

THE CUCKOO

by
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The silhouettes of the two women scampered wildly across the foggy window, from which the only light escaped from the ancient house. One peering through the window would see, after the eyes adjusted, a pair of women in their thirties seated at a small cleared table. They sat facing each other, holding hands across the table, stock-still in the near-darkness, their lips moving silently. Their features seemed to move in spite of their inertness, a trick of the flicker of the single lit candle at the center of the table. Now and then the breathing of one or the other of them would grow stronger, and the candle would nearly go out. Then the disturbance would subside, and the candle flame would calm itself.

This continued for hours, as the heavens rolled the moon across the sky. There was no sound in the house except the occasional creak of century-old planking. With astonishing diligence the women kept to their mysterious purpose, until finally, when the dawn's approach first hinted, then tinted, then painted the east with rose sky-pigment, one of them suddenly broke the handclasp and stood abruptly.

Clenching her fist, she stepped to the window, staggering a little as she did so. The blood rushed to her head and dizzied her, a bodily reaction to sudden movement after long immobility. As she grasped the window ledge for balance, she cursed the frailty of her body and remembered her hatred for it. It had never pleased her or served her well in anything, she thought for the thousandth time. It wasn't pretty, or strong, or even good at digestion. She despised her body. She had never seen the point of having a body, ever, until she had met Katya...

"What's wrong, Greta? You startled me, jumping up like that!" said the woman at the table.

"Oh, Katya, it's no use. You're really wonderful for trying with me, but it's no use. Perhaps it just can't be done." Greta closed her somewhat bloodshot eyes and leaned forward until her forehead pressed against the cold, damp glass. The window creaked, and small flecks of paint fell from the window frame. Greta heard her light step as she approached.

"Greta..." Katya said as she gently touched the other woman's shoulder. "This means so much to you. I don't think we should give up, do you, really?" Greta opened her eyes and stared at the brightening dawn sky.

"Katya...doesn't it make you just a little uncomfortable, the thought of my mind possessing your body? How do you know I can be trusted with this power over you? I wonder myself what would happen if I were you, even for a moment. I might not be able to let go."

Katya laughed a little, in her sweet, almost childlike way. "Oh, Greta, of course I can

trust you. I do wonder whether I'll be awake in some way while you control my body. Perhaps I'll just slumber until you leave me. And it will make you happy again. You've been unhappy for so long, you poor thing." She stifled a little yawn with one perfectly manicured hand and looked at her watch. "Oh, Greta, I have to run. I'm meeting David for breakfast."

Greta snorted. "I can't believe you're still seeing him. I thought we decided you should drop him. Katya, he's no good for you. I know you forget your beauty, and you never think a man is drawn to you by it, but I'm telling you, he's after just one thing. When he gets it, he'll disappear. Drop him before he hurts you!" Katya's eyes flashed with annoyance, but her tone remained gentle. "I know for sure that you're wrong about that." Greta turned. "And how can you be so sure?"

Katya reached for her coat and stepped toward the door. "Because if what you just said were true, he would have disappeared two months ago yesterday."

"I have something to tell you, darling," Katya said as she poured cream into her coffee. The man seated across the table looked terribly out of place, not because of any unusual aspect of his appearance, but because he was not unusual-looking. One might, after seeing Katya's dazzling beauty, imagine only Adonis at breakfast with her. But Katya loved David; he was the first and only man that put her completely at ease. She even dared to think that he would love her even if she were not a beautiful woman.

David dabbed his lips with the white cloth napkin and replaced it on his lap. He brushed his neatly trimmed dark-brown hair into place, and leveled his slate-gray eyes at Katya. She had had a mysterious air about her all morning, and he was curious.

"Tell me, my love. Anything but that you are a dream and I'm about to wake up."

Katya blushed, and giggled a little.

"Now stop it," she protested unconvincingly, "and listen. I have something important to tell you." David put his hand over his lips and beamed.

"David...do you love me?" Her expression became suddenly serious. He blinked, and slowly lowered his hand from his lips.

"Yes, I love you desperately and hopelessly and eternally." He took her small hand and kissed it.

"I'm so glad. So glad. Oh, David ... I'm going to have your child." David patted her hand. "Yes of course, my darling. We'll have a big family someday. But for now let's just concentrate on us."

Katya leaned forward suddenly, stopping just short of upsetting her coffee cup.

"No, David, I mean ... I'm pregnant."

Suddenly, David's expression, which a moment ago was warm and attentive, suddenly became wooden and distant.

"Don't worry. I'll arrange everything. I'll ... get it taken care of."

Strange, thought Katya as she raced out of the restaurant. He doesn't look nearly so handsome drenched with half of a cup of hot coffee. She struggled to preserve the composure her contempt permitted, before it inevitably collapsed into a blur of tears. A large yellow blob swam into view; she waved and it pulled up to the curb. She got in.

"Where to, miss?" the driver said with uncharacteristic gentleness. Katya gave the address, dabbing her eyes and wheezing softly. The cabby watched her through the mirror. He handed her some tissues as he smoothly palmed the wheel through a right turn. He started to say something, and then thought better of it.

Greta was furious.

"Keeping the baby is out of the question, Katya!" Katya sat looking miserable and said nothing.

"I've got to think this through, Greta. It's not that simple."

"Yes, Katya. Think it through, dear. I'll be here for you. Like always." Katya nodded. She reached up to the lamp and extinguished it. Greta left her in the darkness and went to bed.

Katya and Greta continued their attempts to induce the possession. They finally succeeded. The next day the possession recurred without their intending it. Their apparent lack of control gave them some concern, but they shrugged it off. Meantime, Katya vacillated about her pregnancy. Finally, late in the second trimester, she relented. Greta made the appointment. When the day came, Greta drove Katya to the clinic.

Katya sat quietly in the clinic, glad that she had finally made a decision. It was hard, because a part of her knew that she carried not a mass of cells but another human being. But Greta was right, she reflected. It was not the right time of life to have a child. Greta, Katya thought, had real wisdom. She's certainly taking a long time in the restroom, she thought.

As Greta rinsed her hands under the warm water, she inspected her face in the restroom mirror. As she gazed into the black depths of her pupils, they seemed to expand, enveloping everything in her field of view. The sensation of warm liquid over her hands also seemed to spread, until she had the distinct perception of being completely immersed in a warm bath. As the room grew darker and darker, she no longer felt weight on her feet, but instead seemed to float.

Katya looked up from her magazine as a nurse approached with a wheelchair. "Thank you for waiting so long. The counselor will see you now."

"Oh...um, would someone tell my friend? She's in the restroom."

"Sure. I'll tell her when she comes out. You don't worry about a thing, okay? Now let's get you into this and leave the driving to me." Katya slowly shifted herself into the wheelchair.

Greta felt movement. The floating sensation was wonderful, and she began to doze. The abortionist inserted the forceps. Greta suddenly awoke, her sleep disturbed by the touch of something cold and metallic. Its touch became a grip.