

STORIES

— *f* —

MY LIFE



KATHERINE

PATERSON

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A Few Words from Kate DiCamillo



I DON'T REMEMBER when Katherine first told me about Maud Henderson and Robert E. Lee and the last kiss. I only know that the story delighted me so much that I kept asking Katherine to tell it to me again.

At some point, I asked her to write the story down. Actually, I threatened her. I told her that if she didn't write the story, I would do it. I didn't mean it. Not really. I just wanted to know more about Maud.

Happily, Maud's story is in this book. The last kiss is in this book. General Robert E. Lee's horse, Traveller, is in this book, and the bones of Traveller are here as well.

This is the story of a life.

It is the story of a first-grade girl who did not receive any valentines. That first grader grew up to be a writer, and when the writer's mother asked her why she hadn't written about that terrible day of no valentines, the writer answered her

by saying, “All my books are about the day I didn’t get any valentines.”

This book is a valentine.

It is Katherine’s valentine to her parents and to her children. It is her valentine to life and to stories.

It is her valentine to us.

And even though the stories are written down, I love them so much that I might still ask for Katherine to tell them to me again.

—*Kate DiCamillo*

My Friend Katherine



FOR MORE THAN twenty years, Katherine and I have had lunch together weekly. For at least thirteen of those years, we have eaten at a diner near our Vermont homes and across the highway from the state garage. The diner is a family operation, clean, efficient, and democratic, but our loyalty has earned us the equivalent of frequent flyer status. We get priority seating. We have a designated server, Charlotte, who sometimes has Katherine's water with a slice of lemon and my iced tea on the table even before we reach our booth. Our immutable order—a BLT and slice of lemon meringue pie for each of us, plus coffee for Katherine—arrives promptly. We can stay for one hour or two. At some point Charlotte decides Katherine has had enough and switches her to decaf. But this isn't why I come.

I come for the conversation, which is, in a word, extraordinary. More often than not, we start talking even before we shrug out of our coats and slide into one of the Naugahyde

booths. Katherine plants both hands on the table, palms down, and leans forward. Her eyes sparkle with mischief. She can no more contain the story welling within her than she can stifle a sneeze.

Week after week, one of the greatest storytellers in the world has told me the story of her exceptional life. Diners no more than three feet away, deep into their meatloaf, are oblivious to the presence of the former National Ambassador for Young People's Literature, the winner of the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award and the Hans Christian Andersen Award. It would never cross their minds that the gray-haired woman sitting two booths over, wearing a turtleneck and a pink sweater, might have had dinner last week with the librarian of Congress or the empress of Japan.

Week after week, as Katherine nibbles at her sandwich, stories billow from her as if they were smoke and she were a furnace on the coldest day of the year. It seems, at times, as if she has lived a dozen lives, not just the one I know. Over the years I've discerned a pattern of before and after: before she left China and after, before she left for college and after, before she met her husband John and after, before she had children and after, before she started to write and after. At one lunch Katherine said she didn't really care about the fame that has found her. I challenged her. "You enjoy the fame," I said. "Look at the opportunities it has brought you that you never imagined having." She smiled sheepishly. So,

there is also before and after she realized that she could make a difference.

Katherine rarely speaks of the books she is working on. Still, the air between us fills with chatter. Hands wave in the air. There are regular bursts of laughter. We talk about our lives, our families, the books we're reading, our travel, our disappointments, politics, the state of the world, and whether we will continue writing. For her, it never gets any easier. She has written more than forty-three books in fifty years, but each time she finishes a book, she worries that she will never again feel the inspiration of another story rising in her. I have heard this more than once.

But I don't worry. Over the course of our friendship, I have seen Katherine whoop with laughter and I have seen her cry. I have seen her playful, sad, wistful, tired, thoughtful, and most often hopeful and happy, which seems to be her natural disposition. But I have never seen her speechless. Every week there are more stories. Many in this collection I've never heard before, and others I've heard more than once, but every story in the hands of a great storyteller finds new life with every telling. These stories hint at how Katherine performs what she calls the "fragile magic" of spinning her stories for children and young adults, but anyone who reads enough of them will find the wellspring of the waters that have nourished this woman's remarkable life.

—*Nancy Price Graff*

Introduction



MY DAUGHTER LIN was very ill when she was pregnant with her first child, and I went to try to help out. It was hard to know how to take care of her. She could keep virtually nothing in her stomach and most of the time simply lay in a dark room feeling miserable. I soon ran out of topics for conversation, until one day I remembered a story my mother had told me, so I said: “Surely I told you about the time . . .” But I hadn’t. She’d never heard the story I’d grown up knowing. I couldn’t believe I’d never told it to her, just as my mother had told it to me. And then I realized what had happened. I heard most of those stories at the kitchen sink while Mother was washing and my sister Liz and I were drying and putting away the dishes. For most of my children’s lives, we’d had a dishwasher.

I resolved then that I would write down the kitchen sink stories of my family and write about my own life for my children and grandchildren and the several friends who thought

I should write more about my childhood. But as I wrote and people began to read it, I added more and more. The thing just got out of hand and grew, not into a proper memoir, but beyond the simple collection of stories I'd first intended. Since writing a memoir has become all the rage, I found I could hardly give a talk without someone asking when I was going to write my memoirs. Well, call it ego or whatever you like, I decided if I was going to write the stories for my family and friends, I might just as well make them into a proper book with a proper editor and publisher instead of just doing them privately. I am a writer, after all, and I do love to tell stories—the bigger the audience the better.

I'VE FILLED OUT details in the anecdotal tales about my parents with letters and brief memoirs that my parents wrote down when they were the age I am now. I'd taken a tape recorder to their house and asked them to talk their remembrances into it, but they were put off by the technology and decided instead to write them down for us five children. My father's time in the Washington and Lee University Ambulance Corps was augmented by the memoirs of a fellow driver, William Roth.

My mother's mother had saved her letters from China, but they were less than satisfying. Much of the writing was intent on not worrying her mother when, in truth, her life in China was filled with many anxious times. After my father died, I remarked to his surviving sisters that it was a pity he

had written so few letters, as I guessed his might have told more about our lives there. “What do you mean?” one of my old aunts asked. “He wrote Mama every week.”

“I don’t guess you still have those letters,” I said, not daring to hope.

She looked at me with disgust. “Well, we wouldn’t have thrown them away.” A few weeks later they came to my house in an old cardboard box—not every letter he wrote, I feel sure, but many more than I could have ever hoped for, starting with a few from his time in the army through the years 1922–1940, which were spent in China.

The longest story in the book is not exactly a family story, though the germ of it was told to me both by my parents and Maud Henderson herself. My friend and fellow writer Kate DiCamillo heard the short version and told me that if I didn’t write about Maud, she would, which drove me to research Maud’s life. To my surprised delight, I discovered that her letters from China to her half sister and a few others had been given to the library at the University of North Carolina. There were also records and letters in the historical archives of the Episcopal Church and references to Maud in the memoirs of Marian Craighill, the wife of an Episcopal bishop in China.

I am indebted to all these sources, but especially to my mother, who told me stories at the kitchen sink.

—*Katherine Paterson*