

Six



Kickoff

I. LIFE BEGINS

The day after I graduated from college in 1968, I moved upstate to Clemson, South Carolina, to start a job with the now-defunct Clemson University Educational Media Center. My job was to produce drawings and lay out pages for educational materials to be used primarily in graphic arts. I loved the work and my co-workers, but the boss sent me to the school psychologist for my inability to get to work on time (I was usually about twenty minutes late almost every day). The psychologist and I had a pleasant visit. I told her I got all my work *done* on time, but I just couldn't seem to be *at* work on time. My boss at Clemson appeared to think my tardiness was evidence of some sort of pathological mental problem. I asked the psychologist if she thought so, and she said no, but that I should probably quit the job since my boss thought so. Finally, in the spring of 1969, I did quit. I had begun to think the *boss* was nuts.

While I was working at the university, I had my own apartment, which I loved, but I didn't realize what a gross housekeeper I was until visiting family members pointed it out to me. I was too busy trying to construct life-size chicken-wire-and-papier-mâché figures in my living room to pick up the clutter—or dust, or sweep, or scrub the bathtub, or wash dishes. I planned to paint the completed giant human caricatures and dress them. It's a mystery to me where I got that notion, or why I thought it would be a good idea. Maybe I'd read an article about the artist George Segal, who used plaster casts he made from actual human models to create lifelike sculptures that he posed in realistic positions, sitting on chairs or looking out of windows. The effect is quite disconcerting. I, on the other hand, planned to make my papier-mâché people funny—like cartoons of real people—and place them on the furniture around my living room like guests. Whatever impulse made me start the project, I lost interest about halfway through, abandoning everything right where it was. My living room was littered with torn newspapers, glue and chicken wire for months.

The best thing about my first summer in Clemson was meeting Jim Palmer, a doctoral student in agronomy (the study of crops and soils) who didn't seem as alarmed by my weirdness as most of the other guys I had dated. Not only that, but he was smart and he made me laugh. One day, he opened my refrigerator and casually started identifying all the noxious organisms he found growing there. I thought it was funny, and—astoundingly—so did he. I was as impressed with his calm acceptance of my obvious shortcomings as I was with his knowledge of microbiology.

He really won my heart the evening I stupidly cut my own hair right before we were supposed to go out. I had cut it short—really short. *Too* short. Worse, it bristled with uneven places and bad gaps.

“This is it,” I thought. “This is when he will find a polite way to stop seeing me.” When Jim arrived for our date and caught sight of the destruction he said, “Well, I'll be dog.”

I have since learned that “I'll be dog” can mean anything from “That's interesting” to “Well, *that's* a nice (or unpleasant) surprise” to “Oh, my God, get me *out of here!*” That evening, I interpreted it to mean that he wasn't horrified enough to leave me right then and there—and, for some

reason, he wasn't. He saw how distraught I was, of course, and assured me that all I had to do was "drop back and punt." He took me to his barber the next day to get the haircut evened out.

We planned to get married as soon as Jim got his PhD, in the summer of 1970.

When I told Jim I'd quit my job at the Media Center in 1969, he said, "Well, I'll be dog." I had a teaching certificate, so teaching school seemed to be a logical thing to do—as Mama had put it, it was "something to fall back on." So I lined up a teaching job starting in the fall and mooched room and board off a generous employed girlfriend for the summer.

Finding a place to live during the school year proved to be almost impossible. I answered nine or ten ads in the local paper, but no one would rent, they said, to a "single" woman. I wound up paying fifty dollars a month for a room and bath in a private home. (Things have changed a lot for women since 1969.)

That fall, when I started my teaching job at Northside Elementary School in Seneca, South Carolina, I was assigned to teach thirty-three sixth-graders in a self-contained classroom (meaning they didn't change classes during the day—I had to teach everything). I was still twenty-two years old, and my sixth-graders were only a year older than my brother, Bill.

My class was the only one at Northside that was self-contained, because most of my students were band members who needed to practice together at specific times. They were a heterogeneous group: four or five students were non-readers, four or five could read faster than I could, and the ones in between were on various levels of development.

On the first day of school, one child asked, "Miss Salley, is that your paddle?" He pointed to a spot behind me. I turned to see a rather thick board leaning against the wall. I was confused. "My paddle for what?"

"To paddle us," said another voice.

Were they kidding?

"Of course not!" I replied. "I don't intend to paddle any of you."

The children were astonished. "All the teachers have paddles."

"Well, I don't." They looked around at one another in disbelief.

"How many of you have ever been paddled in school?" I asked. Every hand went up—I could not believe my eyes. I tried another approach. "How many of you have *never* been paddled in school?"

Not one single hand. "You're telling me every last one of you has been paddled at some time during your years in school?"

"Yes, Ma'am, we get paddled all the time!" The children began talking all at once, each reciting the history of his or her struggles—how many times she had been paddled and for what offenses, which teachers had been the toughest on him, and so on.

"You'll paddle us, too," one child assured me, nonchalantly. Being paddled had obviously become a fact of school life for them—so much so that it had lost its power over them.

I never even came close to wanting to strike a child that year, but I itched to paddle some teachers every once in a while—teachers who stood guard, large paddles at the ready, as they frowned down at rows of silent children pressed as close to the walls of the hall as they could get.



I still had a pretty thick lowcountry brogue then, and the children spoke with a sharp upcountry twang that I found difficult to understand. They said “nat” for “night,” “rat” for “right,” “squar” for “square,” “far” for “fire,” and so on. They used idioms that were unfamiliar to me as well.

Although my upcountry husband uses terms that my family and I find amusing (such as “loafbread” for “a loaf of bread”; “hosepipe” for “garden hose”; “footfeed” when referring to the accelerator pedal in a car; and “boot” when he means the trunk of a car), his pronunciation didn’t sound as foreign to me as that of my sixth-graders.

The kids had an even tougher time understanding my speech than I did theirs. One day, during a spelling test, I called out the word “tire,” which we had discussed all week as part of the spelling list. Not a head went down—not a pencil touched paper. The class stared at me in disbelief.

“Miss Salley, we ain’t had no word lak that,” offered a student.

“Haven’t had,” I corrected.

“Miss Salley, we haven’t had no word lak that.”

“Y’all have studied this word all week long.” I told them, abandoning the grammar lesson temporarily. (I *had* given them all the words, hadn’t I?)

I checked to make sure. There it was. “Tire,” I repeated, giving them a hint. “Those round things on your car.”

Not a flicker of understanding or recognition registered in their eyes. Even the students who learned quickly and easily were looking at me as if they had never heard the word before.

That’s when I thought—“How do *they* say it?”

“Tar,” I said.

A chorus of voices murmured “Oh!” Heads went down and pencils scribbled.

I loved my class that year. Unfortunately, the other teachers figured out almost immediately that I didn’t know what I was doing. My organizational and teaching skills were woefully deficient, of course. (Boy, I wished I’d paid more attention in my college classes.) My faltering start as a teacher was obvious to everyone; conversation ceased whenever I entered the teacher’s lounge.

I first realized something was wrong when my kids came in after recess to report that other teachers were stopping them on the playground, asking them what page we were on in the math book, or how much homework I was giving them. (I had my own reasons for not giving much homework. In my class, there were maybe two or three children whose parents had a college education. Some of the parents were high-school dropouts. Some had not even made it to high school. Some parents worked separate shifts at a mill. Many were quite poor. I was pretty sure that whatever I didn’t teach those children in class, they would not get at home.)

Admittedly, I was not the most organized teacher, and I’ve already mentioned that I don’t notice a messy room even when I’m standing in the middle of it. But my disorganization and failure to keep my room tidy was only part of the problem. The real problem was the set of unspoken and unwritten rules held dear to the hearts of at least three older teachers and followed diligently by younger ones who knew what was good for them. A new teacher like me discovered one of these rules only after she had broken it—by not having a paddle, for example, or telling the students she’ll never paddle them.

Today, when I visit schools as an author/illustrator, I see experienced teachers mentoring new teachers—and taking pride in their successes. I’m glad things have changed since 1969-70. When I was a new, inexperienced teacher, I really could have used some professional teaching advice.

As it was, my students (who were sharper than some teachers gave them credit for)

informed me that I was criticized if I took them to lunch a couple of minutes too late or too early, or if I marched them in a line down the *middle* of the hallway instead of along the walls. They let me know about the rules I was inadvertently breaking and gave me advice on how to avoid such mistakes.

Long after I had left teaching, I learned from Anne, one of my best Clemson friends, that my year at Northside was still a subject of interest. By then, the old Northside Elementary building was long gone. As it happened, one of the teachers who had been at Northside during the year 1969-70 wound up at Anne's school. By this time, I was a cartoonist—and Anne reported that my cartoons were sometimes discussed in the teacher's lounge. During one such discussion, the old Northside teacher sniffed, "She may be a good cartoonist, but she sure can't teach school."

Anne and I got a good laugh out of that. Then, when I asked her if she had spoken up in my defense, she said, "Of course not—I wanted to see what *else* the woman would say!"

The desks in my room were hardly ever in straight rows. Given that each of my thirty-three students were on different learning levels, I sometimes found it impossible to relay a difficult concept to the entire class so that everyone would understand. I just couldn't think of enough ways to explain the material. At such times, I would instruct the children who were still confused to pull their desks in a circle around the five or six students who claimed they did understand. I'd ask those students to teach the others. It made my class look and sound chaotic: the straight rows of desks dissolved into clumps, and there was a lot of talking going on. It drove the other teachers crazy (as my students learned at recess), but it worked. When I visit schools now, teachers tell me that this is a bona fide educational technique widely used today—it's called "mentoring."

I believe the young principal at Northside protected me from the other teachers. I know they complained to him about me, but the only time he ever said anything was one day after school when he came into the room, sat in one of the students' desks, and asked me why I was still on the first chapter of the math book. I told him it was because some of the students hadn't mastered the first chapter yet. The principal reminded me that it was almost Christmas. He was really nice about it. But he did let me know that I should move on. I had to leave some children behind.

My sixth-graders helped me a lot. I like to think that it was good for them; it certainly made them feel as though they had a stake in the class. They pointed out words I misspelled on the blackboard, and they saved me from all the exasperated notes the office kept sending because I couldn't keep track of lunch money. After one too many such notes, I finally asked the children to take daily responsibility for the lunch money. They took turns counting and recording the money and delivering it to the office—and they helped one another if they had trouble. After the kids took over the lunch money each day, I never got another note from the office about it.

The children also made all the bulletin boards for our room.

Before my students started on their first bulletin board, they couldn't believe I was going to let them do it. They claimed they didn't know how bulletin boards were done; they had always just magically appeared. "Not in this room," I said. The students had a thousand questions. They were afraid that their constructions would, somehow, violate some universal law of bulletin boards.

"Teacher, we ain't got no stencils!"

"Haven't any."

"Haven't got."

"Okay. Do you know what the letters look like?"

"Yes'm"

"Well, draw them on paper and cut them out. Make your own stencils."

"But the words won't be straight."

"If I can read them, I don't care if they're straight."

Most schools have some sort of room where teachers can get craft paper, stencil kits, and other craft supplies, but if someone told me where to find such things at Northside, I don't remember it. (As I have since learned, from teacher friends and from teachers I have met during school visits, many South Carolina teachers today supply the room-dressings themselves—posters, maps, stencils, bulletin board materials, alphabetic borders to hang above the chalkboard, and various other teaching aids. They spend hundreds of dollars of their own money each year on classroom materials.) Our classroom did have tempera paint and brushes, though, so we covered our bulletin boards with old newspapers and painted them. Before we started, we'd talk about the subject of each new bulletin board and discuss how the children could visually represent their ideas. I especially remember their bulletin board on "pollution." They decided to divide the board down the middle. On one side—the "polluted" side—gray newspaper pages served well as smoke and dirty buildings. On the other side, they painted a scenic blue sky and green grass to represent a healthy environment. The words weren't straight, but that was the prettiest bulletin board I have ever seen—ever. And quite informative, too. I was very proud of my class.

That was the only self-contained class I ever taught, so I remember almost every one of my students, and I think about them often. I hope they were able to pass math in the seventh grade. I told my husband once that I'd like to write them all a letter apologizing for the sixth grade and all the important stuff I failed to teach them.

Jim and I got married that summer, 1970, and it was wonderful having our own home together. He started working as a Clemson University Extension Specialist in agronomy—the department where he'd earned his PhD.

Meeting and marrying Jim seems to have been a self-fulfilling prophecy. One night while I was still at the University of South Carolina, I found myself, as on many nights, hanging out with about a dozen other girls in someone's dorm room, talking. The topic turned to what kind of man each of us wanted to marry. Virtually every other girl in the room said she hoped to snag a doctor or a lawyer. (Nobody said "insurance agent," "professional golfer," or even "investment banker.") When my turn came, I surprised myself—and everyone else—by saying I wanted to marry either a teacher or a farmer. Pressed to explain, I said I thought that people taught or farmed did so because they loved it—because the work made them happy. I wanted to marry a happy man.

When Jim started his work at Clemson, it occurred to me that I had hit the jackpot—I'd married both!

That fall, I started teaching art at Pickens Elementary School. I taught the whole school—first through the sixth grades—but had no art room. I shared the "book room" with the PE teacher (a young man with whom I had virtually nothing in common) and wheeled a cart loaded with supplies from room to room, where I'd spend forty minutes a week with each class.

I had to be a mean teacher. It was the only way to get their attention. I didn't have time to be nice or to get to know the students.

I told the kids in one class to draw a still-life I'd arranged at the front of the room, and one student said, "I ain't gonna do it."

"Yes, you are." I told him.

"Make me, teacher," he said.

I walked over to his desk, gave him a close-up stink-eye, and snarled, "You do what I say or you'll be *very, very* sorry."

It was a bluff, of course, but he was only in the second grade, so he got busy. With the older kids, though, it wasn't so easy. You had to make them cry. If a student was being disruptive or insolent, I'd usually invite him out of the classroom to "talk." It was almost always a boy—and most of them were taller than me. The students who remained in the room, accustomed to phys-

ical punishment or yelling from teachers and administrators, would usually fall into a stunned silence, wondering what horrors awaited their unruly classmate.

Out in the hall, the troublemaker would lean against the wall, refusing to look at me. I'd use the one weapon that I was pretty sure he hadn't experienced yet: kindness. I'd start out by assuring the kid that I genuinely liked him and that I'd noticed he was someone others looked up to. He obviously had some leadership ability, and I was proud of his rare gift of humor. I wanted him to be as popular a person as I knew he could be, but I hated to see him making a clown of himself because some of the other kids were laughing *at* him—not *with* him—and I *really* hated to see him squander his abilities in this way. By this time, the kid was usually crying, so I'd send him back into the room with tears streaming down his face, where his classmates would gape at me with a mixture of fear and awe, wondering what I had done to him—and imagining the worst.

(Somebody should probably have tried that on me.)

Walking down the hall one day at Pickens Elementary with students lined up on either side of me, I heard a whisper, "There goes the meanest teacher in this school." I smiled.

By the end of the school year, I was about four months pregnant with our baby James, and deliriously happy to stay home doing art of my own for shows and galleries.

Galleries weren't knocking one another out of the way to get my work, so Jim and I, following the example of Jim Harrison, my sister Margaret's very successful artist husband, began to follow the outdoor art show circuit. Harrison was generous and supportive with his advice on making a living as an artist, but my art is very different from his, and, unlike him, I have no head for business. More than once he has sighed sadly and said to me, "Kate, you'll never get rich as an artist."



I win second place at the Festival of Roses art show in 1974. I was pregnant with Salley at the time—hence the “maternity smock.”

During my second pregnancy, I began running a mile or two almost every day with several other pregnant friends. Most of us already had two- and three-year-olds, whom we brought with us when we met at nine in the morning at Riggs Field on the Clemson University campus each

He was right, of course. It seemed that every piece of art I did turned out to be a cartoon. At outdoor art shows, people would stop at my displays and laugh. I sold a bit—and even won some awards—but I was doing caricatures and cartoons on the side the whole time. In 1972, our local bi-weekly paper, *The Messenger*, agreed to pay me four dollars per cartoon to do local issues, but that only lasted a year. They said I was too expensive.

In 1974, I became pregnant with our daughter, Salley. I continued to do art at home, sending James to childcare a block from our house. I had become fascinated with the whole Watergate saga. It was like a soap opera, and I knew all the characters. Lying on the couch watching the hearings on TV, I drew pictures of senators, witnesses, and the president—anyone who caught my interest. (In 1972, I had voted for Nixon for the second time, still holding on to the conservatism of my childhood. In truth, the Democrats had seemed too much like *me* to be trusted with the whole government. I won't be fooled again.)

day. Riggs Field is the soccer stadium now, but at that time it was an empty, grassy field surrounded by a quarter-mile track. As we grew bulkier, we didn't slow down. My doctor said running was okay, so long as I didn't fall. I did not intend to fall. At the end of my eighth month, the baby descended somewhat, pressing on a nerve and making it difficult for me to run very far. My friend Margie had no such problems. She was full-term the day we raced. She beat me—and *I* had run almost an 8-minute mile! No telling how fast she was going. That night, she went to the hospital and gave birth to her second son, as easy as you please. That kid, the last I heard, was in medical school at Harvard.

Another member of our running group gave birth the day Nixon resigned: August 8, 1974. I'll probably always remember that kid's birthday because of it. (He's a lawyer in Charleston now.)

My Salley was born in October, making our family complete.

We friends continued to meet at least once a week for lunch at someone's house—with all the kids, of course. We agreed it was cheaper than a psychiatrist.

Still, I kept doing cartoons. I couldn't stop. Jim was—and always has been—encouraging and supportive, with his own special brand of advice: “Drop back and punt,” “Try not to get sacked out of field goal range,” “If you block and tackle, the touchdowns will take care of themselves,” “Sometimes all you need is three yards and a cloud of dust,” and other wise adages.

I really wanted to work full-time, doing daily cartoons for a newspaper editorial page. By early 1975, I had a hefty portfolio of cartoons and caricatures I'd been adding to off and on since I'd lost my freelancing job at *The Messenger* in 1973.

II.

A FOOT IN THE CARTOONING DOOR

(with a little help from Coach Howard)

It was Frank Howard, the late, legendary football coach at Clemson University, who sort of provided the inspiration that led to my job at *The Greenville News*. Howard coached at Clemson for three decades, during which time he was famous for (among other things) his rather colorful method of expressing himself—specifically, for his unrestrained use of profanity, ethnic epithets, and scatological humor.

Coach Howard did not hold back when it came to motivating his “Tigers” to greater glory for Clemson.

Our friend Jay, who played for Frank Howard in the 1960s, told us about an incident that occurred during a road trip to Georgia Tech—an incident that Jay likes to refer to as “the only time I ever felt inadequate.”

Clemson had a solid team that year. Their favorite play, “three yards and a cloud of dust,” had given them a respectable season. But Georgia Tech—coached by the great Bobby Dodd—was undefeated, with a reputation for ferocity that preceded them.

In fact, by the time the Clemson team got to Atlanta for the game against Tech, the players were pretty well frozen to their seats, afraid to get off the bus. Coach Howard thus found himself forced to deliver a locker-room pep-talk to a group of tense and fearful players who were reluctant to even enter the locker room.



Frank Howard

Rising to the occasion, he paced the center aisle of the bus, calmly encouraging them.

In his uniquely vivid way, he made what he intended to be a rational observation. “Why, them Georgia Tech boys ain’t no different from you and me,” he reasoned. “They got two dicks and a ball just like everybody else.”

The players looked around at one another in horror. “Then we *were* scared to get off the bus!” Jay laughed.

Of course, the team collapsed in laughter, the tension broken. “We charged off that bus and into the locker room—we were really pumped up,” Jay said. “But we should have stayed where we were; we got our fannies whupped that day.”



Jim Palmer, out standing in his field, on a trip to Argentina in 1991.

toward the sports metaphor, said to me, “Kate, them editors ain’t no different from you and me. They got two dicks and a ball just like everybody else.”

Yes!

I charged right into that building and found my way to the editorial page. Aubrey Bowie, the assistant editor, was reigning in Chief Editor Jim McKinney’s temporary absence. He offered to buy my cartoons for five dollars apiece, and I happily accepted.

We all need a pep talk sometimes. I sure did in the spring of 1975. Our son was three and our daughter was about eight months old. Jim and I put the kids in the car and drove the thirty-five miles from our home in Clemson to Greenville, South Carolina, so I could present my cartoon portfolio to the editorial page editor at *The Greenville News*.

I was scared to death. Jim practically had to push me out of the car when we got there. I stood frozen on the sidewalk in terror, clutching the portfolio of political caricatures and cartoons I’d been doing for months.

“And don’t come back until somebody *looks* at that stuff!” Jim insisted. He knew it was too easy for me to take “no” for an answer. It had happened at smaller papers already.

Now I was about to offer my cartoons to one of the largest papers in South Carolina! What if the editors smirked at my ignorance and laughed at me behind my back? What if they could detect that I really had no idea what I was doing? What if . . . ?!

I began to hyperventilate.

Jim, whose advice tends naturally