

Katie McCray

by Tony Cox

The first time I saw Katie McCray, she was dancing naked in a moonbeam. The shine from the full moon of our new world pierced the forest canopy and, like a spotlight, lit that little stretch of riverbank as if it were day. With quick grace and moon-lit form, Katie weaved and whirled intricate patterns across the bright clearing while her upraised fingers snapped rhythmic beats into the warm night air.

Back and forth, Katie's erotic motion propelled a dark pendulum of long straight hair that alternately exposed and covered the soft, contoured shadows of her lower back and buttocks. While twisting and twirling her way, the nude woman laughed joyously at the homage paid by the lunar brilliance. And all the while, Katie's bare feet stomped a frenzied sonnet into the damp soil of our new world.

A poet, a teacher, and a vacation traveler, I walked the footpath along the river and paused in the clearing to admire her graceful beauty. While I watched, an unheard melody careened through my skull. Vague and tentative at first with a slow, throbbing rhythm, the tune's tempo soon quickened to synchronize with Katie's whirlwind. The volume grew, and suddenly the song became sharply insistent.

I could have walked on and let the woman be, but unlike Odysseus, I heeded the Siren's call and cast myself into what would become my own sea of destruction.

When Katie beckoned, I joined her in the moonbeam, shedding my clothes as I danced. Her welcoming smile drove the music into my being, and I drowned in the deluge of endorphins that flooded my soul. The riverbank became a perfect intersection of time, light, and presence.

Much later, the moon moved on, and its brilliant shine deserted our little patch of riverbank. Katie and I found ourselves suddenly exhausted, and we collapsed together in a tangle of limbs and sweat. Within the warm darkness, we found great comfort in each other.

Next morning, I awoke to the sound of water splashing across the rocks as Katie waded into the river. I sat up and watched her taut dancer's legs disappear beneath the glassy, rippling surface. Waist deep, she paused to wash. The soft morning sunlight, dappled by the imperfect leafy umbrella above us, mottled her back and shoulders. Katie's movements created a kaleidoscope of light and dark.

Afterward, she waded into the deeper water pooling below a grassy overhang. There, she clung to the branch of a massive, half-submerged tree and floated with the current.

Katie appeared relaxed, her body loose, and her eyes closed as if she were gently sleeping, but even from a distance, I could see her pain. Her lips compressed and her eyelids fluttered as she mentally controlled the hurt. Like a narcotic, the calming effect seemed to slowly travel throughout her body, and then she truly relaxed.

After a few quiet moments, Katie's eyes snapped

open, her gaze sought mine, and she laughed.

A shallow dive from the river's edge put me underwater. Its wet coolness surprised me. With a few quick strokes, I surfaced beside Katie and slicked the water away from my eyes. Then I grabbed the branch, and the current pushed me tight against her. I gave the woman a chaste kiss on the lips.

She pulled back, looked at me, smiled ruefully, and said, "I'm old enough to be your mother."

"Really?" I laughed. "I doubt that."

"I birthed from the first vat," she replied, dipping her head down and into my shoulder.

I looked across the top of Katie's head. I could see no strands of gray. There were no wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. If she came from the first incubator run, as she said, then she was older, much older. I birthed from the last batch of frozen embryos that voyaged with the settlers to this new world.

Coming from the first vat would make Katie old enough to be my grandmother. Incredible. If I hadn't seen her face drawn in pain, I would not have believed her. Katie still had the soft, tight skin and the youthful, athletic body of someone nearer my own age. And, last night . . .

I released the branch and slowly dog-peddled against the sluggish river current, turning my head back to look at her.

"Last night was special."

She nodded. "It was."

"But strange, in a way. I sensed another . . ."

She nodded again. "My companion. He was with

us.”

“He!”

Katie laughed. “Actually, the creature is asexual, but for me, it's male. You may have sensed a feminine presence.”

I stared at the woman, only just then realizing who she was. “You're Katie McCray, the . . .”

She frowned. “Katie McCray, the Keeper of the Beast. I know. I hear that whispered a lot. Except it's not a beast, at least not to me. The creature is my companion.”

I stopped paddling, relaxed, and floated on my back, riding the current down river. I knew Katie's story very well. It was an important topic to be taught to the students in my classroom. Katie alone was responsible for our survival on this new world. She was legend among the settlers.

The Beast Keeper.

Beast. An insidious creature named by the frustrated first settlers. Unseen, unheard, undetected by the early reconnaissance teams, and the settlers too, until they had made the irreversible landfall and had started farming.

Although the verdant new land had tested fertile, none of the seeds the settlers planted would sprout and grow. A detailed post-analysis revealed microscopic worms lived in the soil. Worms that were similar to the nematodes of Earth. Similar, but not the same, because these little guys used bacterial threads in a way not much different from the way our bodies use nerves to communicate between the various parts. The minuscule

animals and their bacteria partners formed a collective sentient that infested the entire planet, controlled all life in the topsoil, and resisted the settlers by killing their crops.

Life on the planet became increasingly difficult. As the meager supplies brought with them from Earth dwindled, the first settlers worried that our colony would eventually fail through starvation.

Then along came Katie McCray.

I stopped drifting with the current and swam back to Katie. She welcomed me with another of her cheerful smiles.

“The creature chose me when I was six years old.”

She continued, “After a while, the creature and I learned to communicate and understand each other. Eventually, I was able to convince the creature that we were farmers too, just like it.”

“I persuaded the creature to allow us to plant crops in locations and in ways that would not harm it. My efforts have allowed us to share the planet. I keep the peace; everyone is grateful for that. And I'm welcome wherever I choose to go.”

Katie's eyes unfocused. She frowned and touched her cheek.

“I look a lot younger than I am,” Katie admitted in response to my unasked question. “The creature slows the external part of aging.”

She looked at me with sad eyes. “But it's at a cost; inside, I'm aging faster. My organs are deteriorating. I'm not sure how much longer my body

will last.”

Katie smiled through her sadness. “I love to dance, and last night was such great fun, but today I'm paying for it.”

I wanted to give her words of comfort, to take away her sadness and hurt, but the words did not come. I hugged her instead. We kissed.

Katie laughed and shrugged away. “This day is getting away from us. It's mid morning already. I'm hungry, aren't you? Let's dress, and I'll show you the advantages of being the Keeper of the Beast.”

Minutes later, we walked the road running through the dense native forest that grew along the river. The river road connected all the settlements, threading our little villages together like a string of old world pearls, primitive human jewelry for a benevolent host. Primitive human settlements, because of the high cost of trans-galaxy freight. Benevolent host, thanks to Katie McCray.

We followed the road into a small settlement clearing, a tiny hilltop cluster of log homes surrounded by neat rows of crops in fields dotted here and there with rotting burnt-out hulks of huge tree-like stumps.

First one, and then many children met us on the outskirts of the village. They greeted Katie with the loud excitement and unabashed joy only a child can have.

“You know all these kids by name,” I observed as we walked with the children.

“Of course,” Katie replied gaily. “I'm their special auntie that visits from time to time, and they're my favorite nieces and nephews.”

She stopped walking, leaned closer, and

whispered, "They're also the children I'll never have."

Laughing and shouting, the rowdy bunch pulled on our hands and started us walking again. They led us quickly through the village. As we walked, the noise attracted adults who joined our strolling party.

Katie was the center of attention. She greeted each new person by name and paused sometimes to pass along messages and news from their friends and relatives who lived in other villages. Katie added a more personal dimension to the news than could be had through the communication network that linked the villages.

We eventually arrived at a tree-rimmed park. Make-shift tables and food suddenly appeared, and an impromptu outdoor banquet commenced.

I grazed on the food, had my fill, and then some, but I noticed Katie sat tiredly in the shade of a tree and ate very little, despite the efforts of several motherly settlers.

After lunch, I catnapped and idly listened to Katie and the settlement leaders discuss the plans for new fields, buildings, and roads. Although Katie seemed to draw energy from the group, I could hear the stress in her voice and see the growing tiredness in her eyes.

By mid-afternoon, we had said our goodbyes and again walked the river road through the thick forest toward the next settlement.

We'd barely traveled a kilometer when Katie suddenly faltered and stumbled. I caught her fall and pulled her up into a tight hug. We moved to the side of the road, and I eased Katie down beside a tree. Using

the tree as a back rest, she slumped with exhaustion. I inwardly wished it were possible to give her some of my youthful energy.

“Sorry,” she murmured. “Way too much dancing last night.”

Katie continued, “Lately, I’ve had dizzy spells when I get over-tired. They’re happening more often now and getting worse.”

After a rest, we started walking again. She leaned against me for support, and I curled my arm around her waist. The feel and warmth of her head against my shoulder comforted me greatly.

“The next village is my home,” Katie said. “It’s where I grew up, and where the creature chose me. I’ll be able to stay there, rest, and wait the end. The doctors say that will happen soon. I have friends in the village who have promised to care for me.”

In the short time I’d been with Katie, she had become important to me. I cared for her. It was hard for me to accept the idea of Katie giving up and quitting life. I wanted to talk her out of that. I wanted a good argument to help me change her mind.

Then I thought about our colony and its problem.

“But Katie, you have responsibilities. You can’t just quit. What about the settlers and the children? Who will protect them from the beast?”

Katie abruptly jerked and stopped walking. She looked up at me through wide, startled eyes.

“I thought you knew! Last night, the creature chose you to take my place.”