

THE DOUBLE HAPPINESS COMPANY

a short story by Anne Aylor

Her father planned to wear white boat Oxfords to the New Year's Eve party, huge leather hulls he'd moored on the floor of his closet for more than twenty years. He sat by the toaster polishing them. They were being given a new paint job, the laces stiff as vermicelli.

'The tickets were only twenty bucks a couple for everything,' he said. 'Dancing, party favours, champagne at midnight. You'll love it, Katie. The Buffalo Chips are playing. They're the best band in town.'

'The Buffalo Chips?' she said. 'Bet they took a long time to come up with that name. People are so short on imagination around here.'

A dribble of white polish ran down her father's arm. 'You used to like it here before you left.'

'Can't keep 'em down on the farm once they've seen Paree.' She turned towards the mirror to adjust the straps of her foxy black number, something he'd have forbidden her to wear in high school with its thigh-high hem and vast expanse of back.

'I hope you're not wearing those old clogs,' her mother called out from the bathroom. 'Wear a pair of my pumps. Nobody wears things like that at the club.'

She meant the Country Club. There were two now in Fortuna: a new glass palace with a postcard view of the mountains and the old cinderblock one off Elks Drive. Her parents had joined the cinderblock club with its peeling paint and mangy fairways, cast off by the well-to-do like last season's coat.

Her father started lacing up his Oxfords. 'Hurry up, Lola,' he called back. 'We need to get this show on the road.'

'Hold your horses, Haywood. I need to put on my war paint.'

Katie leaned around the bathroom door. Her mother was squinting into the mirror, prodding her once-dark hair with the handle of her teasing comb. She fluffed her ratted coiffure, drew the arch of her eyebrows, rouged her cheeks, then massaged cornflower-blue eye shadow onto her lids. She put her glasses back on and opened her mouth for a swipe of Orchid Pink.

They slid into the Lincoln, the front seat wide enough for three not to touch. As they backed out of the driveway, their breath plumed in the unheated air. Her mother dabbed Jungle Gardenia on her wrists and warned her husband to watch out for the drunks.

The car's headlights beamed down the highway past Perla's Upholstery, Smitty's Auto, the Lota-Burger drive-in. On the hill in front of the Country Club

were three tall crosses in memory of Spanish friars murdered by Apaches. The iron Ts had been there for years, but it was the first time Katie had seen them blinking with Christmas lights.

‘I have some new groaners for you, Katie. What song did Dracula’s gondolier sing?’

‘I give up. What did Dracula’s gondolier sing?’

‘Drained wops keep falling on my head.’

‘Oh, Daddy, that’s terrible.’

‘Why don’t Baptists made love standing up?’

‘I give up.’

‘Because people might think they’re dancing.’

Her mother slapped his arm. ‘Haywood, I’ll never get you polished.’

‘It’s your patients I pity,’ Katie said. ‘They’re a captive audience.’ She was thinking of the poster in his treatment room. ‘I’ll bet you’re the only dentist in the world who’s got a picture of real pigs who look like they’re kissing.’

Her father grinned from ear to ear. ‘Not everyone can be sophisticated.’

They walked towards the club house. Her mother kept looking at her clogs. Katie knew her mother was embarrassed by them, the same way Katie was ashamed of her father’s old Oxfords. The two of them made the same big noise walking across the parking lot.

The Country Club ceiling was decorated with twisted crêpe paper. Banqueting tables herringboned the room, on each one funny hats, paper horns, silver sparklers. Stuck to the plate-glass windows overlooking the golf course were foil-covered stars left over from Christmas.

They moved towards their table and her father said, ‘What’s wrong with you, Lola? You’re walking like an old woman.’

‘You know it’s my back, Hay. It’s been bad ever since I decorated for Christmas.’

Two Hispanic women floated past in identical fiesta dresses with gold-lamé shoes and belts. Katie smiled to herself. When her parents had moved to town, membership in the Country Club had been restricted: no Mexicans, Jews or half-breeds, only Fortuna’s top-drawer Protestants.

They sat at their table and drank bourbon and Seven in tall glasses with golfers enameled on them. Her father swirled his drink with a miniature nine iron. ‘I’m sure glad you could make it home this Christmas, Katie. I know it’s a long trip, but we sure appreciate it.’ His giant feet on the stained avocado carpet, the toe-cap of one shoe already scuffed.

He thumbed behind him at the Buffalo Chips, four old men wearing vests with gold cow pats embroidered across their stomachs. ‘Great band, aren’t they?’

Her mother elbowed her to remind her of the conversation they’d had last night. Katie had gone to her mother’s room where she’d been propped up in bed

with a heating pad. "I expect you to dance with your father when we go to the Country Club. It's his first opportunity in four years to show you off."

Katie's face burned with embarrassment. "I don't want to be shown off. Why can't you dance with him?"

"I can't when my back's hurting like this."

"I don't know to dance."

"I don't know how you don't know to dance, Katie Scarlett, after all the thousands of dollars we spent on ballet lessons."

She looked at her father, leaning in the direction of the dance floor, beating out the tango rhythm on the table with his ring. Her mother sitting next to him, swirling her ice cubes. *I can't dance when my back's like this.* Three wallflowers at the long table. Her mother nursed her back, her drink. Her father looked out the window into the rough.

'Made any New Year's resolutions, Daddy?'

Her father continued to drum his ring in time to the music. 'At my age, there's nothing to resolve.'

Katie picked up a book of matches and struck one after another, watching the flames lick towards her fingers. 'How about a spin around the ballroom?'

'You know I'm a no-hoper as a dancer. I don't mind sitting out tonight.'

'No,' Katie said, leading him towards the dance floor. 'Won't take no-hoper for an answer. Besides,' she said, 'you've got to get your thirty dollars' worth.'

As they got into promenade position he said, 'I've got a joke you haven't heard.'

'Hit me, Daddy.'

'Mickey Mouse was in front of the judge who was looking over his divorce petition. "Mr Mouse," the judge said, "I can't grant you a divorce from your wife just because you think she's crazy." "Your honor," Mickey says, "I didn't say Minnie was crazy. I said she was fucking Goofy."'

'Oh, Daddy,' she groaned, batting his arm.

Dance after dance, they bobbed up and down in silence, uneasy together and yet perfectly at ease. In a voice that tore at her heart he said, 'This holiday has just flown by. In a couple of days, you'll be flying off into the wild blue yonder.'

An attractive woman in stiletto heels and a floor-length ruby dress polkaed past. She hiked up her gown and flashed her father a big grin. *One, two, three* and a *one, two, three*, dancing past an enormous woman with hollyhocks on her skirt.

Her father said, 'See that woman over there in the red dress and high heels? That's Maggie Hubbard. She's got a butterfly tattooed on her hip.'

Katie wondered how he knew, but was too shocked to ask.

'When you're young,' he said, looking out the window, 'your eyes are blue and your pecker's red. When you're old, it's the other way around.'

She glanced at her mother's feet as they polkaed past their table. She remembered hearing a podiatrist on the radio say that high heels were the greatest

aphrodisiac known to man. With her bad back, her mother could never wear them, her closet filled with a dozen pairs of ballerina pumps.

Her father's friends ask her to dance. She dances with men with silver hair. As she sails past, she sees her parents sitting at the table, turned away from each other like the two faces of Janus.

Before midnight, a last dance with her father. They tango past the rows of tables. Her mother is sitting alone and sad, staring at the foil-wrapped stars.

At the stroke of midnight, champagne is poured. Her father points to the label on the Jacques Bonet bottle. 'It's a good thing that old guy's last name wasn't Strap.'

They light sparklers, blow noise makers made by the Double Happiness Company. She stares at the Chinese characters above *MADE IN HONG KONG*. The Buffalo Chips play "Auld Lang Syne".

Her father lifts a foil horn. He crosses his eyes as his cheeks swell with air, reminding her of the statue she was given this Christmas. "It's from Florence," her mother blurted out when she removed the paper. The foot-high plaster statue was pocked with air bubbles, the seams of the mold clearly visible. *David's* eyes were crossed as if he were mocking the poor imitation.

"Don't you like it?" her mother asked.

She didn't say anything, but her face must have said it all.

"And I thought I'd finally managed to get you something you'd really like. You've always admired naked statues, Katie. When I saw it in the catalogue, I thought you'd just love it."

Nothing more had been said about the *David* until tonight when she was getting dressed to come to the Country Club. Her mother came into her room and said she didn't have to take the statue to New York if she didn't want to; her suitcase was already pretty full. Her mother's back was to her but, in the vanity mirror, Katie could see she was crying, her stoic half-Cherokee mother who never cried, the fifty-percent Indian.

Her mother walked to the bookcase and wound up one music box after another, their silvery sounds melting together. "Lara's Theme" from *Dr Zhivago*, "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas", "Strangers in the Night".

That painful music made Katie remember something she hadn't thought about for years. After she left home for the first time, her father sent a letter telling her how many golf and bridge games he'd played that week and what the temperature had been. The last line said, *Things are pretty well settled after some sobbing when I came back from the airport and went into your room.*

Kate watched him pick up a party balloon. His cheeks filled with air and she thought, How helpless we all are. We can never say what we mean to say; we can never love the way we want to love. We can only signal each other in the dark, like revelers who sound their paper horns as they pass in the night.