



Life Actually

By Kari Kampakis

Happy Birthday, Katie!

Do you have a friend who makes you feel like a rock star? Someone who'd join your fan club whether it had three members or three thousand?

That's the kind of friend **Katie Woychak Houser** is to me. And in honor of her fortieth birthday, I'm dedicating this piece to her.

I met Katie shortly after college graduation—and at the insistence of our two younger sisters. From the Kappa house in Tuscaloosa, Krissie called me one night to say, "Allison and I have been talking, and we decided you and Katie are exactly alike. She just broke up with her boyfriend and needs to get out. Why don't you call her?"

I told Krissie I would but never got around to it. A week later, she called to pester me. "Okay, okay, I'll do it," I said, annoyed. So what if Katie and I both lived in Birmingham, worked in PR, and started Christmas shopping in August. Did the fact that we shared a Type-A gene that drove our sisters nuts mean *we'd* hit it off? Not necessarily. Still, I kept my word to Krissie, if only to get her off my back.

I reached out to Katie, and we agreed to dinner at Bottega Café. It felt like a blind date, only instead of romance, a friendship blossomed.

That was sixteen years ago, and boy have things changed. Our old Thursday night ritual of drinking wine, cooking Success Rice, and watching *Friends* and *ER* before heading to Otey's for girls' night out has been replaced by carpools, Happy Meals, and bedtime stories. We've replaced paychecks and power suits with husbands and kids. And though we'd never wish our current lives away, it sure is fun to remember the younger, carefree versions of ourselves.

Today, Katie is a fellow Mountain Brook mom. She has three girls—Anna Lauren, Emmie, and Addison—and lives five minutes from me. Despite this proximity, our paths rarely cross. But she's there when I need her. If there's any trait that defines Katie, it is loyalty.

This is the girl who starts planning my baby shower once I pass the first trimester.

She talks up my birthday weeks in advance. When I'm sick with the stomach bug, she drops off Gatorade and chicken noodle soup. The day she receives my Christmas card, she sends a raving e-mail. She remembers my kids' birthdays and checks in when my parents have a health scare or are awaiting the result of medical tests.

Whatever I'm pursuing, Katie cheers me on. When I started dabbling in photography, she hired me to take Anna Lauren's picture. She told her other friends, and within days they called to schedule sittings, too. When I finished my first novel, Katie begged to read it. Handing over that first manuscript was painful. I hadn't toughened up to criticism yet, and I knew that too much negativity might provoke me to throw in the towel.

Luckily, I trusted the right person. Katie praised it high and low, and though I now see it for what it was—a first draft—I'm eternally grateful for her reaction. I can vividly recall standing in her kitchen, my stomach in knots because she'd invited me over to discuss my book. As she took a deep breath and paused, I braced for a bad blow. But the first words out of her mouth were, "I loved it. I couldn't put it down."

In that moment, I was a rock star.

If you, too, have the privilege of friendship with Katie Woychak Houser, you know what I mean when I say she'd stand in your stadium whether it was pitifully empty or crammed to capacity. She doesn't seek the stage, or limelight, or even fifteen minutes of fame. No, in a world of attention mongers, she's refreshingly content to hang back, to stand in the crowd while rooting others on.

Katie, you deserve a shout-out. I wish I had a microphone for the job, but these words will have to do. I hope you realize the ripple effect of your subtle, thoughtful ways. Most of all, I hope your fourth decade of life is your best one yet.

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