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# KISSES *from* KATIE

*A Story of Relentless Love  
and Redemption*

Glamour  
Magazine's  
2012 Woman  
of the Year

KATIE DAVIS

*with* BETH CLARK

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UPDATED AND EXPANDED

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## FALLING IN LOVE—WITH A COUNTRY

Sometimes it hits me like a brick to the head: My life is kind of insane. I am twenty-two years old; I have fourteen children, eleven of whom are currently being homeschooled. We so often have extra people staying with us—dying grandmothers, destitute refugees, or severely malnourished children—that I am forever doing a head count before I begin making meals. Most days, though, bumping along these red dirt roads in my sixteen-passenger van full of singing (or screaming) children, neighbors, and occasionally our pet monkey, seems completely normal—so much so that I have a hard time writing about it. To me, there is nothing very spectacular about this everyday craziness; it is just the result of following Jesus into the impossible, doing the little I can and trusting Him to do the rest.

Moving to the other side of the world and having a large family was never my dream or even my idea. But as I look back, I can see that God spent my whole life preparing me for the life He had planned for me—the people He placed in just the right places at just the right times, and circumstances I could never fathom would eventually be for His glory. For years before I went to Uganda, I had fantasized about doing something incredible for God and others; what I

have learned is that I can do nothing incredible, but as I follow God into impossible situations, He can work miracles in and through me.

I first mentioned it—the idea of doing something outside the norm—to my parents in a serious way on my sixteenth birthday. To celebrate, my parents took me to eat my favorite food, sushi, at my favorite restaurant. It was a lighthearted occasion until I made a nervous comment that changed the mood completely: “I think I will spend a year doing mission work after I finish high school and before I go to college.”

The smiles on my parents’ faces gave way to blank stares and looks of confusion. The happy chatter at the dinner table ceased and my comment seemed stuck in the atmosphere. Silence.

I might as well have said I wanted to play quarterback in the NFL or fly to the moon. To them, taking a year to do mission work was about that far-fetched. It was completely unheard of in the Davis family and, I knew, probably unacceptable. My father had always been adamant about his desires for my life, desires rooted in his love for me and in his concern for my safety and well-being. As most parents do, both my mom and my dad wanted to do everything they could to guarantee me a successful, comfortable life, and they felt the best way to secure a “good” future for me was to provide me with a college education that would prepare me for a career.

A few minutes after I mentioned taking a year off to have some kind of adventure besides college, my parents recovered from their shock and responded in the best possible way; they didn’t say no. They simply said they were not sure about the idea, but they would think about it. I was convinced in my heart that my desire was right. I was ready to go; it was up to God to convince my parents.

Sporadically over the next eighteen months, I remembered this conversation and searched the Internet for the word *orphanage* so I could investigate volunteer opportunities. I never had Uganda specifically in mind. As my senior year in high school grew closer, I began applying to volunteer at several orphanages I had found online. A

home for babies in Uganda was the first to respond and say they were in need of volunteers. I was excited and my parents agreed to allow me to go over winter break during my senior year, hoping I would “get it out of my system.” Their only requirement was that I find an adult to travel with me.

My parents may have been more clever than I gave them credit for. Of course, finding an adult who could take three weeks away from a job in the United States—and who wanted to spend that vacation time, including Christmas, in Africa with me—proved impossible. So I begged my mother to accompany me. When she realized how much I wanted to go and saw that I wasn’t giving up on the idea, she said she would think about it. She soon realized this trip was not a whim but something about which I was deeply passionate, and because she is a woman who genuinely wants her children to be happy and fulfilled, she reluctantly agreed to the adventure. Before long, her reluctance turned into anxious enthusiasm and she became excited to be the person who would share this dream with me.

In December 2006, my mom and I were on our way to Uganda, where we would spend three weeks volunteering in a home for abandoned or orphaned babies. During those three weeks, I lost part of my heart to a place I’d never been before. I fell in love with Uganda as soon as I arrived. After I woke up the first morning of our stay, I looked around and saw glistening bright white smiles against ebony faces; I heard happy voices, lilting language, and gentle laughter. I saw strength and depth of character in people’s eyes. I found Uganda to be a beautiful land filled with beautiful people.

Jinja, the city nearest to the village where I live today, sits nestled against the shore of Lake Victoria and at the source of the Nile River. Views of the lake and the river took my breath away when I saw them for the first time, and the explosion of color I saw as bumpy, vibrant, red dirt roads traversing the lush green landscape captivated me.

The people who called this fascinating country home astounded me with their gracious kindness and gentle ways. I watched, wide-

eyed, as cattle, goats, and chickens roamed freely through the villages while curious children wandered among the shacks and makeshift businesses (such as little stores that sell canned drinks or washbasins or airtime for cellular telephones). In the town, I saw the kind of everyday life that happens in every society, in its own way, take place as people shopped along Jinja's main streets, did their banking, or met friends and chatted on the sidewalk. When I went to the villages, I witnessed men and women shucking corn, cooking, talking among themselves, or simply sitting beside the road quietly taking in the happenings of village life.

Whether I was in the town or out in a village, children were everywhere. When they saw a person with a different color of skin, they giggled and shouted. Some ran toward me with glee, others shrieked and fled at the sight of a foreigner. Those who weren't afraid of me grabbed my hands eagerly, as though we had been friends forever. It was easy for me to fall in love with them and with their country, its enormous beauty juxtaposing extreme poverty.

Most of our time was spent working at the babies' home feeding, changing, teaching, and playing with the many children there. The children as well as the women who worked in the orphanage inched their way into my heart, leaving their little handprints all over it. I would never be the same.

I left Uganda in tears at the end of our trip, the country and the people now a part of me. I cried all the way back to Tennessee and knew that someday I would return. I was forever ruined for comfort, convenience, and luxury, preferring instead challenge, sacrifice, and risking everything to do something I believed in. I realized it as I bathed babies and changed diapers in the babies' home, as I met older children and threw stones into the river with them, and as I did everything I could do to meet the basic human needs so evident around me. My heart had found its joy as I served the beautiful people the world calls "poor" but who seemed so rich in love to me. I have no doubt that God was preparing a longing in my heart for Uganda many

years before I could even find this country on a map; there is no other explanation for the instant love I felt for this place and these people. Though the red soil eventually wore off the soles of my feet, Uganda never left my heart and was never far from my mind.

Upon my return to the United States to finish my last semester of high school I must admit I had become a bit obsessed with Uganda. I glanced at the clock during class to figure out what time it was there and daydreamed about what my friends in Uganda were doing. I talked about Uganda so much that I'm sure all my friends in the States wanted to tell me kindly to shut up. I knew I *had* to get back.

During my trip to Uganda, I met a pastor who had founded and ran an orphanage on the outskirts of Jinja. He was planning to open a kindergarten there and had asked me to be the teacher. The idea seemed a bit preposterous, as I had little experience teaching anything other than Sunday school, but he insisted I was the one for the job. Once I returned home, I realized I was prepared to do whatever I could to get back to my beloved Uganda, even if it meant suddenly becoming a kindergarten teacher.

By the end of my senior year, after many conversations and ample opportunities to see that I was serious about returning to Uganda, my parents had finally agreed to my postponing college for one year. I promised to spend only one year in Uganda and, when that year was finished, to return to the States and enroll in college. In the meantime, though, I had agreed to teach kindergarten in a small slum village outside of Jinja, Uganda. Though many of my friends and much of my family did not understand my desire to be so far away for so long, no one could dampen my enthusiasm. Every once in a while I felt nervous, but more often than not I could hardly contain my excitement for this yearlong adventure.

My dad, still unhappy that I was not going to college, never lost his fatherly concern for me. As a father who had worked to provide everything his only daughter had ever needed or wanted, he had many misgivings about the adventure I was determined to undertake. In

WHAT WOULD CAUSE an eighteen-year-old senior class president and homecoming queen from Nashville, Tennessee, to disobey and disappoint her parents by forgoing college, break her little brother's heart, lose all but a handful of her friends (because they think she has gone off the deep end), and break up with the love of her life, all so she could move to Uganda, where she knew only one person and didn't even speak the language?

*A passion to follow Jesus.*

Katie Davis left over Christmas break of her senior year for a short mission trip to Uganda and her life was turned completely inside out. She found herself so moved by the people of Uganda and the needs she saw that she knew her calling was to return and care for them. Katie, a charismatic and articulate young woman, is in the process of *adopting* thirteen children in Uganda and has established a ministry, Amazima, that feeds and sends hundreds more to school while teaching them the Word of Jesus Christ.

*Kisses from Katie* invites readers on a journey of radical love down the red dirt roads of Uganda. You'll laugh and cry with Katie as she follows Jesus into the impossible and finds joy and beauty beneath the dust. Katie and her children delight in saying yes to the people God places in front of them and challenge readers to do the same, changing the world one person at a time.



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**KATIE DAVIS** is a young woman with a passion to serve Jesus. Now twenty-two, Katie lives in Uganda, where she is in the process of adopting thirteen little girls and is the founder and director of Amazima, a ministry that reaches hundreds of other children in Uganda. Katie is originally from Nashville, Tennessee, where her parents and brother live. This is her first book. You can read her blog at [www.kissesfromkatie.blogspot.com](http://www.kissesfromkatie.blogspot.com).



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