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KATE VAIDEN



A NOVEL BY
REYNOLDS
PRICE

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Mr. Price's heroine blows like fresh air across the page."

The New York Times Book Review



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**KATE
VAIDEN**

**REYNOLDS
PRICE**

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

for
D A N I E L V O L L

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A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

Born in Macon, North Carolina in 1933, Reynolds Price attended North Carolina schools and received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Duke University. As a Rhodes Scholar he studied for three years at Merton College, Oxford, receiving the Bachelor of Letters with a thesis on Milton. In 1958 he returned to Duke where he is now James B. Duke Professor of English. His first novel *A Long and Happy Life* appeared in 1962. It was followed by a volume of stories *The Names and Faces of Heroes*, *A Generous Man* (a novel), *Love and Work* (a novel), *Permanent Errors* (stories), *Things Themselves* (essays and scenes), *The Surface of Earth* (a novel), *Early Dark* (a play), *A Palpable God* (translations from the Bible with an essay on the origins and life of narrative), *The Source of Light* (a novel), *Vital Provisions* (poems), and *Private Contentment* (a play).

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MUSTIAN: TWO NOVELS AND A STORY

O N E



THE BEST THING ABOUT MY LIFE UP TO HERE IS, nobody believes it. I stopped trying to make people hear it long ago, and I'm nothing but a real middle-sized white woman that has kept on going with strong eyes and teeth for fifty-seven years. You can touch me; I answer. But it got to where I felt like the first woman landed from Pluto—people asking how I lasted through all I claimed and could still count to three, me telling the truth with an effort to smile and then watching them doubt it. So I've kept quiet for years.

Now I've changed my mind and will try again. Two big-new reasons. Nobody in my family lives for long, and last week I found somebody I'd lost or thrown away. All he knows about me is the little he's heard. He hasn't laid eyes on me since he was a baby and I vanished while he was down for a nap. I may very well be the last thing he wants at this late date. I'm his natural mother; he's almost forty and has got on without me.

Reynolds Price

* * *

I WAS CHRISTENED KATE VAIDEN. THE NAME HAD BEEN ready before they conceived me—my father's mother's name, *Kate* not *Katherine*. He'd loved her so much, and she had died on him before he was grown. So what did that say I was meant to be? I still pause to wonder, though it's way too late. He had known my mother—my father Dan Vaiden—since he finished high school and met her at a grand celebration house-party up on the Roanoke River. She was Frances Bullock and was brought by another boy who soon passed out. They were well-chaperoned of course—1925—but according to Frances, they found time apart and in less than a whole day had bit down hard on a plan to marry. She had what she thought was the world's best reason—an orphan living at the mercy of her sister in Macon, N.C., the real deep country. Dan lived with his father and a single servant fifteen miles away in Henderson, a town—streets lined with water oaks and good dark homes. Neither family had money but Dan's had a Ford, and soon he was making that long trip to Frances on roads rough as gullies. It must have been worth it.

All I remember is Frances telling me about the one time he drove her to Raleigh on a Saturday night to hear *Gypsy Love*, the whole operetta. It was January and cold as igloos. Halfway home she was dying to pee; but of course in those days, you couldn't mention that. So when Dan stopped briefly to buy cigarettes, she raised up the floorboard of his Model T and cut loose, much to her relief. But then as they drove on and the car warmed up, thick waves of the smell of pee rolled up—she'd peed on the gear box or some crucial part, and it was near boiling.

Dan never knew the reason till the day he died. They

KATE VAIDEN

were married in October, against his father's wishes. He'd been what his father had for so many years since the first Kate died. So he thought if he moved my mother to Henderson, the father would soon be cherishing her too; her eyes were famous in that part of the state.

It didn't go well. Dan would work with his father, dawn to dusk—they sold hail insurance to tobacco farmers—then they'd both drive home to find my mother, bathed and nervous as a hamster from reading since breakfast under unbroken glares from the Negro man-cook. She would laugh too much and show her wet gums, the one thing about her my father didn't like till just before he killed her.

I wasn't there to see any of it of course, their first married days. What I know comes to me in spells of recalling fall afternoons when my young mother would be blue as indigo, stretched on the sofa—me combing her hair and her rolling those few sad memories out for me to approve and eventually use. Not once did she say one word against my father. Dan was nearly God to her, which even so is less than what she was to him.

It scared me long before I guessed where they were headed. I used to have to leave some rooms they were in, just to find air to breathe. They would simply be talking, Sunday breakfast maybe. I would be looking back and forth to follow their words, feeling sleepy and safe. Then it would hit me *I'm not in this, this is all for them*. And their slow words about food or rain would switch into some secret language of love that left me a stranger, stranded dry by the road, wondering would they turn back and why they'd made me.

Frances swore they'd made me by plan, not chance. After nearly twelve months of misery in Henderson, Dan told her one cool night he'd found a way out. He'd got a wire that day, offering him a job just far enough west—

Reynolds Price

Greensboro, ninety miles. Some insurance adjustor had commended Dan's smartness to the home office there. Would Frances mind moving? *Mind?*—she all but died of joy and that started me. Not the joy itself but the vow it triggered. Dan had told her he'd give her the child she wanted once he saw his way clear. Now he thought he saw it and kept his bargain. Frances told me that much the summer she died.

I've imagined the rest—him rolling down on her in the dark, smelling good. They were children themselves at the time, both lovely and gentle as breezes. Or so they thought. I always knew better. They were children all right, which is why I mostly call them Frances and Dan, but nothing like as gentle as they let themselves think.

Dan's father was understandably hurt by the news of them leaving. The new job didn't start till November 1st, and life in Henderson got grimmer fast. Dan made the quick choice to send Frances home to Macon with her family while he lived in one rented room in Greensboro, learning his job and hunting a house. They were parted eight weeks, and it may have ruined them both or started the process.

This year for the first time I read the letters they wrote every day in those weeks. I'd kept them buried in a trunk all the while but spared myself the knowledge. Since finally I was hoping to understand though, I made myself read them—a terrible effort. I couldn't bear more than one or two a night, and then I'd need gaps. No harsh revelations, just two people holding themselves toward each other at absolute whiteheat, bound to fade or shatter. Frances may not have known she was pregnant when Dan left, but she's bound to have had proof by Thanksgiving week. It's not in the letters, not even in their little private hints and jokes. She must have kept it from him till he came at last to get her—Christmas week; they meant to start their new life on Christmas.

KATE VAIDEN

These are the last two letters they wrote before reuniting. To the best of my knowledge, they're the last happy words that survive from the rest of their lives. They lived more than eleven years longer, strong and talking; but they never agreed to part long enough to make letters useful.

December 18, 1926

Dearest Dan,

It's two in the morning. If it wasn't cold as scissors up here I'd be out on the stoop now dark as it is listening for the train. You don't leave there though for 46 hours and we have a hard frost still holding on outdoors and in. Yesterday at breakfast I told my sister you and I would be leaving on the 24th. She said "Suit yourself" and I said "Well I will" but she seemed relieved. It was Swift that scared me. He waited ten seconds, then shot up like a banner and said "You can leave people once too often, Fan." Sixteen years old and splotched on the face and hands with great red whelps like he'd get as a baby when I'd leave for school. I told him "Swift, you been knowing right along Dan was coming for me. You can visit us at Easter." But he wouldn't look at me. He marched out not making one scrap of noise. Quit a whole day's work and is still not home. I'm sitting up thinking he will be drunk and need some protection from his daddy. You know he wouldn't hurt me and Uncle Holt is scared of me now with you coming. He thinks you are rich. I don't dare tell him we will live in bare rooms for a year or so still. Did you find a bed?

I think we are rich as the caves of Peru and I know we are going to last as long. If you'll just hurry, Dan—

Hurry. Love. Eternal.

Frances

Reynolds Price

(Caroline was Mother's older sister, the one that raised her and later me. Holt was Caroline's husband and weak enough to get mean when anybody crossed him. Swift was Caroline's youngest boy, younger than my mother but her nephew. He's still alive and badly stove-in, no danger now.)

December 18, 1926

Only Girl,

It is almost three a.m. and why can't I rest? I tell myself every minute or so that I'm just worked up about seeing you soon but then I wonder if you're safe and well and asleep like you should be. I have strained not to bother you with what I know happens only in my head. But now that our separation is ending, I can say that one of the two cruelest things on me was my own mind when idle. I would have to press it to believe in you.

Why should you want me? Why should you hold true? I have to say truly that the only ease I have had since we parted is either when I'm working a specially hard day or when I'm here in the dark and we come together for some minutes in my head. Even those end sadly when the dream caves in and I'm me here alone.

If the human mind had any kind of power to invent mind-travel, this boy Dan Vaiden would have stretched against you every night of these weeks and known your loyalty by touch and smell.

I am fine. Don't let those funny thoughts throw you. Just wanted you to know one more time, darling, who is life's blood to me. He'll be by you soon as iron rails can bear him.

Eternally,
Yours

KATE VAIDEN

My childhood memories are the happiest of anyone's I know and the earliest. Most people start keeping back pictures and sounds at the age of three. But the first thing I *know* I remember is sky—just pure blue sky and straight warm light. There's a pad beneath me, a white cotton blanket; and there seems to be nobody else in the world but me and those quiet things. Since I was born the June after they moved to Greensboro and since our house had a quilt-size yard of successful grass and sun-baths had come into style for babies, the memory must come from late summer, early fall. I wasn't more than five months old anyhow. Notice I'm alone. Was Frances near behind me or indoors checking through the window now and then? The Lindbergh baby was still years away and my own memory of the scene is of *safety*. I am on my own and calm in the light. If my parents exist, they are calm and trustworthy.

I really think they were until the last three days; and they didn't come for eleven more years. I think I could prove it too, reeling off my memories. But I've generally felt people's childhood memories are like their nightly dreams, interesting to them but boring to us. Unless their childhood was somehow amazing for adventure or pain. Mine was normal as tapwater, up to a point; and I knew it at the time.

The one special thing was that, when I learned to read, I plowed through the small case of books at home. They were mostly Dan's—Frances and her people only read the paper and devotional pamphlets—so I got a good early bait of boys in danger: *Treasure Island* and one I've looked for ever since called *Brave Lads Victorious*. They would give me nightmares, but that was fine too since then Dan would either come and lie down beside me or Frances would lead me in to their bed between them. They could sleep with me there. I noticed

Reynolds Price

that early. I would stay awake and think how happy we were, partly touching each other.

It went on like that, with just enough bad knocks to keep us from giving the world a blank check. I was two years old when the Great Depression struck. Dan's company suffered. Few people had anything left to insure, and some of the old hands were turned out to pasture. But who in the business of peddling a product as invisible as assurance would turn loose a boy with a grin good as Dan's? It seemed like the time was hard on his temper though. My main scare before I started to school was the way I could not predict his explosions. They were always aimed at Frances or at something she'd touched. I would suddenly be transparent as glass, stood off in a corner while he tore at her. Just words—I never saw him strike her unkindly. But a hot flow of words ran naturally in his family; and he could burn a broad strip off my mother from clear across the room, not meeting her eyes.

There was never a question, so far as I knew, of children after me. Now and then I would put a new baby in my prayers, sometimes wanting one and sometimes begging that I stay alone as the third to their two. I seldom felt lonesome. We lived on a street, so I had little friends. Some of their voices are still clear to me; but I've lost their faces—David Sumner, Grace Walker, six or eight more. We played in a long dream, summer and winter. And then we started school.

I CAN NAME EVERY TEACHER I HAD IN THE TEN YEARS before I quit. They were mostly single women that seemed old and wise, though from here I can guess they were in their late twenties, mid-thirties at most. If the thought of men and marriage had creased their brains,