

Johnny Cash's Girl

by Xanthi Barker

It was the kind of family holiday on which daily pleas were made to God, Father Christmas, biological parents, et cetera to be granted an early death. On the fourth day, Kitty was very good at being acerbic. She could do it with a single flick of the eyes. She'd learned it off a Johnny Cash song, practiced for two hours with a mirror and the track on repeat. Acerbic. Kitty liked the sound of it. A hiss over the c like a cut. She could do it with her shoulders too, coiled away from them on the sofa, her face hidden behind the barrier of her knees. She was a fortress on skinny short legs, a ghost inside to complete it with a haunting, and so it did not surprise her when that boneless fillet of a girl Eleanor whined over the chocolate mousse her da-ad had delivered to her stink-patch on the sofa, "Kitty's giving me-e the cre-eps."

But everything here gave Kitty the creeps: the long silences at breakfast, that woman's shark hair on the TV, her mum's fake smile, her brother's forgetting, not to mention Eleanor herself and that stupid impostor Pauly who might have been a solicitor with a BMW and a four-storey house but still could not use a drill or bring an articulate child into the world. But, you wouldn't hear Kitty complaining about it because you wouldn't hear Kitty say a word. In fact, they were now more than halfway through this den of claustrophobia and fools known as a holiday and Kitty had managed not to say a thing.

Thinking this, she couldn't help smiling.

But smiling was a big mistake.

"Ho ho ho," her mum began, "he he. You are funny Pauly, look! Even Kitty's laughing. Ha ha he."

See?

Pauly had been doing a stupid punching probably racist Egyptian dance impression and stupid whiny Eleanor and stupid Mum and stupid fake pretend traitor Greg were laughing their stupid heads off. Like it was actually funny. Frankly, Kitty was insulted. Frankly, her family had the sense of humour of a reception class. Frankly, she wasn't even related to half of them.

It was enough to make a girl wish away the seven years until her eighteenth birthday when her dad would take her to live in Nashville, Tennessee and they would start a new life with a handsome rescue mongrel named Scoundrel and a motorbike and loads of gruff, clever friends with sideburns who appreciated their taste in music.

"Kitty-Kitty-Kit-Kat, I can see you smiling."

Kitty clenched her jaw but it was no use—the tell-tale hands, the grinning approach—her mum was coming over. To tickle her.

Kitty held her breath until the fingers were deep in her ribs, forced herself to think of blue things, cold things, song names. She twisted and stretched away but every defensive movement rendered a new part vulnerable. A disabling giddiness spread through her. She jabbed an elbow backwards, aiming for her mother's thigh, missed. Groaned and covered her face.

"I can see you laughing Kitty, ha ha he."

Then the fingers found Kitty's belly. For a moment, Kitty was paralysed. Then in a flash of genius she could not later place she tucked her head between her knees and elbows and screamed.

It was a sound that hurt and it hurt to make it. In a lesser built house, it might have roused neighbours. But the tickling didn't relent. In fact, it escalated: fingertips scattering further and digging harder. Kitty increased her pitch. A war had begun.

"Da-ad I ca-an't hear the TV-ee."

"Sorry, my sister does this sometimes."

"Christ, give me a splitting headache in a minute."

All at once, the fingers went limp and departed. Then there was a soft pad of footsteps, socks on carpet, and in a new voice Kitty's mum said, "Yes, please Kitty, enough."

On the fifth day Kitty said two words. Two words: two mistakes.

It happened like this: it was raining. Everyone was downstairs playing Monopoly. Kitty was upstairs, playing Opposites.

"I'm so happy," she said to the ceiling. (Words said in private didn't count.) Then she did her best imitation of the new laugh her mum had been trying to pass off as real for the past eleven months. "Ho ho ho," she said, "ha ha he he."

There was no way Kitty's mum didn't know how fake it sounded. It was so obvious, it made Kitty actually laugh. She laughed and laughed and laughed. It was even worse than being tickled. It was like baby kittens charging out of her. Her bladder stung. She had to stop or she'd wee herself. She had to stop or—the door flew open and her brother burst in. Kitty held her breath. "I won!" he said. "I won, I won." He was dancing like a chicken, his bottom far out behind him while he punched the air with tight fists. "The crusty boot has done it again." He stopped, looked at her. "Don't make that face at me." She made it harder. "You know what'll happen if you do." She rolled her eyes. He looked at her, the floor, the door, back at her. Then with a flourish of hands, he gave a war-cry and leapt upon her.

Kitty tucked her head into her chest and crossed her legs. Greg was a vicious arachnid of a tickler. Long ago, Kitty had learned the futility of wrestling with her brother. More recently, a shift in attitudes had minimised the effect of bargaining, and at the beginning of this holiday, he had developed a sudden immunity to the counter-tickle. There was nothing else to do. She balled up her fist and waited for her chance, for a sudden shift in his multi-limbed grip. Noting it, she yanked her fist back and dug it forward, sinking her knuckles into the triangle of tracksuit below the daggers of his hips.

There was a shriek and he fell off her. On the floor, he curled up like a woodlouse. Kitty scrambled backwards, her lungs in her mouth. She stared at Greg. It didn't seem possible that noise was coming from him. Brothers didn't make noises like that.

His screaming broke into low moans and Kitty grabbed his shoulder and jostled it. When that didn't help, she dipped her head and nuzzled him like a bear. His moans melted into sobs and something like whale-song. Kitty sat up, whimpering, pinched herself. Chairs scraped below. Adult voices called out. Footsteps began to thud. Greg's cries softened. Their mother appeared in the doorway. She rushed across the room, draping her body across Greg like a bandage, lifting him onto the bed. Kitty was transferred to the floor. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Oh," said their mother, "so you can speak?"

Kitty shrugged.

"Hmm?"

Another shrug.

"I can't believe you sometimes."

Kitty watched the floor.

"Are you going to stop this nonsense now, or what?"

The floor was indifferent to everything and Kitty hated it.

"Kitty?"

She looked up. She tried to say with her face that she really was sorry, that she hadn't meant to, that she wanted to be good. But she didn't know how and then her face wouldn't work. She watched her mother's expression change. She looked around for some words, any words.

Mum sighed and her eyes faded. "And you can start being kind to Pauly," she said, "at least polite. He's done so much for us." She leant forward so her face was level with Kitty's. It wasn't clear if she was smiling or trying to swallow her hate. "Anyone would think you wanted to be left at home." A puff, like laughter but not. "What was that Kitty?"

They stared at each other. Kitty pulled her mouth into its worst smile and watched her mum know exactly what she meant.

“Oh don’t give me that,” Mum said. “You want us all to stay at home? Alice is on holiday. Aunty Jo isn’t well. Where would you have gone?”

Kitty gritted her teeth, took a slow, solid breath, lifted her chin so she wasn’t looking at her mum but at the ceiling. She couldn’t look at Greg. Then she gave up and pointed at the tall brown boots on her feet.

It wasn’t her holiday laugh then, that Kitty’s mother emitted, but a low rasp, painful on the ear, hollow and long, and at the end of it she said only, “Yeah, right,” like that was the end of the matter.

But it was the end of the matter. Their mum went out.

“Why did you upset her?” Greg said. “He doesn’t want us, you know.”

The sixth day would have been a very good day if it hadn’t been for the spaghetti.

Kitty was permitted leave from familial duty on account of not having slept. She had tried to sleep, but her brain had not let her and when she leant forward to brush her teeth in the morning the sink went red with black dots and then pink with vomit. This itself was quite painful but what it meant was she was allowed to spend the day at home, listening to the three albums her dad had burned for her on the antique CD player. Frustratingly, it also meant she would miss visiting the local caves. These had been the sole selling point of the trip, for Kitty. She was interested in the sounds down there, the damp and the things called stalactites and stalagmites that clawed so monstrously and so lazily up and down out of the rock. She had seen a video inside some caves on the internet and had been thrilled. But now the others would go without her. It was a compromise.

In any case, it was good to be eleven and alone in a house. Particularly one that did not belong to you. Alone at home, Kitty was liable to panic. Though the days had passed when break-ins were as regular as red utility bills and Pauly had paid a man to fit two bolts to the door, she could not shake the feeling that someone was lying in wait for her behind every corner. It was why she had taken to carrying a gun.

Without anyone in it, the holiday house was all right. It was all one room downstairs, so the room was massive, with three big puffy sofas and a TV Kitty could not have got her arms around and a fireplace that there could have been actual fires in, if Pauly was like Dad and knew how to build one. The kitchen was enormous too, with an oven she could’ve sat inside. When they arrived, she’d made a joke to Greg about Hansel and Gretel and they were both in hysterics until their mum told them to stop it and Pauly said again it was bad manners to whisper. Now she gave the oven a light kick and it warbled. She hadn’t eaten breakfast so she climbed onto a stool and opened the cupboard up at the top where she knew they’d hidden the chocolate biscuits. She took the packet out and, crouching, pressed three onto the table. Then, because three did not look very much once she imagined the first two being gone, and because there wouldn’t be another chance to eat today, she popped out another two. Twisting the packet, she replaced it and climbed down, licking the chocolate off the first biscuit on the way.

It was time to dance. Four biscuits stacked in one hand and one in her mouth, she went back into the living room and knelt in front of the Sony High Fidelity Stereo System to figure out how to turn it on. There were many buttons, and each made a satisfying clunk. She slid the silvery disc out of its plastic packet and placed it into position. After finishing the last biscuit and licking her fingers to clean them, she pressed play and stood up, listening out for the whirring hiss. There was a funny feeling in her head when she did this, a sharp yellowness like a solid sun beam being pulled through her ears, but she took no notice of it. She twisted the volume, pushed the coffee table to one side and put her hands on her hips at the centre of the room. The bass started up, then the twanging guitar and a low hum and for the first time in longer than even she would have believed, Kitty felt wildly happy.

Well, it was a fine way to spend the day, acting out murders and betting on horses and bar fights and growling out the wills of dying lovers. She knew every word. She had on her favourite blue checked shirt and the now-cracked plastic stetson her mum had found in a toy shop and the belt with

the pocket for the plastic gun which had a bright red tip so nobody thought she would kill them, not to mention her most prized possession, that she would have worn to bed if doing so didn't make her feet fill with pins-and-needles—tan leather cowboy boots with the swirling pattern up the side and the stitching on the toe and the hear-me-coming heels and the shape of her feet worn in. Her dad found them. They were second-hand, so they had their own story and nothing to prove, he said, and even though it hadn't been her birthday he'd wrapped them in saloon-bar wrapping paper with a card that had Johnny and June on the front and when you opened it said, Because you're mine I'll walk the line, and it didn't matter that he'd had to cross out HAPPY ANNIVERSARY to write in his scribbly handwriting *I'm sorry Kitty-cat, your daddy always xxx*, the point was *where did he find such a card?* Kitty wanted to buy all of them. She wanted a whole box.

She danced.

She danced and Johnny Cash's voice ran through her, and when she had danced and listened and danced and sung long enough, she did not have any need to think about who or what or where she really was.

Five hours later, Kitty was still dancing. She took a long break for lunch, watching five episodes of *The Simpsons* back to back because then it didn't matter how hungry she was. But after that she felt more tired and that annoyed her: she did not want to feel tired today. She got up and put on a quite fast chuck-chuck running kind of song and flapped her arms through five twirls while in the song the kid caught a worm to watch it squirm though it was difficult to catch her breath. The room span. The song ended and the next started up. To stop herself falling over, she leapt up, did a couple of wiggly twists and then dived onto the sofa in time to shoot a man in Reno just to watch him die.

But it was a car then, that shiny black German one that they were not allowed to touch the windows of and not the Folsom train that rolled towards the house and shattered all illusions of freedom. Kitty heard its hiss and froze. Her movements sharp and economical, she switched the music off, put the table back in place, grabbed her stetson and hurried upstairs.

Lying on her bed with the door open because Pauly did not like shut doors, Kitty listened to the voices outside. The key clicked in the lock and the voices burst in, filling up the house with loose feelings.

"Pauly, Pauly," Greg was saying, "do that woman's voice again, please."

"No ice creams to be eaten in the museum," Pauly said in a clipped, regal accent.

There were guffaws and Mum's, "Ho ho he he ha ho," and the front door clicked shut and Pauly said the same thing in the same voice again.

"Do it aga-ain, do it aga-ain, Da-ad."

"Oh, that's enough now, I think, Elly-poo."

There was some ruffling, some audible squirms. "Don't ca-all me that. It's gro-oss."

"Sorry Elly-poo."

"Da-ad! Put me do-own."

"I'm hungry."

"OK Greg, not long. I'll go and start dinner. Pauly, what did you two want to eat?"

"Me-eaty pe-esto pa-asta! Da-ad, remember? you said."

"Oh," said Pauly, "right. Did I?"

Silence. Kitty shifted her stetson where the plastic was making her forehead sweat. Then her mum's voice: "OK, meat and pesto pasta. Have we got all the things for it? Do we have the cheese?"

"You can use any cheese," Eleanor explained. "Mum says stilton or gruyere is best. Dad likes it when we have both."

Some footsteps. Clicks and clacks. Then, "We've got cheddar. Maybe I can pop out."

The truth was, Kitty could have told them, fancy cheeses gave you nightmares, acne and gas. They were a waste of money, for people who had it to burn and no one could really tell the difference. But Kitty's mum didn't know the things she used to. Kitty removed her hat and lay down, wondering what this meaty pasta thing was and how she could get out of eating it.

It was a glum wondering, and so she did not mind when Greg padded into the room, Cheesy Wotsits in hand and said, "Are you crazy still or can we play Playstation now?"

He had been inside a cave and seen the deep claws of the earth and he looked happy and satisfied and smug, and to know all this hurt Kitty right behind the belly button.

But all the same she sat up, nodded once and replaced her hat.

Have you ever tried “meaty pesto and pasta”? How about to the recipe of your new partner’s ex-wife? Try it, I dare you. There is a subtle spice.

Greg called this subtle spice, “Pauly, Pauly, have you tried every cheese in the world?”

Mum called it, “I wouldn’t have thought to put dill in pesto.”

Eleanor called it, “Mmummmmm,” and later, “Da-ad, I didn’t get any chilli flakes in mine.”

Pauly remained stoically silent and periodically benign, stroking his two girls in turn. He was at the head of the table, because he had the most money and was the eldest and male. So if there was a break-in it would be him who had to stand up and—“What, shoot?” “No, Kitty. Please, it’s just the way it is.”

But it was Kitty who kept her gun under the table. Her place was at the foot, Greg to her left and Eleano-or to her right.

Outside, the cows were beginning to moo.

Pauly dabbed his mouth and said, “What about Kitty? Tasty?”

Kitty hooked a single strand onto the prong of her fork, lowered it into her mouth and chewed.

She chewed for a long time, like a cow. She was listening to the cows, picturing them. She decided she liked cows. She was, after all, a cowgirl. Thoughts like these carried her through their stares as she twirled another narrow comb of spaghetti onto her fork and draped it into her mouth.

“Kitty?” said her mum.

“Kit-Kat? Pauly asked you a question.”

It was Greg’s father impression. It wasn’t very good, but then he’d learned it off *Neighbours*.

“She o-obviously likes it because she’s eating i-it,” Eleanor said into her dad’s ear.

“It’s rude to whisper,” said Greg.

Eleanor glared at him. She pushed her chair back, stood up and, putting her lips as far as they would go inside Pauly’s ear, whispered something apparently hilarious. With no food in his mouth, Pauly had nowhere to hide his laughter. It just blurted out and hovered over the table like a fart.

“Oh,” said Mum, “ho ho he, what’s that Pauly? He he.”

Pauly looked at Eleanor. Her eyes blazed. “Nothing,” he said.

“Nothing?” said Mum.

“Come on, Elly, sit down.”

“Da-ad.”

“Elly,” he said.

“Da-a-ad,” she said.

“Elly-y?” he said.

“Da-a-a-ad.”

“Sit down please.” Then Pauly squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, straightened his shoulders, and resumed his meal. He did not look at his wife, whose mouth had grown tight and small.

“Elly,” she said, “guess what? We’ve a very special pudding in a bit.”

“It’s called dessert,” Eleanor said, and sat down.

It was a long time to eat in silence, because the cows had stopped chatting and it turned out meaty pesto pasta was a difficult meal to get down. Kitty had finished already, so she distracted herself thinking of her plans. She wanted to learn the guitar. Johnny Cash himself bought his first guitar in Germany for \$5 with money he earned in the army. Kitty didn’t want to join the army, but she felt it was important to buy her own guitar. The one she had in mind—royal blue with a mother-of-pearl inlay—cost more than a hundred and fifty pounds. That was more than her mum made in a week. For obvious reasons, she couldn’t ask her dad. She needed to get a job. In eight months, she’d saved £17.84.

Greg was shovelling his food at a rate that would have alarmed child psychologists. Eleanor was stirring her spaghetti like a witch at a cauldron. Kitty's mum's eyes flicked repeatedly towards Pauly. Pauly himself stared straight ahead, his eyes slicing through Kitty while he filled his mouth in a proud slow-motion, setting his knife and fork down between mouthfuls because that was polite.

At last, like a river or a spot or a financial market, the silence burst and the argument began.

"Finish what's on your plate," said Pauly. Then, "Finish it or no dessert." He did not blink. "You're going to have to finish it, I'm afraid." His face had the look of a cheese-grater.

"Come on now Kitty." That was Mum.

Greg had stretched his mouth into an absurd smile. When Kitty looked at him he smiled harder.

"It's the rule," said Pauly. Then, "We've talked about this, Sarah."

"Please," said Mum. "Come on babe, please."

Greg leaned forward, his lips coiled right around his eyebrows now. Pauly's eyelids drooped. He pushed one corner of his chair back. The foot of it scraped the floor and both Greg and Mum jumped. Eleanor did not jump. She snickered.

"Now, please Katrina," said Mum. "Stop being silly."

"Please," said Greg.

"It's okay," said Pauly. "Don't worry. We'll wait. We'll sit here until you're finished and then we'll all have some of Sarah's lovely dessert."

"Da-ad!"

Kitty watched the condensation form on the window behind his head. It had been a mist, but now it was beading. She realised that she had not been outside today and thought how it made it seem like she was ill. She wondered if it meant she would have nightmares again, or that actually she was going to be ill. She felt sick. Usually Greg was kind and greedy and didn't mind if she slid things onto his plate. But the table here was too large, much larger than the one at home, and the plates had edges. There was a hotness in Kitty's head now and a badness in her hands. She wanted to shake them or take out her gun but she did not know what to do. She pulled a knee up onto the chair and hugged it to steady herself.

"Sit properly," said Pauly, "at least."

"Kitty," said her mum, "just a mouthful. Please? For me?"

"Ju-ust ea-at i-it."

"Eat! Eat! Eat!" Greg began.

Pauly folded his arms, which was against the rules, and she knew then that she wouldn't eat another bite. "Come on," he said. "Please. For your mum?" Then, "It's because we care about you, you know, Kitty-cat."

Kitty gasped.

Then, without quite knowing what her limbs were doing or where the screeching noise was coming from, Kitty found herself high above the table, wavering, everybody small and big-eyed below her.

They were staring at her hand. She followed their eyes. Saw the pointed grey-black nose of the gun. Looked from it to her bent knees, how her boots were marking the pale fabric of the chair and her jeans were scuffed with pesto. Her free hand found her hip and gripped it. She tucked in her jaw, flicked her hair out of her eyes and stared at the man who'd ruined everything.

"Get down, Kitty! Get down, now." Her mum's deepest, most serious voice. "What do you think you're doing? Don't point that gun. Kitty, get down now. Stop pointing that gun. It's awful, get down."

Greg scrambled up on his chair, lurching forward, but Mum grabbed his arm to stop him so he was stuck, half pulled onto her lap. Kitty stared at Pauly, stretching her arm long and steady, lining up the sights. Eleanor began to cry. "Da-ad," she said, "Da-ad. You sai-ai-d." Outside, a light switched off and the room was yellower, hotter, very close.

"Get down now," Mum said.

They were watching Kitty. Nobody was watching Pauly. Kitty glared at him as he glanced back coolly, his mouth ajar. When several seconds had passed and Kitty's mouth and face and arm and body had not faltered, something gave in his face and silently, he began to laugh.

"Kitty, come on," Pauly said. "We're not in Texas."

"I hate you," she said and pulled the trigger.

On the sofa, with her face in her hands and the soft cotton of her hair enclosing the sight of it, Kitty's mum cried. Greg sat beside her with a hand on her back, saying over and over, "There there." Kitty was curled around her mum's ankles, pressing her lips against the delicate bones of the grown-up feet. Pauly and Eleanor had gone for ice cream. It was almost nine o'clock, but he said they would find some somewhere

"He's a good man," Mum said.

"He loves us," Greg explained.

He kissed his mum's temple. She heaved and pushed the hair out of her face, turned and stretched an arm around Greg. Then she reached down and held Kitty's shoulder. "Kitty," she said, "Kitty-cat?"

Greg said, "Can't you come up and sit with us?"

Kitty looked at his face, how strained it was. She knew what he was thinking, what he wanted her to think, but it was not possible to think these things, it was not possible to know them. Their dad was their dad. He was her dad. So she could not say for certain how it could be, when she'd sat on his shoulders and rubbed her face against the sharpness of his cheek and held his hand and once sat in the front seat of his shiny green Fiesta all the way up the M1 to a big lake where they pierced maggots on hooks and caught giant silvery fish, when she could remember exactly the feel of the writhing pink things and their cloudy fur and how the mass of them heaved against her palm and she might've screamed if he hadn't been there holding her hand, no it was not possible for her to believe it. There were easier things to believe. Though her brother had told her, over and over again. And it was true, too, that she had been there. She'd seen it. She knew.

No, what he had done was not forgivable, and yet the instinct was there in Kitty to forgive, like the instinct to breathe even when you are drowning.

Greg reached down with both hands and lifted his sister by the armpits. She did not stop him. When he'd settled her between himself and their mum, he said, "Mum, she doesn't weigh a thing."

Their mum's eyes were almost shut. She said, "I know," and pulled Kitty onto her lap. Kitty flopped backwards, hot in her mum's arms and against her body. "Oh Kitty, I miss your voice."

Kitty looked at the past and it shifted. The fear of it made her head spin. She looked at Greg and he was nodding so keenly. Her mum held her close and rocked her and the hotness seeped in, and her brother's hand was on her shoulder.

And when at last Kitty could speak, the words she heard herself say were, "I miss Dad."

"She doesn't really, Mum," said Greg.

Their mum looked at the curtains drawn across the window. She kissed Kitty's temple. Greg shuffled up closer to them. Then the sound of their three breaths mingling was broken by the crackling of tyres on the gravelled drive. The car's engine shuddered and stopped. Two doors thumped and clicked. Any second now, someone else's dad and someone else's daughter would appear in the doorway. Greg's hand slipped into Kitty's, padded and sticky. She gripped it. Felt the slight sink of her mum's body before the door clicked and like a row of streetlights, their three faces brightened.