

A Promise Kept

A story of miracles, a mother's promise, and a daughter's desire to return the favor

Lydia Matiejunas

The silver Skyhawk gulped the miles as the season of autumn wrapped its brilliant color around us. We smiled at each other, feeling a strong sense of harmony. We were so much in tune, words didn't seem important.

The sun-drenched sparkling hours of driving through the Adirondacks flew by before we realized how ravenous we were.

Relaxing in the restaurant, I leaned over the table and looked intently into my daughter's eyes.

"Kate, I am finally keeping my promise to you. I didn't realize it would take so long."

Kate smiled back at me, trying to hide her grimace as she shifted her weight to relieve some of the pain creeping up her right leg, trapped within the metal brace she had worn for the past year.

We left the restaurant, each thinking about the long, difficult years that had led us here.

I would never forget that summer night that I first "met" her. I was so young and unsophisticated and totally unprepared for that night! I smiled wryly, remembering how little I had known about sex and birth control.

Walter was a Navy cadet and I a college student when we had fallen in

love at the outbreak of World War II. My parents had begged me not to marry at such a young age, but once I graduated I would listen to no one and married Walter. Kate was born nine months later.

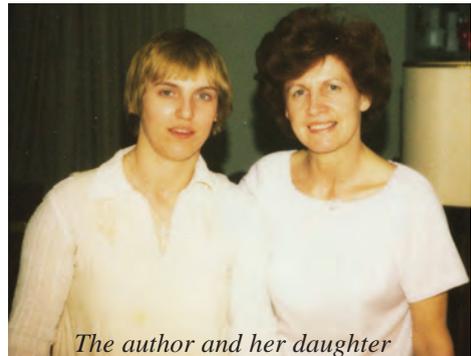
That lovely summer night had held such a promise of life. Warm breezes carried honeysuckle perfume. White jasmine was everywhere. A full moon floated ahead of us en route to the hospital.

I remembered giving myself up to wave upon wave of insistent pain. Then nothing. When I opened my eyes, the curtain of pain had become the curtain of the hospital room being drawn around me.

"How do you feel, Lee?" I recognized the doctor.

"Your baby girl is having breathing problems. We had to put her in the incubator."

My pounding heart made it difficult to concentrate as he continued.



The author and her daughter

“The odds are not in her favor. Would you like to call your priest?”

I numbly shook my head yes. I could not speak.

When Mrs. Wolsky, the night supervisor, came and gently asked if she could be godmother, I managed to whisper, “Yes.”

Tormented hours followed the christening. Kate fought for her life. I knew there would be brain damage. The doctor had told me. Cerebral palsy. I prayed endlessly, using my fingers as a rosary. I promised myself I would never regret it if Kate would just live.

And then Mrs. Wolsky, usually so dignified and stately, came running down the hallway.

“She’s going to live!” she cried, over my great choking sobs of relief. “Kate is going to live! She just passed the crisis.”

Painful memories of Kate’s frustrated struggles to walk—or just be—like other children were to become deeply etched and locked within my heart over the years.

The miles had gone by unnoticed while we were both wrapped in such deep thought. We were startled to realize how late it was, but even the growing dusk could not hide Quebec’s charm. Warily, we registered at the hotel, not having the energy to explore the old-world uniqueness of the city. We decided to rest in preparation for the next day.

After breakfast, we consulted the map and confidently drove past homes nestled in the arms of flamboyantly



colored mountains and cascading waterfalls. Signs of infinite variety beckoned us towards the shrine of Saint Anne de Beaupre.

Slowly we walked into the magnificent cathedral. We joined the people kneeling in prayer. When I looked up, I found my daughter staring at a tall column. I couldn’t believe my eyes! Crutches and braces, baby shoes and footwear of all descriptions stretched upward as far as the eye could see. A strong wave of emotion swept through me. I prayed intensely that Kate would be able to leave her brace and crutch in the church.

Mother and daughter were subdued on the drive back to the hotel. I caught the spasm of pain and unspoken disappointment on Kate’s face. My own disappointment tasted like bile. I couldn’t keep the words back.



“What did I expect? I don’t have to ask how you feel. I know you’re still in pain! Did I really expect you to leave your brace and crutch and walk right out of the church like everybody else?”

“Oh, Mom, I didn’t even think of that,” Kate said. “I just prayed that I could cope with the pain. Especially my right leg. The brace just doesn’t seem to help.”

I couldn’t continue the conversation. Looking in the mirror, I saw a flash of red bearing down on us. There was a terrible squealing of brakes. The driver of the red Corvette struggled to control his car. Kate, sure we would be hit, shuddered. The memory of her own near-fatal accident of just a few years before came back in agonizing replay.

Kate loved the little orange sports car she had been given as a high school

graduation gift. It was a very special gift because the hand-and-foot-controls on the steering column made it possible for her to be truly free for the first time in her life. She could drive wherever she wished.

That soft spring night had been a happy one. It was good to be young and with friends. Going home, she decided to try another, quicker way. Kate always winced when she remembered that enormous tree that seemed planted in her way when she turned the curve. She didn’t remember anything after her car hit it. The dream became a nightmare. Fighting her way out of unconsciousness, in terrible pain, she barely realized she was in the ICU. In the days and months that followed, she struggled to live again, to walk again, to work again. The odds weren’t with her, but she made it. Again.

Now Kate was a helpless passenger in my silver Skyhawk. I swerved. Somehow, the driver of the other car turned it around. It careened crazily across the highway and finally stopped.

My heart pounding, I turned to my daughter.

“Oh, my God, Kate, we were almost killed!”

Kate’s green eyes smiled.

“Who said there aren’t any miracles?” she laughed.

We didn’t talk much about that trip in the weeks that followed. Kate would call from work on Tuesday nights at ten. One Tuesday evening, I smiled when the telephone rang. Before I could say a thing, I heard Kate’s excited voice.

“Mom, I can’t believe it! I couldn’t wait to tell you. I was walking around here at work and felt something was missing. I realized I had taken my brace off during my break and forgotten to put it back on. I’ve been walking without it for the past hour and . . . and I don’t have any pain!”

For a minute I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry to express the joy that filled me.

“Honey, you and I are going back to Saint Anne’s some day—soon! We’re going to put your brace at the very top of that column!”

Kate and I both felt that eventually, somehow, we would return the brace to Saint Anne’s. I left it in my car to remind myself of that promise. But time went by and the brace remained buried in my trunk.

When Kate ran into an old friend from college, friendship blossomed into love. One day, in the midst of all the wedding plans, Kate turned to me and said, “Mom, Frank and I aren’t telling anyone else where we’re going for our honeymoon. We’ve decided to go to Quebec.”

Laughing impishly, she asked me for the brace.

Lydia Matiejuna is a retired schoolteacher. Her daughter Kate is a disability advocate living in New Jersey with her husband, two children and one grandchild.

ABOUT THE SHRINE OF ST. ANNE

The Shrine of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré, located about 25 miles northeast of the city of Quebec, overlooking the St. Lawrence River, has been a place of pilgrimage for the past 350 years. Innumerable healings and other miracles through the intercession of St. Anne, mother of the Blessed Virgin Mary, have been attested to throughout the shrine’s history. The shrine continues to attract not only practicing Catholics, but also Christians of all denominations as well as non-Christians and non-believers of all nationalities. For more information, visit the shrine’s website at: www.ssadb.qc.ca.



Photos courtesy of Sanctuaire de Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré