Calico

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Back in those days Calico was a mining town, north of Daggett, which was on the Southern Pacific Railroad.  Just a small settlement in 1877, within ten years there would be 1,200 people living there.  Within twenty years, it would be a ghost town.  That was how things were on the frontier in those days.  Towns grow where there’s metal to be mined and disappear when it’s gone.

In those days there wasn’t much talk about law, least not in Indian Country or parts further west.  People lived by the gun.  People like Kid Doolin.  Word had it that at the age of 21, fourteen men had died by his hand.  Word like that was promoted by the Kid himself, regardless of the truth.

“I will stand up to any man,” he liked to say.  “I will lie down for no man.”

But gunfighters die by the gun too, and when Jack McCall gunned down Wild Bill Hickok in Nutall & Mann’s Saloon #10 on August 2, 1876, people found that out.  Shot in the back of the head, he was, while playing poker.  And McCall walked away and bragged about it – ‘The man who shot Wild Bill’.  Oh yes, he got a trial eventually, but it made people like Kid Doolin think about life.

The death of Wild Bill showed two things: If you are a gunslinger, there are people gunning for you; and the days of killing and not facing the law are all but over.  A young man like Kid Doolin needs to look for a place where he can hide.  A quiet town, but maybe a growing one.

The problem for the Kid was that he was distinctive.  He was called Kid because he looked like one, even at age 21.  He was small and slight, with hardly a hair on his chin.  His ginger hair and scattering of freckles made him look even younger. A saloon owner might have refused to serve him were it not that he was so clearly Kid Doolin.  You don’t want to upset somebody who is that good with a gun.

So he rode into town late at night, and instead of heading for the saloon or the boarding house, the Kid headed for the back of the General Store where he had heard on the trail that a room might be available.

After accepting the first price quoted to him for the room, he asked for one condition. “I’d appreciate it if you would keep my presence a secret,” he told Mrs. Maggie Hailstone, the widow proprietor.  “The truth is that I am keeping my head down for a while, but hoping to secure a small mining claim over in the hills in due course.”

“If you want you can make yourself useful in the back room,” Maggie said.  “There is work here, and you can earn your room and board while staying out of sight.” She actually felt a little bad for the boy, she’d expected him to bargain and she was ferociously overcharging for the rent. It was only an eight-by-twelve room that formerly held potatoes and truck before she had had a cellar dug. Of course, she had no idea who he really was.

The Kid was short on book learning, but he was no fool.  He was not cut out for most manual labor.  He was not strong, and his hands were no harder than necessary to draw a pistol or shuffle a deck of cards.  The mining idea was just that and would stay that, and he knew it.  A storekeeper he could do.  He could move boxes and improve on his words and figures to keep track.  Something would come up.  He just needed to stay alive until then.

He would even come up to the counter sometimes and offer to help, when there were womenfolk in the store.  He knew to stay away from men.  They might recognize him where women likely would not.

Maggie seemed to think him younger than he was and he did not correct her. It amused him that she called him Child instead of Kid since it meant the same thing. His real first name was Shade, something almost no one knew. It was from the Irish his mother had as an immigrant. But Maggie hadn’t asked and he hadn’t told her, not even the lie he usually used that his name was James Doolin.

The ladies who came into the store liked to speak with him. Maggie could be impatient with indecisive shoppers, but the Kid was not invested in controlling the interaction and kept a contented smile on his face. His voice had a charming lilt, too, though he was personally unaware of this.

“You have a gift for selling, Child,” said Maggie after he had made a large sale of cloth and notions to Mrs. Clark.  “But you can’t use that gift for men.  They want buckets and shovels and steel rod.  They come with a list.  I can deal with them.  But where men go, women follow.  And there is business in women’s clothing if you know something about that?”

He was ready to learn.  There were made-up garments coming in, and there were alterations to be done.  Kid Doolin was soon immersed in bustles and petticoats, ruffles and lace.  And the needle and thread suited his sharp eye and nimble fingers.

Who knows why he put that first dress on his own body?  Maybe it was to check the cut of the garment in the mirror?  Maybe it was just to feel what it might be like to wear skirts?  For whatever reason, there he was, and Maggie was saying “Why heavens, Child, if we put a bonnet on your head, you could walk down the street!”

It couldn’t be denied or doubted, the Kid with his fair skin, youthful soft features, and slender body made a very feminine appearance in the mirror. He stared at himself for some time, thinking about what Maggie had said.

His red-blond hair hung lank and nearly lifeless to his shoulders. It would tend to curl except he mostly kept it oiled. He wore it long in the style of gunfighters and gamblers, and gunfighting gamblers of that time, but was unable to set it off with a set of whiskers. What whiskers he could grow, now had to go if he wanted to explore this new way of hiding his identity.

He sighed. It had only been a month or two, but he would be more than happy to step outside in the daylight.  But in a town full of miners, a man in a dress might be at some risk.  A bonnet seemed hardly enough.

The hair on his head needed to be washed and not oiled, and drawn into a snood on his head, with maybe a few curls showing at the temple.  And some of that kohl and rouge would be needed as well to conceal any masculine line to the eye and cheek. He would need women’s shoes, too. Fortunately, he had small feet.

“Maggie,” he said. “I’m going to need some help.”

Maggie was willing and the task seemed to both amuse and delight her. Perhaps Kid Doolin became the daughter she had never had in her mind. “Let’s see if a pair of my shoes pinch your feet,” she suggested.

And so dressed as a woman, this young person headed into the street and down to the blacksmith with payment for some wrought iron tools the workman had supplied.

He seemed liberated.  Ever since the death of Hickok his fear of being bushwhacked from behind had plagued him.  Now from behind he was the furthest thing from a gunfighter that could be expected.  He was not even a man at all from behind, and as he soon learned, not from the front either.

But there a voice was needed to address the blacksmith, and with throat cleared and pitch adjusted as best able, that voice said: “This is from Maggie, at the general store.  I am working there as her assistant.”  And on inquiry, there seemed little choice: “My name is Dulcie”.

Where did that name come from?  Perhaps the mouth had already started to say ‘Doolin’ and needed to be stopped and corrected.  From whatever place, Dulcie came to Calico.

She would later say that: “Calico is a fabric for tents and wagon covers, and workers shirts.  I prefer silk.”  From the moment that she set foot in the street, everybody who met her was sure that she would not stay.  She was silk.

And not just in the fabric of those clothes but in the touch of the skin too.  The store sold psilothrum to assist ladies in depilation, and cold cream to sooth the arms legs and face.  A range of the latest hair soaps perfumed with rosewater or lavender were also popular, and in selling to the women of Calico there is not better advertisement than that the seller be the best possible model for the products.

Dulcie became on of the women of Calico, and perhaps the leading women of Calico.  Maggie was happy to say that Dulcie “should do what she does, and that is to sell”.  It seemed that “she” was unburdened by heavy labor and thereby able to concentrate on her own beauty and refinement of character.

Kid Doolin had spent time and spilled blood to win just a fraction of the admiration that Dulcie received everyday from men and women alike.  It might be said that men desired her, and women desired her life, but nobody was out to take her life.

She could walk down the main street of Calico and people would say: “That marvellous creature is Dulcie who runs the store.  She is a lady of refinement and always perfectly turned out.  She carries herslf like a queen, because that is what she is around these parts.”

People looked up to her like they never had for Kid Doolin.

And she won new respect when one crazed man attempted to rob the general store.  This was a man who had bought a dead claim.  He had spent a year digging in barren dirt and lost blood, sweat and dollar in producing just thing air where soil and rock had once laid.  Such mean have been known to lose their minds, and then go to the store and try to sell back the shovel for just half what they bought it for - which happened to be 5 times what it was worth outside a mining town.

There was a commotion that drew witnesses to the store.  The demented miner pulled a gun and pointed it at Maggie but with a speed that seemed superhuman a gun appeared in the dainty hand of Miss Dulcie and laid the man out dead, a hole in the middle of his forhead from a muzzle flash from the hip.

“We lie down for no man,” Dulcie said.  “This is a business.  Shovels or skirts, we have the best.  We just require payment.”

Maggie was so grateful that she offered Dulcie a partnership then and there.  But Dulcie offered to by her share from some money that the Kid had put aside.  It seemed a good deal as it set the price to buy out the other half less than a year later.

And not long after that, Pete Beynac entered The Diamond Saloon in Calico well before sunset, but he was looking forward to it.  He had been riding all day in the hot sun, except to rest himself and his horse in the shelter of a lonely tree for an hour or so around midday.  His horse was spent but being the man he was, he made sure he had something in reserve.  He tossed a coin to the liveryboy to water and brush down his mount and then surveyed the town before selecting The Diamond Saloon.  It looked busy even before the light was lost.

“Are you a miner, Mister?” the barman asked him before he had time to order.

“Of a sort,” said Pete.  He patted the breast pocket of his coat as if to confirm it, but the barman had no idea that there was a pack of cards there.  “Do you have cold beer?”

“We have beer,” the Barman said, “But it’s only cold in the winter, and in case you hadn’t noticed …”.

“Just beer then,” said Pete.  He needed a bitter taste to quench a day’s thirst.

Tankard in hand he surveyed the room.  He liked what he saw.  Two tables were playing cards.  But something seemed a little out of place.

“Have I lost track of time?”  He said to the barman without turning to him.  “Is it Sunday?  Or maybe there has been a funeral?  This is a mining town and these fellows look like miners, but they are not dressed as miners.  I swear I have never been to a bar west of Texas and seen me so well turned out as here.”

“Well there is a reason for that,” said the barman.  “They say to be a miner you have to be hopeful above all things, and these men are among the most hopeful.  You see, Miss Dulcie is about to walk in at any moment and all of these fellows hope to win just a moment of her affections.”

“Miss Dulcie?”  He was looking at one man in particular.  His hands were calloused claws and his face weathered like a canyon wall, yet his beard was combed and his hair plastered with oil, and he was wearing a suit several times too big for him.

“You might call Miss Dulcie the Queen of Calico,” the barman said.

“A saloon girl?” Pete said with sudden disinterest and perhaps a trace of disdain.

“No sir.  Not that.  A lady.  Her body is not for sale.  She buys her own drinks or would do, if I let her.  We have not long been open you see, but where she goes the boys go – least them with money and ambition.  No, she runs the general store here.  She wants no man, just the attention of all men.  And she gets it too.  The most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on.  And maybe that you might, as well.

“I have seen a lot of women,” said Pete.  “And a lot of beautiful women too.  But if she is not interested in male company or their money, why does she come here?”

“Oh no, she is interested in their money all right, s’long as she wins it, fair and square.”

“A beautiful lady gambler,” Pete mused.  “This I have to see.”

“Just to warn you, Mister,” said the barman, dropping the volume of his voice for some reason.  “Dulcie carries a gun and knows how to use it … just in case you might be thinking of forcing your attentions on her.”

“Resourceful too.  How fascinating.”  He turned back to the barman: “So, what does she drink this Dulcie?”

“She does like this green stuff from France.  She asked for it and I had a couple of bottles shipped here just for her.  Otherwise anything strong and sweet.”

“I might have a chance then,” the big stranger said.

He felt her presence even before she crossed the threshold through the swinging doors.  It seemed that every man in the place did, as if she sent vapors on the breeze like a bitch in heat.  How else could you explain that all eyes were on the doorway before she even entered.

If he had expected to be impressed, he was not.  He was demolished.  The dress was full, light blue with lace, drawn in to a corseted waist, with a neckline suggesting a full bosom.  Her head has no hat or bonnet,  just a huge mess of shiny blond curls pinned up, and the face was clear skinned and strong in shape, with big blue eyes, a tiny nose and full lips, in a haughty smile.

The word “beautiful” seemed hopelessly inadequate.  The sun through the doorway seemed to be there just for her, and she paused for a moment so that watchers might compare her to that pathetic orb in the sky.  Then she looked one way and then the other at the two tables of men, eyes wide and mouths open, like moths seeing their first flame.

She chose and strode over.  It was a walk that seemed not feminine but commanding.  One table was favored.  The other suddenly distraught.

Pete Beynac had to collect himself to walk to the same table as her.

“My name is Pete Beynac,” he said, extending his hand.  “But I don’t think that you need to introduce yourself.  If your name is Dulcie, then I feel I know you already.”

She placed her hand in his as if she was letting him touch a precious jewel.  He took it as if it was and placed the softest kiss upon it, just for an instant.  She approved, and he could see it.

“Welcome to Calico, Mr. Beynac.  Now, do you play poker?”

“As it happens Ma’am, I do,” he said, looking around at the table of men, all staring tomahawks at him.  “But I would not wish to muscle in on a game.”

“If I ask, I am sure they will allow it,” she said, in the full knowledge that it was true, and that the whole town of Calico rested in the palm of her soft manicured hand.

Two chairs appeared from nowhere and there was a small scuffle for the honor of pushing hers under her exquisite bottom.

“Fresh cards please, Harry,” she said to the man with the pack in his hand.  “And with two more I think you will need two packs.  That always makes it interesting.  Who knows, I might just get five aces again.”

Pete ran through the odds in his head.  Do goddesses need to cheat?

He watched her.  Everybody did.  She just looked at each man in turn, forcing them to avert their eyes and look at their cards.  She could then assess their reaction one by one.  Pete marvelled at it.  The perfect gambler.  Checking for tells one by one.

Her eyes came to him, but he just looked back.  She had not yet bothered to check her cards, and Pete wanted her to.  He returned the look he had seen her give to them: ‘Well, are you going to look at your hand?  Are we playing poker?’  He could see that she saw in him something different.  She smiled.

Pete Beynac considered himself immune to the charms of a woman in this situation.  In all that he did he was focused and deliberate.  It had kept him alive.  It had made him money.  He loved women … more than he loved fresh coffee.  He loved women … in bed with the lights out.  But this was something else

“Ladies first,” he said.

She pulled the cards closer to her across the table and curled them to glimpse the corners.  “I’ll open and take one,” she said.  She placed a silver dollar on the table from a bag in her lap.  More of those coins would follow from there, and more than that would go in the other direction.  It took some hours before the miners withdrew leaving only Pete and Dulcie seated, and the man now serving solely as the dealer.

It was a clash of titans, as everybody in the bar now understood.  People were watching her, as they always did, but him too.  The bar was silent and now just an audience to the high drama in the corner.  There were two piles of coins, and 10 cards on the table.

“I understand that you are a businesswoman and that you own a business?” said Pete.  “Would you bet that? “

“If you can match it, I will let you see my hand,” she said.

“Well, perhaps I can do that,” he said calmly.  “I have a small ranch in a place called Santa Barbara over the hills south of here, and overlooking the sea.  It is a part of a larger cattle business.  I have to admit it, I won it in a poker game.  It would be worth more than your store here, but seeing as how I got it, I could put that up right here, right now.”

Dulcie had a moment to consider.  Calico was her place of abode and the store made it so.  But was that what she wanted.  Was there really a future here?  It was not home and never would be. The faces around her reminded her that she was like a swan among sparrows.  If she won this, she was gone.  If she lost this, she was gone.  Either way Calico was over.  She was not Calico.  She was silk.

“Done,” she said.  She spat on the palm of her hand and thrust it forward.  Pete Beynac did not take it to shake.  For a moment he considered turning it palm up and licking it, but he turned it palm down and kissed it.

“Show us your cards, then,” he said.

It was a full house.  Same as him.  But she had three eights.

He did not turn his cards.  Everybody watched.  He was smiling.  She was not.  The world stood still.

Slowly he pushed his pile of money towards hers.  Strangely he was still smiling.  So was she.

“We will need to document this,” he said.  “I would take a room in the hotel, but I seem to be a little short of money.”

“Take a room and I will pay,” she said.  “It is the least that I can do.  And supper together too.  My treat.  I seem to be flush with cash.”

As they crossed the street some men in the bar wondered if this was the price that needed to be paid to have supper with Dulcie and have her in your room at the hotel, in particular when one of their number turned over his hand left on the table and discovered that it was a full house with three jacks.

But they were at the hotel together and alone.  He was in the room, and she was too.

“I should explain that the small ranch you now own adjoins a bigger ranch that I still own,” he said.  “So if you will come, we will be neighbors.”

“I plan on leaving Calico,” she said.  “But you should not get any ideas.”

“Ideas just come, and there is nothing you can do about it,” he said, stepping closer to her.  This was not the first time this had happened to her.  She could guess what was coming next.  She revelled in the worship of men, but her secret could never be discovered.  She might let a man get a little way, but then when she says no, sometimes a small pistol must appear from nowhere and be plugged into his nostril.  Dulcie was small and weak, and life as a woman had made her weaker.  The little four shot revolver was easily concealed where there were no breasts, accessed through a fold in every bodice she wore.

It was just that this time she wanted just a little more.  She wanted his hand on her cheek, and down her neck.  It made her shudder and sigh.  Just a little way, and then it must stop.  His large hand past her side curls and behind her naked neck drawing her into a kiss.  A kiss.  A perfect kiss.  Soft yet fierce, betraying passion on both sides.

She prided herself that she was quick.  The gun was not on her hip, but she could draw in a flash.  And yet she with his tongue in her mouth she seemed to have lost the power of her limbs.  The gun was in her hand and yet her hand and arm were limp in his embrace.

The pistol fell to the floor.  She opened her eyes to see him look down at it, but he did not unlock his lips from her.  His other hand seemed to have been able to raise her skirts.

Now her eyes were wide open.  His free hand had reached forbidden territory.  She waited for the jolt.  And without the gun she was powerless to fight of his undoubted assault.

“It seems as if you might be packing more than one pistol,” he whispered into her ear.

“I still won the poker game, fair and square,” she said, as if that really mattered more than her survival.

“You did that, and my heart too,” he said.

“But, well, and you can … feel, I am not what you can love.”

“Well, ain’t life strange,” he said.  “Because right now, that don’t seem to matter.”

“You could not possibly be interested in me.  You are handsome and rich, and I am not even a woman!’’  There were tears now.  There never were until now.  But in this moment, only minutes after her life seemed to have turned a corner towards wealth a happiness, it all seemed for nothing without love.

“Now, one thing you need to know about me Little Darling, is that I don’t like to be told what I want or do not want.  So, if we are going to be together you and I, that is one thing that we will have to change.”

Now, here was a man she could lie down for.

The End

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