

The Wrong Place

The bright lights blinded Katie as she trailed behind Pam, a short, dark-haired figure scurrying down the beige corridors that snaked behind the auditorium of the historic Palace Theater in downtown Marion, Ohio. Katie's eyes struggled to adjust to the incandescent passageways, a harsh contrast to the dusky outdoors. She had just spent the two hours prior to the dress rehearsal of "How Great Thou Art" trudging around the undersized parking lot adjacent to the theater with Norman, the Easter drama/musical's notoriously cantankerous donkey, ambling along at her side. For now, he waited outside in a metal cattle trailer while Katie followed Pam down the hallway before them.

For the past four years it had been Katie's self-assigned duty to exercise Norman before his dual performances inside the Palace, first as the pregnant Mary's mount, and later as Jesus' transportation into "Jerusalem" for his triumphal entry. Norman, however, was very young and inexperienced, and he was infamous among the "How Great" crew for being excitable and difficult to handle. Being one of the few people not frightened of the mischievous donkey, Katie felt it was her duty to do her best to calm him. A two-hour walk seemed to sober the beast, and the task fell to Katie.

After a disastrous first attempt during dress rehearsal to lead the donkey into the Palace and down the steeply sloping, carpeted aisle, it was suggested that Norman might perform better if he had Katie at his head to comfort him. Katie was flattered to be considered to fulfill the small part, and she immediately consented.

At first, her position seemed simple. Katie would be assigned a costume and assist in leading the donkey down the aisle. She was directed backstage and found herself delivered to Pam, the lady in charge of costumes.

Pam was in a hurry as she led Katie down the hallway aglow with soft, white lights. The faint stench of must and mothballs seemed to seep from the cold cement blocks that comprised the echoing hall.

"Women's costumes are down this hall, around this corner, and at the top of these stairs," Pam instructed her. The depth of the Palace dressing area was overwhelming as Katie struggled to remember the series of twists and turns Pam ushered her through. "It's simple, really," Pam called over her shoulder. "Do you have any questions?"

Katie shook her head. She was quiet and rarely asked questions.

Suddenly, the duo was bombarded by a series of cast members requiring Pam's assistance.

"Pam, I need you over here!" one woman demanded.

"Pam, the men need you downstairs," came another command from the opposite direction.

"Pam, can you help me?" a disheveled shepherdess begged.

After several lengthy detours, Pam was finally able to direct her attention back to Katie's plight.

What have I gotten myself into? Katie wondered as she followed the retreating figure up a narrow stairwell. *I have no idea where I am and I don't know how to act in a play. I'm too embarrassed to tell Pam I have no idea how to find my costume tomorrow night. And how will I ever get*

back outside? Finally, they reached a short hallway filled with bustling women and lined with small, colorful rooms, each outfitted with a full length, lighted mirror.

"Your costume will be on this rack tomorrow night. Don't forget to go up to women's makeup after you get dressed. Tell them you need to look like a boy to lead the donkey," Pam instructed Katie.

Makeup? Katie wondered. This was an aspect she had not considered when she had accepted her role as donkey security blanket. Makeup was something Katie did not like and wore very little of on a daily basis, but she decided it could be tolerated for four nights, the duration of the play's production.

Katie turned away for only a second, but without a parting word Pam bustled away, already absorbed with another of her perpetual missions. Katie picked her way down the stairs and tried to retrace the steps she had taken earlier. Finally, she managed to locate the backstage mechanics area. Goose pimples prickled down her arms as she realized she had no idea where to turn. However, almost immediately, she spotted a familiar face surrounded by Roman soldiers outfitted in authentic red costumes, complete with feathered Roman helmets and leather string sandals.

"David," she whispered to the young man, "I'm lost!"

"I didn't see you in class on Wednesday," David said. "I missed you." David settled his lanky frame against the rough brick wall. His face was nearly enveloped by the shadows of the backstage area.

Katie flushed. "I'll try to make Bible study next week." She shifted her weight and moved a step back from David. Lately her friend had been making his attraction to her more apparent, and it made her uncomfortable.

"I hope you do," he said, flashing her a lopsided grin.

Katie shuffled her feet and moved further away. She avoided eye contact with David, focusing instead on the wires running from the panel switchboard up the wall behind him. "David, please help me! I don't know where I am!"

David sighed, then grinned at the eavesdropping soldiers. "Where do you want to go?"

"Outside," Katie squeaked hoarsely as she cast an embarrassed glance at the Roman soldiers. One soldier laughed and turned slightly to open a heavy metal door behind him where a handmade paper sign declared, "Please keep this door shut at all times." Katie tripped over the threshold and stumbled into the dimly lit parking lot with a sigh of relief.

Making a sound like a rusty gate screeching open and closed, Norman's boisterous heehaw filled Katie's ears as the donkey heralded her arrival, delivering his greeting from the direction of a black cattle trailer stationed in the center of the parking lot. Katie moved over to the side of the trailer and murmured quietly to the beast lurking inside. Soon a rustling of straw forewarned of Norman's approach. Gray velvet lips stretched from the trailer and between the open slats toward the sugar cube Katie presented on her flat, outstretched palm.

As expected, rather than daintily lipping up the proffered treat, greedy teeth raked across Katie's fingers and ripped the cube from her palm. She expertly jerked her hand back and chuckled as she stroked the soft nose in rhythm with the steady, contented crunching of the massive teeth. The rich scent of warm animals wafted gently in the air around her as the sheep shifted their weight in the trailer compartment in front of the donkey. *This is where I am happiest*, Katie thought. *Outside, caring for the animals. Not inside surrounded by costumes, makeup, and hectic people.*

Quickly, Katie tried to dismiss the thought. *I do so much work behind the scenes. No one even knows I'm out here. No one really appreciates what I do. If I'm actually in the play, maybe everyone will notice me. They'll be impressed that I can handle the donkey! But what if I mess up? What if I can't do it? I could only make things worse. I've never practiced in the theater, and during the performance is one hell of a time to find out it isn't going to work.*

Still, excitement bubbled within her as she thought of finally having a part in the play, her reward and recognition for the effort she put into preparing the donkey for his appearance. *It might be nice to have a little fun*, Katie decided. *In a costume I don't have to be myself. I can be whoever I want to be, and I won't have to worry about looking stupid.*

The next evening was opening night. Twilight descended and cloaked the parking lot beside the Palace as Katie strode toward the backstage door, illuminated only by a single bare bulb dangling remotely above the doorway. She gave the door a yank and slipped inside. Katie's stomach knotted as she walked across the darkened stage situated behind a crimson velvet curtain.

One hundred and fifty pairs of eyes belonging to the cast members followed the stranger's trek across the hardwood platform, silently questioning her intent. None voiced concern, but simply regarded Katie with mild curiosity. Katie turned her head away from the cast's glare and pretended to study the plush red theater seats in the auditorium as she hurried off the stage. She located the narrow stairway Pam had indicated previously and began her ascent. A door above her slammed open, and children flooded the stairwell. Katie waded through an ocean of Nazarene youth and fought her way upstairs.

Women, abandoned clothing, and mismatched shoes cluttered the short, narrow hallway before the women's dressing rooms. The heavy scent of women's perfume with undertones of empty tennis shoes permeated the still air. A long tan costume hung on a coat rack, reserved by a neon green tag bearing Katie's name. She grabbed the rough cloth, ducked into the least crowded room, and began to pull the costume over her head.

"You can't wear your clothes," an older lady admonished her. Afraid to challenge the woman's authority, Katie reluctantly stripped down to her long johns, trying to tuck her body close to the wall as she changed amidst the other women.

The heavysset matron nodded her approval. "That's fine," she said. "Don't forget to tuck the bottoms of your long underwear up above the hem line of your costume." Desperate to escape the bustling atmosphere, Katie hiked the thin white pant legs up around her calves and then quickly fled

to the quiet sanctity of the darkened backstage. Katie hurried into the Palace auditorium, through the lobby, and up the staircase to the balcony.

Katie had never been upstairs in the Palace before. *Where do I go?* she wondered. She poked her head through a nearby doorway and followed the carefree laughter of women down a carpeted hallway and into a bright room equipped with a full length, wall sized mirror. Spotting her aunt Hannah, who was in charge of the makeup department, she seated herself at Hannah's makeup table.

"Hi, honey," Hannah said. "Are you in the play this year?"

"I lead the donkey down the aisle. He's been worse than normal this year and they asked me to help out," Katie explained. "I have to look like a boy," she added.

"Makes sense to ask you. Everyone knows when that donkey's in a bad mood you're the only one who can talk him out of it," Hannah said and she smiled, her eyes meeting Katie's in the mirror before them. The seaweed-and-talcum-powder scent of makeup filled Katie's nose as Hannah did her best to make Katie's delicate feminine features appear as masculine as possible.

They do? Katie thought. *They know who I am? They know what I do?*

"Anyhow," Hannah said when Katie didn't respond, "I didn't see you at dress rehearsal last night. Didn't you wear any makeup?" Hannah dabbed some creamy pink blush along Katie's cheekbones and blended it with her thumb.

"I wasn't in the dress rehearsal," Katie admitted. "They asked me last night after it was over."

"I'm sure you'll do just fine. Close your eyes," she ordered Katie. A heavy eyeliner pencil dragged along the line of Katie's lower eyelids. "There," Hannah declared. "You're my masterpiece for tonight." Hannah stepped back and pulled the plastic bib from around Katie's neck where it had been placed to collect any wayward makeup. Katie donned her brown cloth headpiece, allowed Hannah to pin it expertly into place, then checked her appearance in the mirror.

Katie was shocked by the transformation created by the stage makeup. Her normally pale pallor was a dusky tan and her blue eyes stood out enormous from her rouged cheeks. Unaccustomed to wearing lipstick, her lips felt dry and sticky, almost frozen into place. Her slender frame was draped in yards of rough material, disguising her nineteen-year-old-figure as a pudgy old man. *I shouldn't be doing this*, she thought. *Besides, who will even know it's me?*

Katie drowned her antagonistic observation in her staccato footsteps as she rushed back to the parking lot. Norman greeted her with his usual "swinging gate" donkey serenade as she approached. Katie shoved open the trailer's stubborn sliding door and clipped a lead rope to Norman's halter. Norman balked at Katie's fluttering costume and the headpiece that concealed her familiar face. As she attempted to lead him out the trailer entrance, Norman assumed the typical "stubborn-mule" stance—brown eyes rolling until the whites showed plainly, weight shifted until he was nearly sitting on his hindquarters, forelegs stiffened—he refused to leave the sanctuary of the trailer. Not even coaxing words and a sugar offering could soften his mulish attitude. *This is not going to be a good*

evening, Katie realized as she pulled harder on the lead rope. *I wish we could both just stay outside.*

After a great deal of consideration, Norman followed Katie off the trailer. "You could try to behave," she whispered to the donkey. Norman nodded, swirling the hairs on his forehead as he rubbed it against her shoulder, seeming to agree with her. In a few minutes the wide double door leading from the back of the Palace to the parking lot swung open. A tall man, his brown-bearded face cloaked by a dark green headpiece, emerged and, with a sweeping gesture of his arms, beckoned her toward the entrance. "It's time," Katie murmured to the donkey's soft, twitching ears.

Norman hesitated for a moment as Katie led him through the doorway and into a dimly lit carpeted hallway. The donkey's hooves echoed as they gingerly danced on the solid flooring. He hopped up three short stairs, and then they were in the wide aisle that ran behind the seated patrons of the Palace Theater. Several of the other animal caretakers surrounded the donkey with their bodies, confining his anxious movements as he tried to continue past the center aisle that would lead them toward the stage. A large man grabbed the donkey's lead rope and threaded a chain through the halter's buckles and ran it under Norman's upper lip, forcing the chain to rest on his gum line just above his teeth. He pressed the end of the chain into Katie's fist.

"It's the only way to make him behave. We do it every year," the man explained quickly under his breath before turning away from Katie to help pregnant Mary alight her steed.

"But I don't have to make him behave!" Katie hissed at the man, protesting. "He trusts me! He'll behave if I ask him!" Norman curled his lip against the chain and bounded lightly to the side in a desperate attempt to unseat the girl portraying Mary. She quickly caught her balance and settled lightly upon the donkey's broad back, the characteristic dark brown stripe across his shoulders resembling a cross. Norman bobbed his head and his hindquarters danced in a wide arch, displeasure for his duty screaming from every taunt sinew.

Katie tugged desperately at the chain, trying to pull it from the donkey's mouth as the first chords of their song sounded from the direction of the orchestra pit.

"Get going," someone breathed from behind her.

Katie quit fidgeting with the chain and glanced at the girl on Norman's back, wrapping her brave fingers in the scanty, scrub-brush mane as Katie tightened her grip on Norman's halter. Taking a deep breath, she timidly began to lead the procession forward.

When Norman's hooves detected the steep declining slope of the carpeted aisle between the rows of theater seats, his oppressed aggression exploded. In a vain attempt to rid himself of his handler, the obstinate beast attempted to scrape Katie off onto the sturdy outermost row of seats as he lunged down the aisle. Katie's knuckles stretched white as her fingers clenched around the nylon halter, and she jerked desperately on the chain that chafed Norman's tender mouth and was intended to slow his thundering trot to a controlled stroll.

Increasingly distressed, Norman threw his head high, dangling Katie off her feet. When Katie landed, her right foot buckled under Norman's flying hoof, and she nearly collapsed to her knees.

Katie wrenched her foot out from under the donkey's crushing hoof and shoved Norman back to the center of the walkway. Her feet skidded on the worn carpet as Norman again swung sideways, and his massive head crushed her against a sturdy fixed theater seat, nearly tossing her into the lap of an astonished patron. Immediately righting herself, Katie no longer tried to slow Norman's onslaught but was now concerned with simply removing the raging donkey safely from the theater. Onlookers gasped as the beast flew down the aisle, Katie struggling at his side.

Katie glanced upward, surprised to find Mary still clinging desperately to Norman's back, his mane continuing to entwine her fingers and provide a subtle degree of support. Mary's lips were drawn tightly across her teeth, and her face was pale, but determination creased her brow. Upon reaching the bottom of the aisle, Mary nimbly leapt from the donkey's back and moved quickly to her mark. As she stood before the Innkeeper with his "Inn of No Vacancy" and began to sing her solo, the devoted Joseph at her side, her voice never faltered, nor even trembled.

Their passenger tousled, yet uninjured and safely delivered, Katie piloted Norman's wild flight back up the aisle that would lead the donkey to freedom. Norman strained toward the doorway and bolted.

A wide-eyed angel with white feathered wings pushed open the heavy double doors before the rampaging donkey and his trailing handler. Katie guided the donkey through the exit and then fought Norman across the shadowy asphalt of the parking lot, his strength and the agitated jerking of his head against the rope causing the rough fibers to cut into her palms. Finally, reaching a chain link fence at the end of the lot, Norman was forced to concede.

Katie turned Norman slowly back toward the theater and stopped. She slipped the chain from Norman's mouth and let it fall to the gray pavement with a satisfying clink. Together, Katie and Norman watched the various individuals hurrying between the two main side doors. All had arms filled with baskets of chickens or freshly washed sheep trailing docilely behind them. *What a boring job*, Katie thought. *I prefer an animal with a little integrity and personality.*

Norman put his wide forehead against Katie's shoulder and, with almost enough force to send her slight form sprawling, he enthusiastically rubbed his long face up and down the improvised scratching post with his bottom lip flopping. When he finally raised his head and shook it vigorously, Katie wiped at the short silvery strands of hair that punctuated the dark brown smear of donkey dust he'd left on her rough brown robe.

Katie stroked Norman's shaggy cheek for a moment, then yanked off her headpiece, her long chestnut hair tumbling down her back in a twisted cascade of hair pins. She plucked the pins from her hair, then tugged gently at the rope in her hand and began to lead the donkey in their familiar circuits between the rows of parked cars.

"Well, Norman," she murmured softly to the donkey, his heavy head now drooping low under her pressured caress. "I guess I don't belong in this makeup and burlap any more than a jack-ass belongs inside a Palace."