The City Wife

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She didn't belong. At least that's what the country women whispered among themselves when Nicholas Krueger first brought his new wife home to Five Points. Besides the Church, Five Points had only a smattering of houses and one other building that served as general store, gas station and tavern, but on that day the basement of St. Mary's was filled to overflowing with the country people who had come from miles around to meet the new bride. In one corner, some of the men who owned instruments played music which befitted the occasion and there was dancing, laughing and pleasant conversation. The men in particular seemed happy, more so than they usually did at these kinds of things, for this was the first big party since the war had ended. Young girls clung tightly to young men who had been away so long and they seemed not to notice or care why they had been brought together on that day, only that it had happened and they were glad. The older women, however, watched Nicholas and his bride with sharp, penetrating eyes as they sifted through the well wishers and came in turn to each of them. After they met her, they would regroup a few at a time, around the punch bowl, at the cake table and in the ladies room, and reconfirm what they already knew and had known since before she had set a foot in Five Points. Kathleen Krueger was not one of them.

It seemed a great pity to them that a man like Nicholas Krueger should have to take himself a city wife. It just wasn't done. The people in and around Five Points had always married their own kind and there certainly wasn't a shortage of unattached young ladies, especially now. Two wars in the last thirty years had seen to that. A city girl could always find herself a husband, but in the country it was different. Now some girl, maybe one of their own daughters, could be left to spinsterhood. It was bad enough that Nicholas had taken a city wife, but to make matters worse, he had taken an Irish one as well. That didn't set well with people who had been German
since their grandfathers and great-grandfathers had come over from the old country. From that first day onward the women were outwardly pleasant to Kathleen, greeting her with the appearance of country warmth. But inside they were bitter.

They examined her carefully and what they saw gnawed at their insides. She was no great beauty although she was pretty enough with her tall, slender figure and her dark, chestnut hair that curled loosely about her face. Her appeal lay not in these outward attractions, but in some intrinsic quality that made people think that if they closed their eyes or pretended not to look, she would turn suddenly into a child. For always in her face there was a certain calmness, without arrogance or coquetry. She walked with a surety as though she had never known defeat, tragedy or heartbreak.

What bothered them more than anything else was that they knew so little about her. They knew not where she had come from, who she had been before she came or why she would even have wanted to. All they knew about her had been learned by careful observation and endless speculation. She was probably the daughter of some fast Irishman on the make, for she had come a bride to the small farming community with ten trousseau dresses, six brand new pairs of shoes and a smart two piece suit that must have cost forty dollars and set off her graceful figure to a perfection. Kathleen did not impart this information to them, for she was reluctant to talk about herself. But they learned it themselves soon enough. Every Sunday they eyed her with cool aloofness as she walked into the fifth pew of St. Mary's arrayed in a different dress. This continued for ten Sundays, and then on the eleventh, someone thought they had seen a dress a second time. Some were doubtful but by the next Sunday it had been confirmed. The cycle had begun to repeat itself. After that there was no sight of new finery and it gave the ladies much satisfaction.

They were sure that it would not be long until Kathleen's happy expression and unsettling confidence would be greatly diminished by hard work and strenuous living, the kind they had known all of their lives. From the looks of Kathleen, it was obvious that she was used to being pampered, but no matter. She would learn to work as they all worked. Nicholas might be devoted to his new bride, but he could never spare her the hardships of the life that she would live. For they were a poor people. They had started poor and had grown poorer with the
depression. Yes they would wait for Kathleen to change. Maybe when her back was bent from working and her middle thick from childbearing and her hands callussed and hard, maybe then they could understand her. But now they didn’t want to.

Sundays came and went and the same dresses appeared, even after they had lost their store-bought newness. But the Kathleen that wore them was the same girl who had come a bride to Five Points. Often the ladies would drive by the Krueger place and they would see her digging about in her flower beds or just sitting idly on the front porch steps before the run-down wooden farm house, staring at the hilly countryside as though she had nothing else to do and was unaware that the wash was dry on the line, the garden in need of a good weeding, and the beans ripe for canning. She would smile, wave, and beckon them to stop as though they had nothing else to do but loll afternoons away in idle chatter.

Three years came and went and she bore her husband no children. In three years a good country wife would have one child and most two or at least another on the way. They took this as another sign of her inferiority. They criticized her often, but never to her face, and they continued to wonder about her and why she was so different.

One Sunday, later in August, as the people stood about talking after Mass, someone caught part of a conversation between Nicholas, Kathleen and Father Frederick. Old Father Frederick had been the pastor of St. Mary’s Church for twenty-five years and he had a great fondness for Nicholas, who had been his first Baptism. Everyone knew how this affection had been extended to include Kathleen as well, for he talked to them the longest after Sunday Mass and was frequently a guest at their house for dinner. He stood between them, with one hand on Kathleen’s shoulder and the other on Nicholas’, talking in his usual cheery voice.

“So you can’t have a child. That’s interesting. Most people around here have too many.” He smiled kindly at them both.

“I’ve reconciled myself to it, Father, I would like a baby, but I don’t need one to make me happy.”

“Yes, I can see that, child.” He always called her child, which was appropriate for his tone was always tinged with fatherly affection. “But you know the old saying, nothing is impossible with God. What you need is a couple of Novenas, a
Mass or two and a whole lot of prayers. I'll bet by next August there will be three Kruegers."

"Oh Father," Kathleen laughed. "Do you think it's proper?"

"Proper! Why of course it's proper. We can pray for rain can't we, and good harvests, so why not for children? And don't laugh at me child, I've got connections."

He had wandered on to the next group with a wave of his hand and a smile. None of those who overheard ever expected he would be as good as his word, but by next August a son was born to Nicholas and Kathleen, a tiny, beautiful, black haired child that did not live to see its second day. The neighbor women came as they always did with birth and sickness and death, bringing food as a token of their sorrow. They were surprised to find Kathleen up and about so soon. She came to meet them at the door with her warm smile and her silent grace and they inquired after her health and expressed their sorrow.

Somehow they had expected to find her broken, defeated and bitter, but she was not. In fact she was quite cheery, leading the conversation away from the dead and toward the living. The ladies thought it quite peculiar, for on such an occasion it was customary to share similar sorrows and how they had been coped with. They felt themselves at quite a loss, wondering what they should say to her, when footsteps were heard on the porch. Kathleen herself had not heard them and she did not go to the door. The screen squeaked open and slammed shut behind Father Frederick. For once Kathleen's good manners failed her and she sat rigid in her chair without speaking as the priest approached her. She had a contorted look on her face and her eyes were brimming with tears. The ladies thought suddenly of the lonely, unmarked grave in St. Mary's little cemetery and all the Novenas and all the Masses and they wondered if Kathleen was remembering them too. She was crying before Father Frederick reached her chair, at first just a few silent tears trickling down her cheeks, then her shoulders began to shake and uncontrolled sobs escaped at last. Nicholas was beside her quickly and put a comforting arm around her while Father Frederick placed a gentle hand on top of her head. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, handed it to Kathleen and wiped his own tears on the sleeve of his coat. All around the room hankies were pulled from pockets and insides of sleeves, for there was not a dry eye about
the place. They all felt much better when it was done and then the ladies decided to take their leave. Tomorrow, they told her, they would return. She thanked them kindly and then they left. They were a silent group as they walked to their cars and began the long rides to their own homes. It was a vigil they had kept many times and now they were each lost in some sad, private tragedy of their own. Tomorrow they would return to Kathleen and they would do whatever was needed and they would do it with kindness and sincerity. No more would they wonder about her, who she was or where she had come from, because now she had suffered. Now she was one of them.

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NAGASAKI RAPE

by
Larry Hufford
Botany 3

The fat man pierced
her soul in the shadow of
the tea house garden.

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