

HATTIE AND WHISPER

By Kathleen Sutphin

Hattie Finds Her Voice

Hattie nestled her chestnut brown body among the colorful foliage she called home. She wanted to hide but it was difficult to disguise the bright orange spots that dotted her upper body. This wasn't a game. No, sad and alone Hattie wished she could fly away from her family of caterpillars who spent their days eating tasty leaves off the pipevines, talking about eating, and then crunching and munching and eating some more. Pipevines, that's all their tiny brains were wired for—pipevines. Not Hattie! She wasn't eating. She was listening.

Hattie had once heard a mysterious sound, not like the threat of bird calls or the rapid beat of wasp wings. It was a gentle, almost sad sound, like an ocean breeze on a summer night. So, she kept to herself, hiding and listening, wanting desperately to hear that lovely sound again.

But Hattie's family didn't understand. Anything she said that didn't involve eating leaves was "un-caterpillary," a waste of time. Her only encouragement was to stop dreaming, stop listening and start eating!

Today, was different. Something scary and spectacular happened. Hattie had seen the giants before. They usually arrived with the morning sun, moving quietly through the garden. The largest one fussed over the vines and flowers. Hattie's favorite was the quiet one with long dark hair. Hattie named her Whisper.

Hattie's sixteen legs were great for crawling, but she often wondered if she could walk on two legs like Whisper. Hattie tried it once, teetering back and forth, swaying wildly until she fell flat on her face. "Ouch! No thanks!" She preferred the safety of her tiny legs!

On this bright Florida morning, Whisper leaned really close to Hattie, almost nose to caterpillar. Although Whisper had spoken to her often, today was different. Among the giant's mumblings Hattie heard something she could repeat! It was just one sound, one word. "Cello."

Hattie was stunned! She didn't know how, but in that instant a magical connection opened the door between their two worlds, between caterpillar and giant. Hattie looked up into Whisper's large dark eyes and shouted in her best little caterpillar voice "CELLO!!!"

The giant stumbled backward over pipevines, trampling milkweeds. She quickly stood up, stared at the little caterpillar for several seconds, and then ran out of the garden!

"Oh, no! Stop!" Hattie pleaded for Whisper to come back, fearing that she had said a bad word that frightened the gentle giant away.

"Oh, what have I done!" Her tiny caterpillar tears evaporated quickly in the heat of the warm sun. Hungry, sad, and trying to understand what just happened, Hattie bit into a pipevine leaf. That satisfied the emptiness in her tummy, but her head and heart still ached. What was this Cello, and why did Whisper run?

Wishing desperately for answers, she closed her dark, tear-filled eyes. Perhaps a nap would help. As she began to hum herself to sleep, her antennae sensed a change in the air. No wait, it wasn't the wind. It was back! That haunting sound she longed to hear again. It was back!

Wide awake, Hattie hurried to the edge of her leaf, hoping to glimpse the source of this beautiful breeze-like sound echoing through the pipevines. To her complete surprise, there sat Whisper. Her eyes were level with Hattie's leaf, and she was staring into Hattie's eyes!

"Cello," Whisper murmured as she pulled a long stick back and forth across an oddly shaped box. At last, here it was—the source of that magical sound! "Cello," repeated Hattie.

Whisper smiled and nodded as she played, "Yes," she said, "Cello."

Hattie Discovers Cookies

It was her favorite place, stretched out atop Whisper's shoulder. Hattie listened as her friend read books or practiced her music lessons. These unlikely friends shared something special. Begun as a bond built on their love of music, it blossomed into a magical friendship filled with language and laughter.

Every day Whisper would run to the garden to chat with Hattie. Their morning conversations were brief. A quick, "Hello, dear friend!" and then Whisper hurried off to get ready for school. Their evenings together were much more pleasant. After dinner, Whisper raced to the garden. She extended her hand to Hattie for the ride to the bedroom. As Hattie bristled with excitement, her orange spines tickled Whisper's palm. Hattie was leaving the humdrum of the garden to enter the home of the giants.

Tonight, was different. Instead of curling up quietly on Whisper's shoulder, Hattie used Whisper's hair like a rope, climbing from her shoulder to the top of Whisper's head. From here, Hattie could see well beyond her bedroom perch.

As she scanned her surroundings, she realized she needed to eat. Her body was changing. Risking a scold from Whisper, she shouted, "I'm hungry! Do you have any pipevine stew or maybe juicy green salad?"

Whisper put down her math book. "Hmmm. . ." She knew that pipevines were good for Hattie but not for people. Maybe there was something in their pantry that Hattie could eat.

"Come with me!" Whisper shouted as she lifted Hattie from her head onto her shoulder. Off they went to the pantry.

Whisper's mama was busy dancing around the house with her new vacuum cleaner, so she didn't notice Whisper poking through the pantry.

Whisper gave Hattie a handful of crumbs to taste. “Wow, these are yummy!” said Hattie as she swallowed a tidbit of chocolate chip cookie. Wanting more, she hopped off Whisper’s shoulder and crawled into the cookie box.

Just then, Whisper’s mama yelled “Get out of the pantry, now! You’ve had your dinner!”

Whisper jumped back as mama slammed the pantry door. “It’s past your bedtime. Wash your face, brush your teeth, brush your hair, put on your jammies and kiss your daddy goodnight!”

Whisper nodded. What could she do? Hattie was still in the pantry eating cookies!

“Now!” her mama shouted.

Tearfully, Whisper ran to her bedroom.

Hattie didn’t mind the darkness. Whisper was gone. So, she would do what caterpillars did—eat! Surrounded by chocolate chip cookies, Hattie started munching and crunching and munching some more.

In the darkness and exhausted from all the chewing, she closed her eyes. “Oooohhh!” she moaned. “My tummy’s going to explode!”

The next morning Whisper jolted awake by a scream. “Eeeeeekkkk! There’s a big, fat caterpillar standing in my pantry!” Whisper threw herself out of bed, racing to the kitchen to stand next to her mama. They stared into the pantry.

There, wobbling on tiny legs stood Hattie—looking like a fat, prickly pickle. Hattie was about to yell, “Surprise!” when Whisper grabbed her and raced to the garden.

“Oh, Hattie, I’m so sorry you were trapped in the pantry all night!”

Hattie smiled. “It’s all right, Whisper. I taught myself how to stand on my back legs, but I think I ate too many cookies. I overdid delicious.”

The friends made their apologies, before Whisper headed inside to get ready for school.

Alone again, Hattie wondered if she should stick to eating pipevines. What if the chocolate chips affected her transformation to a butterfly? “What if my wings turn cookie-brown or have chocolate chip spots instead of yellow ones?” As she nodded off to sleep, she decided that it didn’t matter. Tonight, she would ask Whisper for another cookie.

Hattie Disappears

Whisper’s family had just returned from a short vacation. As soon as daddy unlocked the car doors, Whisper raced to greet her little caterpillar friend, Hattie. But Hattie was not daydreaming in her usual spot on the pipevine trellis. Whisper inspected the leaves, one by one, searching for her friend.

After turning over every leaf, Whisper began again. This time, tears perched on her eyelids, held back with the hope that Hattie was playing a game of hide and seek.

After an hour of searching, Whisper panicked. “Hattie, Hattie! I give up!

Where are you? Please answer!”

Only the leaves rustled in the late-day breeze. No longer holding back tears, she raced through the garden. “Oh no, oh no!” What if she was eaten by a bird or stung by a wasp!

Exhausted, and not certain where else to look, Whisper left the garden. She told Mama that Hattie was missing. In a gentle voice, Mama tried to calm Whisper, “Perhaps her family took a vacation too. I’m sure she’ll be waiting for you tomorrow.”

That didn’t help much. Mama insisted Whisper get ready for bed. She didn’t always say bedtime prayers, but tonight was different. She knelt beside her bed, pleading for Hattie’s safe return. Back in bed, she pulled her blanket under her chin and fell asleep.

Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap.

What? What was that sound? Was it a dream? Whisper rubbed her eyes and yawned. There

it was again. Tap, tap, tap. Whisper turned to the window - maybe a thunderstorm. Nope. The window was dry.

Tap, tap, tap. No, the sound wasn't outside. She turned to see a small bird perched on her desk. Tap, tap, tap. Maybe a hummingbird. Or woodpecker? Whatever it was, it glowed like a tiny night light. Cautiously Whisper slipped out of bed.

“Who—or what—are you?”

Creeping closer, Whisper realized it wasn't a bird. Could it be—could it really be—a fairy?

“Hello, my name is Dancer. Do you like my sparkly shoes? They're new. I just got them from the fairy cobbler. He does fantastic work, don't you think? Dancing is part of my job. I do it to get attention. Listen. Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap. Aren't they great? They have such a sharp sound. ‘Tap, tap, tap’.”

Sleepy and confused, Whisper tried to be polite. “Your shoes are pretty. And they do glow when you tap them! But why are you dancing on my desk?”

“Easy. I am here to give you a message from Hattie.”

“While you were away, it was time for her body to change. She couldn't wait for you; her little body wouldn't wait for you. Before caterpillars like Hattie grow into butterflies, they must rest. They do this in a snug little hideaway called a chrysalis. She told me you were her best friend and asked me to tell you goodbye.”

Tears filled Whisper's eyes as she listened to Dancer. She sobbed, “Will I ever see my little friend, again?”

Dancer didn't answer. She sat quietly staring at her shoes. At last, “Hattie asked me the same question. She tucks herself into her little sleeping bag for a long time. Then her body has a lot of work to do, changing from a long crawly thing into a delicate flying thing.”

Dancer explained that the bond between such unlikely friends as a caterpillar and a girl was unknown to fairies. They couldn't guess if Hattie would remember Whisper when she emerged as a butterfly. "Hattie will be lost to you forever. Or one day you might catch a glimpse of her as she glides past you, flitting from flower to flower, enjoying the sweet blossoms of Spring. You may feel great sadness that your friend is gone. Just remember that during your special time together, your differences didn't matter. You loved her like a sister, and she loved you like a caterpillar."

Whisper's Search

Whisper hammered the last nail in her project. It began last winter after she lost her dearest friend Hattie, a caterpillar who disappeared without even a goodbye. Whisper suspected Hattie had vanished to a leafy hideaway, tucking herself into a protective cover that would give her time and privacy to reappear as a butterfly. It was difficult to lose her crawly little friend even though Whisper knew that Hattie didn't have a choice.

For Hattie that change was metamorphosis. A big word for a little bug. Whisper's friend was now a butterfly. And Whisper was determined to find her.

It had taken almost three months to put together her plan. She remembered that her uncle had been a pilot who could fly his small plane into tight spaces where bigger planes couldn't go. That's what Whisper needed, something that could carry her on the breeze, gliding in and out of the garden in search of her friend.

Her finished project looked more like a boxwood derby car than an airplane, but with Daddy's help it was strong enough to carry her, small enough to move among the flowers, and quiet enough not to frighten Hattie.

Meanwhile in a dark corner of the garden under a half-eaten milkweed leaf, Hattie freed herself from her snug cocoon, shook off the dampness of her newborn wings, and lifted herself

onto the breeze. She wanted to travel but first things first. She needed to eat.

After filling her tummy with delicious honeysuckle nectar, Hattie was ready to fly. She knew without thinking that she would fly west as far as her wings could carry her. No bags to pack, no family to kiss goodbye, no plans to make. Just flap, flap, flap and off she went.

Hattie enjoyed the freedom of flight. As she swooped down on the colorful flowers, dancing in the morning sun, she tried to remember her life as a caterpillar. Nothing made sense, it was a crazy dream repeating itself, mysterious sounds, strange places, enormous dark eyes. Maybe a sip of nectar would help her memory.

After several minutes of searching for tasty flowers, Hattie spotted the purple blossoms of a bee balm plant. Landing gently on its petals, she sucked in the flower's sweetness. As she enjoyed this morning treat, her antennae started to twitch. Uh-oh! Something wasn't right. What was it? It wasn't the melody of her dreams. No, this sounded like danger!

Hattie folded her brilliant blue wings into the shadows of the bee balm. Motionless, she struggled to identify the sound. It wasn't a wasp, and it didn't sound like any bird she knew. Her tiny body trembled.

Suddenly, like the approach of a thunderstorm, leaves swirled, flowers flew in every direction and Hattie was thrown from her hiding place. As she landed upside-down on a nearby milkweed, she heard a tremendous thud. Startled but curious, she decided to put aside her fear. Shaking her wings to make sure she could still fly, Hattie turned to face the danger.

A huge contraption, neither bee nor bird, rolled through the flowers crashing into the garden trellis. Hattie watched as a dark-haired giant emerged from its belly. The giant's eyes searched back and forth across the flowers. Hattie gasped as the giant bent toward her and in a gentle voice spoke.

“Cello, my sweet friend.” Hattie's heart raced as the giant continued, “I am Whisper.”

And in that instant, Hattie recognized her friend and the music of her dreams. With one leap she landed on Whisper's nose. Eye to eye with her friend, Hattie bounced up and down with excitement as she shouted, “Cello, Whisper, Cello!”