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Events

Kate's Wedding Day... And Night

By Walter Blum

Earl E. Wimberly



Mr. and Mrs. Robert Lonnie Barnes.

*"It's been a long time coming
— the vows, the rings, the
throwing of the rice."*

■ Kate Marlowe is getting married. It's been a long time coming — the vows, the rings, the kisses, the throwing of the rice — even more so because Kate is fifty, and there's been a lot of pain and confusion along the way, and Kate is marrying a convict so there won't be any honeymoon, at least not for a while. But beyond that, there is something else that makes this marriage so special. Kate Marlowe is a transsexual.

It is a thing the mind finds difficult to deal with. Questions of identity lap around the edges, of what is real and what is not, of death and rebirth. Nor does Kate make it any easier: she is at once brash, witty, vulgar and yet strangely sensitive. In a life that has embraced a dozen lifetimes, she has been many things — author, stripper, hair stylist, prostitute, missionary, lecturer — and a man.

Now he is she. And soon she, who used to be Kenneth Marlowe, will be standing before a minister and saying the words that will make her one with Robert Lonnie Barnes, the man she loves, and half a century of living — most of it in the wrong body — the tears, the joys, the fears, running from life and the world until it could all be put right, will culminate in this moment.

To understand, though, you have to go back to the beginning, to Iowa.

Back to Des Moines, where she was born. Father a state auditor, staunch Republican, thirty-third degree Mason. Mother ran an apartment building in West Hollywood, after the divorce.

Even then there were suspicions that something might be wrong. "They raised me like a sissy," she says, "because I was so thin and frail, and my aunts teaching me knitting and cooking. No male in my family ever asked me to go hunting, fishing. Even so, everything was all right until I got to be a teenager, and one of my classmates, a boy, asked me to go to a movie with him. That shook the household up."

Bewildered, rejected by her family, she left home. In Los Angeles, working as a male hustler, she was picked up by an older man ("my sugar daddy") who put her through beauty school. In Chicago she got a job as a B-girl and female impersonator in a night club run by the mob, until one day she stumbled on a murder about to take place.

The D.A. wanted her as a witness. Fearful that the mob would put the screws on her to perjure herself, she fled to New Orleans. There she landed a job as a hairdresser in a brothel until the late Estes Kefauver closed down the town, after which she joined the burlesque circuit as a stripper and finally ended up being drafted 1-A into the Army.

Thinking the Army might turn him into a good soldier, which would make his family happy and proud, Kenneth let himself be taken. "Everything went fine for about eighteen months, and then one time they needed entertainers for a camp show, and I said I would do a strip. That was the wrong thing to do.

"That night after the show, I went back to my barracks and about two o'clock in the

morning fourteen or sixteen soldiers surrounded my bed, ripped my blanket off, took me down to the boiler room and raped me. What's more, none of them were ever brought up on charges, while here I was with a broken arm, a broken nose and thirteen stitches in my back. And I was the one who got a dishonorable discharge.

"Well, now I was really despondent. I had failed everybody including myself, I didn't know what to do. I was walking down the street and I heard this street service with the drum and the tambourine. It was an Assembly of God Pentecostal Church, and they told me how Christ loved me no matter what!

"They told me He'd wipe away all my sins. Well, I felt I'd been very sinful, anyway. I just felt I had heard the voice of God, so I went down to the Ozarks to a Bible institute in Springfield, Missouri, and studied for the missionary field. And pressures of society were on me to get married, so I started dating a girl and we became engaged. I thought she knew of my problem, but we never discussed it. Then just before graduation they brought me in and told her in front of the dean of men that they were not going to ordain me. Why? Because, they said, I had homosexual tendencies."

So it was back to Los Angeles. There, while running a call-boy service for gay movie stars on the side, Kenneth Marlowe gained renown as a hair stylist. Imogene Coca, Joan Blondell, Gypsy Rose Lee were among the customers who called to have him do their hair. It was Gypsy who brought him to San Francisco for her tv show.

Again disaster struck. "I was going to get some coffee for Ann-Margret and Sylvia Sydney," she recalls, "and one of the dogs on the show had left a little calling card in the hall. Well, I went ass over tincups, and I hit the studio door, broke my nose and this finger, rushed off to the hospital. When I came to Gypsy was standing over me. She said, 'I had about an inch of it cut off.' Well, I grabbed myself in horror. She said, 'No, I don't mean there. I mean your nose.'"

After that, Kate tried a number of things — an ice cream parlor, a bookstore, some porno movies — none of them successful. Then one day the apartment she was living in on Jackson Street burned down. She came next day to see her friend Nelson, the hairdresser, in the depths of despair.

"Nelson," she said suddenly, "I'm going to change sex."

Nelson, who is blond and round-faced, simply smiled and said, "It's about time. What's your name going to be?"

The prison sits there, silent, brooding in the hot California sun. A high cyclone fence and barbed wire, faceless gray buildings and men in brown uniforms peering down from guard towers with guns. A thousand nightmares come to life. Not the kind of place where you would like to be.

At the main gate, there is a bustle of activity — wives, children, lovers — waiting with boxes and Thermoses and hampers of food for visiting hours to begin. People who come here week after week greet each other, old

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California Living Magazine/August 7, 1977

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Reverend Archie Allen, Ginny Van Zandt, Richard Nelson, Kate Marlowe, Lonnie Barnes and Nathan Eli.

Earl E. Wimberly

friends now. At nine o'clock the guard at the desk begins issuing passes. Visitors are checked through the metal detector. Seeing a young woman in a long white dress by herself, you ask diffidently if she's going to the Kate Marlowe wedding.

"No," she smiles, "I'm going to mine."

Evidently, there is to be more than one wedding here today. You step through a door that is opened electrically by a guard in a tower, who pushes a button when he sees who you are.

The driveway in front of the administration building is planted with lovely orange and yellow flowers. Inside the lobby, a girl in tight red hot pants is pacing back and forth. All sorts of things made by inmates are offered for sale in the lobby — coffee cups, pig ashtrays, paintings, beep baseballs. A large black fly buzzes annoyingly. The bride is late.

She arrives at last in a cloud of apologies, hands flapping, full of nervous gestures. "I never knew so many things could go wrong," Kate gasps. "We were supposed to have a chauffeur, and he didn't show up. A florist was supposed to bring my corsage, and he didn't show up." Suddenly, she looks around in mock panic for Lonnie, her intended. "They still have him here, don't they?" she asks with wide eyes.

By now, the conviction that Kenneth must be reborn as Kate had become undeniable. In death would come a new life. At Stanford Medical Center's Gender Dysphoria Clinic, she was told she would be eligible for surgery. She began taking hormones, which is the beginning of the change.

In 1974 came the first of three operations. "They started at the head and went right down to the toes." For \$1,000 a new bust was installed. Plastic surgery was done on her face — new cheekbones, lips, doe eyes, Adam's apple — which ran another \$2,500 and then there was the crucial sexual phase, which came to \$3,500. "Plus I'm a bleeder, so they had to fill me up with Vitamin K," she says.

To raise money she threw a party, Sally Rand did a fan dance, friends from show business came to entertain. "We had about nine hundred people," she says, "but still I went in the hole. I had to take a bank loan."

The transformation made final the break between Kate and her family. "It's very hard for a father or a mother to say, 'My son is now a daughter.' See, I'm not explainable any more."

A note of bitterness creeps into her voice. Once, when a program about a transsexual appeared on television, her father phoned to say, "It won't be long now. As soon as the world understands more, then you can come home." Kate was furious. "I said, 'Well, how nice. I might not be ready when you are.'"

So now she was free. But society, simultaneously repelled and fascinated by what had been done, would not let her be. Soon Kate, who had been Ken, was being invited to lecture groups on what it was like to change sex. It was after one of the prison lectures at San Quentin that she met Lonnie Barnes. They had corresponded at first, and then she went to see him.

"He was a hot, foxy young male of twenty-nine," she recalls. "He had served eight years for murder, robbery and many other crimes. He was soft-spoken — I didn't believe he was a criminal. The years had no doubt mellowed him, the State had educated him, he was brilliant. He was a nurse in surgery, and a licensed astrologer. We were both Sagittarius sun signs. We got along."

Nine-thirty a.m. The conference room is crowded. Lonnie's three sisters are here serving as bridesmaids and Kate's hairdresser friend, Richard Nelson, giving the bride away.

Here in Vacaville, which they call the California Medical Facility, which in a world full of euphemisms may be the unkindest cut of all, here behind the fence and the barbed wire Lonnie Barnes, transferred from San Quentin, is now doing time. Here one of the strangest weddings in the prison's history will be held.

The red tape has been horrendous. A copy of Kate's Iowa birth certificate had to be produced, officially changed, and all sorts of documents and then it was necessary to wait — and wait and wait — for approval from Sacramento, and even at the last minute there was some question whether the wedding would come off.

"But they couldn't stop it," says Kate. "They tried every which way." She looks

stunning today, her blonde hair piled high on her head, clad in a long antique white dress with lace inserts on the sleeves, a pearl necklace around her throat, a corsage of oleanders in her hand. She is heavily powdered and rouged. She explains about the flowers. "I had to have them. So I picked them in Vacaville on the way up, out of somebody's front yard."

In the conference room, Lonnie comes to meet her. They kiss discreetly. Lonnie wears prison denims. His arms are covered with band-aids, the results of prison research. "It has to do with cosmetics," he says mysteriously. "They're testing the irritation potential."

The room is in confusion. Inmates mill about. Lonnie's sisters have brought their babies, and they lie in bassinets on the conference table, and another has come with her three-year-old. A little inmate named "Wimpy" is busy taking photographs. "Oh, I do want one picture of this!" cries Kate, lifting her skirt to reveal a flash of blue and white garter. Lonnie's best man, Nathan Eli, signals to everyone that the minister is ready to go.

"Dearly beloved, we have gathered together . . ."

The words bore into your consciousness, familiar and yet strangely remote, the three-year-old sits at the table drawing and moaning and making singing noises, Nathan, beside Lonnie, fingers the ring nervously behind his back, a guard stands in the far corner of the room, trying to fade unobtrusively into the wall.

" . . . And the greatest of these is love . . ."

Kate is choking back tears. Her mascara is running, and when the time comes to say the fatal words she can hardly get them out. And suddenly, you realize that what you are witnessing is the final stage of the change, for this is the moment that really makes Kate a woman.

"With this ring I thee wed . . ."

The ceremony over, Kate mumbles something and still weeping rushes into the adjoining office. "She's going for a cardiac arrest," jokes Nathan. "Stay tuned for the next exciting episode." Meanwhile, there is much kissing and shaking of hands. One of the inmates leads a cheer for the Reverend. Finally, Kate reappears from the office next door, makeup straightened, mascara dabbed, and in her best Auntie Mame voice announces:

"There, I'm all composed. What's next?"

It was Nathan who brought them together because Kate had despaired of ever finding a man, even among the convicts, and she listened to Nathan skeptically.

"It's not easy for me to find anyone," she explains.

"See, the homosexuals really don't want you any more. You're not part of them. The heterosexuals still fear you and don't understand you, and they keep you at arm's distance. So I had to stop and think: What kind? Homosexual husband's out. A straight husband would have the same problems I had with family rejection, so I said: A bisexual. Lonnie's a bisexual. He can understand.

"We've both gone against society, see. His action was punishable by law, mine wasn't.

continued

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vents continued

But we'd both known loneliness and rejection. People ask why I want to get involved with a convict. My God, how can you control what happens? I'd like to call it off, but I can't. He needs me, I need him — I'm needed by someone, do you understand? I've never had somebody really *need* me before and want nothing in return."

It's over now: the pictures taken, the marriage certificate signed, and everyone is heading for the grassy area across the parking lot from the main gate, where a picnic is going to be held.

But first, there's a small ritual to go through.

Before the main gate is that door controlled electrically by a guard in the guard tower. Everyone else steps up to the gate and is let through, but not Lonnie and Nathan. For them the lock clicks shut. "Barnes and Eli, Table 19," they shout up at the tower guard. The guard nods. The lock goes click. The two inmates join the wedding party heading for the picnic grounds.

There is something positively eerie about this, as though you were watching another part of the nightmare. Until now it had all seemed so easy, so natural. Now you are thrust into another world — gray, forbidding, and one that leaves a very bad taste in your mouth.

Over in the picnic area, Table 19 is covered with a lace tablecloth. Nelson is unloading food hampers of fried chicken and potato salad and fruit salad and warm Cokes and Seven-Ups. From a huge box he produces a single-layer wedding cake covered with Chinese characters. Kate giggles when she sees it.

"Anyone here speak Chinese? No? Fine, then I'll read it to you." In her rich baritone she intones: "'Lonnie Barnes loves Kate Marlowe. Happy marriage.' It was a gift from friends at John's Chinese restaurant. They gave me this and four hundred egg rolls for the party tonight. You're all coming to the party, aren't you?"

Then someone says, "It's count time." A ripple of tension flows through the groups of inmates and their relatives at the picnic tables, awareness that across the parking lot the guards in the towers are counting heads. At last they relax, and Kate throws her garter and then her bouquet in the time-honored rite. The bouquet is caught by a girl from a table down the way. "I'm getting married next month. I damn well better catch it," she says.

Lonnie is on the ground now, leaning against a tree, being interviewed by two young girl reporters from the local papers. "Who knows why love strikes," he says in answer to a question. "Katherine is a fantastic woman." He has a sly way of talking, looking at you from the corner of his eye, a habit that may have been nurtured during long years behind bars.



A flamboyant Kate poses at a party on the night of her wedding.

One of the reporters asks him what his occupation is now. "Just behaving myself," he says. There is a thin veil of irony behind which he apparently hides. A deck of Tarot cards appears, and he does someone's fortune, finds there change, travel and an inheritance. The day is turning into a scorcher, and the icing on the cake is starting to run, threatening to turn the Chinese letters into some language never seen before by man.

There's a big confusion with going to see an inmate," says Kate. "It's a burden on your heart because they're locked up, and you sometimes confuse this with love, and that's what happens to a lot of the girls."

For Kate, who has no car, it has been an ordeal visiting Lonnie. A long ride — three hours on the bus, up and back — and it will be six weeks before they are permitted to have a wedding night. Vacaville allows conjugal visits, but there is a long wait for the available trailers and apartments, and in the meantime Kate must wait and think and plan what she is going to wear, the frilly nightgown, the meals she'll cook — clam chowder, meat loaf that first night — those few hours when they'll be allowed to do more than hold hands.

And they write. Long, inchoate letters full of hopes and dreams. "I'll survive," Lonnie writes, "because in the back of my mind is the day when I will walk out of this prison. Into a world of freedom, and into your waiting arms." And Kate writes back. But no one knows how long it will be before her man gets out.

The Andromeda bar on California Street is a roaring, boozy, happy carnival of well-wishers feeling warmly comfortable. In the center of it all is Kate. People are coming to congratulate her and pin dollar bills around her decolletage, cooing and kissing and making her feel like the princess she is. A female impersonator with long black hair, in a tight-fitting skirt, offers her a peck.

"You're still the same whore you always were," the impersonator observes with a dry laugh.

"Don't you know it!" exclaims Kate. "But you wouldn't believe how nervous I was this

morning. I mean, imagine getting married with all those correctional officers around."

Good spirits are flowing through the Andromeda now in more ways than one, hot egg rolls making the rounds, a middle-aged chap in a sailor's cap who has assigned himself to Kate as her "stand-in" goes to fetch her a drink while Kate poses sexily for a photograph on the pool table.

Up on the raised area, which serves as a stage, the female impersonators — Tiffany [redacted], Ms. Pooh Bear, Shawna [redacted], Lana [redacted] — are putting on a show. Kate, now in the place of honor, watches glowing. A bouquet of roses rests in her hands, and the bodice of her dress is plastered with dollar bills. "Maybe this time I'll win," sings one of the impersonators, directly at Kate, for whom the words have special meaning.

And then something happens that cannot be duplicated, a moment wrenched from time.

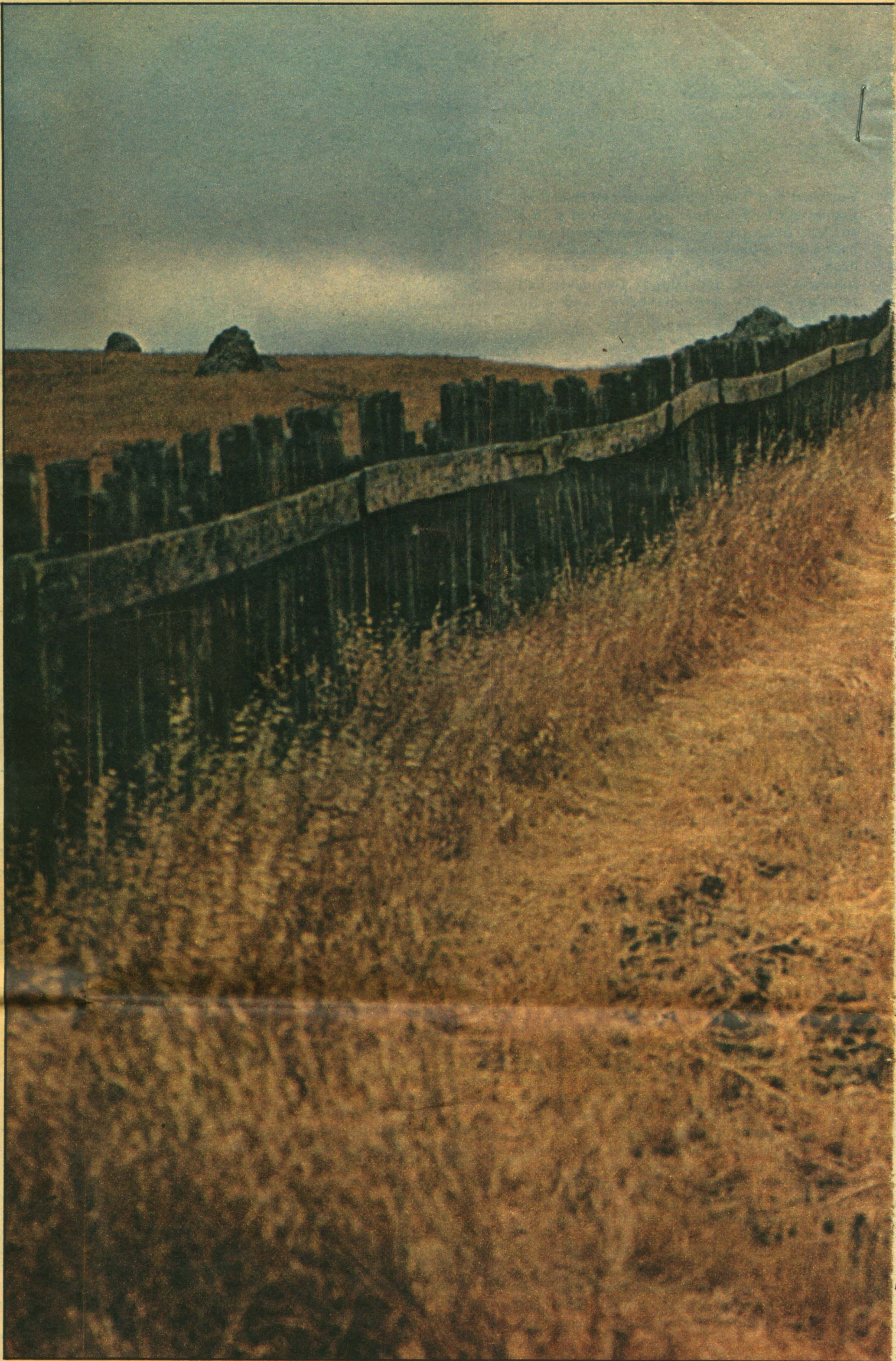
The impersonator named Shawna is doing a "This Is Your Life" number, facing a mirror on the stage. The music is pounding and nearing a climax and people are applauding, whistling and then without warning the impersonator rips off her wig and facing the audience does a sizzling torch song. And in that instant Kate leaps to her feet, her eyes blazing, throwing roses right and left and screaming deliriously:

"Yes! Oh, that is so right. This is my life and I don't give a damn. They ask, yes, they ask, but I tell them where to get off!"

And it is as if all the years had come rolling to this point, the wild, terrible, crazy years — all that time trapped in the wrong body — and you wonder if she and her man will ever know happiness, these two outcasts who met and loved on the farthest fringes of the sexual galaxy, and watching her now in the darkness of the Andromeda on this, her wedding night, you can at least grasp the desperate meaning of her cry, "Oh yes, this is my life and I don't give a damn!"

And then she is brought on stage. Again she is weeping, but there are also smiles, and a kind of wonderful giddiness. When the show is over she begs everyone to stay and have a good time. And now and then she glances at the simple wedding ring on her finger, the symbol of what has come to pass. □

Country Album



**Bales of hay dot the horizon
in a neatly mowed field
in western Marin County,
near Nicasio.
Photography by Hal Lauritzen.**