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Kathy Arrives at the Jack-o'-lantern House

WHAT A BIRTHDAY! All my life I've looked forward to being sixteen. And here it is. So what happens? I've spent this whole day on a slow train, headed for the jumping-off place! And when I get there I have to stay ten long months. That is, if I don't go completely nuts and really jump off! To think of spending my junior year in a country high school. That shouldn't happen to a dog!"

Kathleen Carey had been so busy feeling sorry for herself that she had failed to notice the beautiful hills and woods that were on each side of the track which had been winding back and forth in its climb up the mountain. Now she awoke to the fact that the station the conductor had just called was, according to the timetable that her father had given her, the last one before Upper Melrose where she must get off the train.

She began to gather up her belongings, the box with a dozen chocolates left, the magazines, a book, and her coat from the rack overhead. As she lifted the coat down she remembered the good time she and Mother had had two days ago when they shopped for the new wardrobe that was to be what Mother called her "going away out-

fit." It had been fun then, but now even a lot of new clothes didn't seem any recompense for having to leave her school and friends and come to this little mountain village to live with people she didn't know. It was bad enough to have Daddy and Mother go off to England and leave her behind, but it would have been easier to take if she could have stayed with some friend. There were so many important things that came when you were a Junior. And she would have to miss them all!

She blinked back the tears and looked out of the window, trying to draw a mental picture of what Cousin Rob, who was to meet her, would look like. She had seen him once, ten years ago, but all she could remember was that he had brought her some nuts and apples in a big bag. And she had not seen Cousin Emily at all. Would she be fat, or thin? Would she be friendly, or would she get cross if she found clothes left on a chair or books scattered all over the table?

Would there be any other young folks living near—who could go to school with her? These questions pounded on her brain and made her hands grow cold with nervousness as she pondered them. When the conductor called "Upper Melrose!" and the train began to slow down, she wondered wildly if her shaking legs would take her down the steps. She found herself carried along by the crowd. Apparently this was the end of the line and all the people who had been shopping in the larger town some miles back were getting off. In a minute, whether she wanted to or not, she would be pitched into a completely strange world where there would be nothing to remind her of the home and friends left behind.

As she stepped to the platform a big hand reached for her suitcase, and a voice of proportionate size boomed, "So this is Kathy!" and she found herself looking into a smiling face. This was Cousin Rob, of course! And in that minute all sense of loneliness left her. He looked like Daddy!

"I was wondering if I would know you," he said. "All the way up here I've been fearing that I would have to speak to a dozen beautiful young ladies before I found the right one. I see now that I wouldn't have had any trouble at all. I had decided to start on the handsomest one and work—er—on from there."

"You started to say work *down* from there." She laughed.

"I know I did," he admitted. "But I was going on to say that I would have hit it first time. You look just like the girl Cousin Ed brought up here on a honeymoon more than twenty years ago. I'd have known you if I had met you in Siam. Well, come right this way. You can wait by the jalopy while I get your trunk and get it tied on so we don't lose it going down the mountain."

While she waited in the car she watched him as he moved among the people on the busy little platform. Everyone he met had a smile and a greeting for him, and the tight feeling in her chest began to loosen. The dark dread that had been hanging over her like a cloud lightened a bit. She didn't know what Cousin Emily would be like, but it wasn't going to be a bit hard to like Cousin Rob!

As they drove down the winding road away from the little mountain station, Kathy felt the sense of strange-

ness returning. This was certainly different from evening in the city. Instead of the noise of cars on the boulevard and the shouts of children playing on the sidewalks, there were the cool dark woods all around them—woods filled with all sorts of noises. That crash among the trees off to the right could be—well, anything. And the weird cries of a night bird from across the little pond they were passing was so lonesome sounding that it brought back the weight in her chest. She wished she could hear the swish of a long line of cars as they passed the window or see the rows of lights go racing past. But there were no lights or cars, just herself and Cousin Rob alone on this dim, winding road. And Mother and Daddy were in New York, all set for sailing in the morning. By this time tomorrow there would be miles of ocean between them and her. She swallowed and winked hard to keep back the tears. She *wouldn't* cry. She had promised. She did wish Cousin Rob would say something, but as he didn't she decided to start a conversational ball rolling by herself.

“What became of all the people that got off the train? Where did they go? I didn't see any houses.”

“Oh, they all took their own cars or rode the bus down to Lower Melrose. That's the real town. This is just a station and a couple of houses. The town was built long before railroads were ever thought of. At first I guess Melrose folks felt bad because the road passed them by. But they built this station up here and just went on living in the valley as they always did. Now we all like it. We have busses, and most everybody owns a car. We only use the train to go into Greenfield once in a while to do some shopping. And of course

we get city guests occasionally," he finished with a smile.

"Is the road downhill all the way?"

"No. In a minute we start up the Hump. It's quite a hill. But after we get over it, we can just coast down—if we want to. I've never tried it, but I think it could be done if you didn't care how you landed."

"Let's don't. Where is the farm?"

"Down in the valley. When we get over the Hump we can soon see it. We are three miles from Melrose and I save time by cutting through this way. Anyway I like hills and trees better than I do crowds of people. There's a carnival in town tonight and the square will be full."

"What's a square?"

"A square? Why—why—oh, it's a square place in the center of town. I'll take you in and show you."

They had been going slowly in low gear up a steep hill which Kathy thought must be the Hump. The old car wheezed and chugged, and she wondered if it would make the grade. She speculated on what would happen if it stopped on the ascent. Surely they would never get started again on such an incline. But just as she had decided that the engine could not give another gasp they came out of the trees onto a spot of level ground, and Cousin Rob gave a chuckle.

"She did it again! I always hold my breath on that hill. I don't know that it helps, but I keep on doing it. My good car has died on me there three times, but this old bus of Jerry's always makes it."

From this open space they could see the road winding down into the valley. Out here, away from the woods, there was still a glow of light from the west though the

lower ground lay in darkness. Here and there the lights from farmhouses dotted the landscape, reminding her, at this distance, of the fireflies she liked to watch on summer evenings at camp.

"Kinda pretty, isn't it?" said Cousin Rob. "I always like to stop here a few minutes and just look. It rests me and quiets me and sorta puts me in my place. See that clump of trees off yonder just on line with the center peak of those three hills? We call them the triplets. Well, in that clump of trees is our house. You can see the lights now. They come from our back windows. Emily'll be fixing supper. She would hear the train and know we'd be coming down this hill just about now, so,—here we go!"

Kathy looked across the valley to the lights that shone from the group of trees. At this distance, and with the shadows of evening over the valley, she could not see the outlines of the house. Only the lighted windows showed, two well-spaced ones above, then between them and lower down a small one that looked as if it were a transom over a door, then a long row that shone brilliantly through the darkness.

"Oh, Cousin Rob! It looks like a jack-o'-lantern! See the two eyes and the funny little nose, and all those windows across the bottom like a row of teeth?"

Cousin Rob laughed. "Why, so it does! Now, I've seen that bunch of lighted windows more times than I can count and I never noticed that. All they meant to me was that Emily was there in the kitchen cooking supper for me. Those two windows upstairs are Jerry's. The little one is over the kitchen door. That row of

teeth is made up of the windows over the sink and worktable, and the pane in the door."

"And I'm guessing that those two spaces that look as if Jack had lost a couple of teeth are at the sides of the door. Aren't they?"

"Yes, there's a few feet of space on each side with no windows. It's queer no one ever noticed before how much like a funny old face it is. Between Jerry and Henry, we don't miss much at our house."

"Who are Jerry and Henry?"

"They're the chaps who really run the place. You see, I'm in town all day. I'm postmaster at Melrose. Have been for twenty years. Henry's been with me all that time."

"And Jerry?"

"He's a high school boy that lives with us. You'll like him. He's about your age."

They wound through the curves of the mountain road. Sometimes she could see the lights of the house, then for a few minutes they would be lost to view. The road was steep and not very smooth, and Cousin Rob had to give diligent attention to his driving, so Kathy sat quietly by his side enjoying the new experience of a ride at dusk down a mountain. They came out of the woods at last and the road curved sharply several times, then took a steep dip to the creek at the foot of the hill. Kathy looked about, seeking to locate the house again. There it was, off to the right, its jack o' lantern face shining brightly. But something was wrong. She looked again, then laughed.

"The jack-o'-lantern is a Cyclops," she thought, re-

membering a story of Greek mythology. "There's an eye in the middle of his forehead."

She started to speak to Cousin Rob about it, but he was having a difficult time holding the old car to the rough road and negotiating all the curves, and he did not hear her. She turned again to the view, but now the jack o' lantern looked just as at first, with only two eyes staring at her. Apparently the other eye had been only the reflection of some other light. She was glad she had not mentioned it to Cousin Rob.

They were so near that she could now see the outlines of the house and the buildings that surrounded it. Then they turned into the driveway, and with a final chug the old car stopped by the side door. Cousin Emily must have heard them for the door opened at once, throwing a beam of light across the drive. Cousin Rob helped her out and turned to the door where Cousin Emily stood waiting.

"Welcome home, Kathy!" he said.