you, of the pretty women he had glanced at shyly, hoping they would not see his ugliness. He remembered his dream-courtships of the 3-D goddesses.

He recalled the bars he had stood alone in, sipping lonely beers, and the crowded empty streets and the stars diminished by the flamboyant city lights, or lost behind smaze or smog or smist or whatever other name you cared to coin to identify a factor that robbed man of his birthright.

He shut the door, tightly. He went over and closed the damper on the stone chimney so that no telltale wisp of woodsmoke would give his hiding place away.

The ship passed high above the counterpaned valley and disappeared into the azure distances. It never returned . . .

The seasons flickered by like the colored pages of a book: the poly-chromatic page of spring and the green page of summer, the golden leaf of autumn and the white leaf of winter. The years were like exquisitely written chapters, and the heroine of the book was Katy Three.

Her garden grew in summer and her mind grew in winter, and throughout all the pages she remained beautiful and kind, moving through the years on her broken leg, the silvery bruise on her cheek subtly becoming a part of her, just as her leg had become a part of her, as the prose and poetry of the micro-films and the music of the albums had become deathlessly a part of her.

Arnold walked down the valley every night, and then back again along the well-worn path between the trees. As the years went by he walked slower, and his shoulders became stooped, his breath short. But at the end of the valley the light was always shining and Katy Three was always waiting, in the window, or dancing in the secure little room, listening for his knock to sound above the strains of Strauss, or in the midst of a delicate Debussy.

One night in spring he walked in a cold rain and the next day he began to cough. The following day the cough was still with him, and his body grew alternately hot and cold with fever. He lay on a couch that once had graced the *Capella Queen's* lounge, and Katy Three sang for him, and recited *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. She no longer needed the projector or the films. All the beautiful words were in her mind now.

The fever grew worse and a tightness settled in his chest. Katy Three brought him food, but he could not eat. She stroked his hot forehead, looking down at him with her clear blue eyes.

The days sped by, past and present intermingling. Sometimes he was back in the maze again, back in his little teller's cage counting credits and smiling wearily at the gray people who kept coming in to raise or lower their little heaps of security. More often, though, he was walking up the valley and seeing the yellow light shining through the trees, and the little head sunning over with coppery curls in the window.

The tightness in his chest increased and each breath he took became a searing torture, and finally he knew that he was going to die.

The room was a little ship in space, drifting amid misted stars. Katy Three was the stewardess, sitting by his couch, her hand upon his forehead, her blue eyes trying to cry. He reached up and touched the silvery bruise on her cheek.

"Katy Three," he whispered. "How much do you love me, Katy Three?"

"How do I love thee?" Katy said. "Let me count the ways.

*"I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace—"*

Her soft voice filled the ship. His hand fell away from her face and she enclosed it with her own, her eyes still trying to cry. He heard her words only faintly now, and they were the last words he ever heard, or ever needed to hear,

*"—I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life!
—and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death—"*