



the LAST
STORYTELLER

A NOVEL BY

DIANE NOBLE



WATERBROOK
P R E S S

THE LAST STORYTELLER
PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS
2375 Telstar Drive, Suite 160
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80920
A division of Random House, Inc.

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ISBN 1-57856-399-2

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Noble, Diane, 1945-

The last storyteller : a novel / Diane Noble.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 1-57856-399-2

1. Grandparent and adult child—Fiction. 2. Women storytellers—Fiction. 3. Welsh Americans—Fiction. 4. Terminally ill—Fiction. 5. Pregnant women—Fiction. 6. Single women—Fiction. 7. Grandmothers—Fiction. 8. Storytelling—Fiction. 9. Wales—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3563.A3179765L37 2004

813'.54—dc22

2004010014

Printed in the United States of America

2004—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Taite Abbott hoped she had the courage to utter the words that had kept her in a cold sweat at night, heart thudding, for over a week. She stood barefoot in the wet sand at the ocean's edge, her toes tickled by the lacy foam of retreating waves. She glanced at Sam, who was sitting a few feet away and staring out to sea, and her heart ached. Their lives were about to be changed forever.

The air was full of winged song. Gulls banked and soared, their shadows crossing the sun. Long-legged shorebirds dipped and waddled and chattered across the wet sand. In the distance, harbor seals yipped in staccato counterpoint to the rhythm of the breaking waves.

The place awakened something tender and beautiful inside her as she stood on the damp sand, toes curled into its gritty warmth. When she felt especially unacceptable, undesirable, and less than all she needed to be, the ocean drew her. It always had. Maybe because it was here that her heart found strength to float above her failures, take wing with the seabirds, and soar heavenward toward castle-shaped piles of clouds.

With a sigh, she sat down again on the warm sand, then lay back on her side, elbow bent, her cheek resting in her palm. She faced Sam, whose brow was furrowed in thought. On the horizon beyond him, a

gaggle of shrimp boats chugged slowly through the gray green swells. He was likely figuring out something about work-hours versus profits, how much more money they could make if they stayed out an hour longer.

She smiled to herself. Not that Sam knew any more than she did about shrimping. But too often his analytical mind kept him from enjoying the beauty of a day like today. He'd sometimes said that trait in her was one of the things he loved most. She reminded him to stop and breathe, to celebrate such moments before they disappeared. It always surprised her that he found something of such joy in her. She seldom saw such things in herself.

Sam's jaw was backlit by the late afternoon sun. His familiar silhouette, in repose, showed both strength and good humor. When he turned, she would see love in his expression, just as always. Until she confessed her secret.

Watching him, she tried to predict what his reaction would be once she uttered the awful words *I'm pregnant*. Would it be the same as hers: disbelief followed by dismay, then anger?

Somehow she thought not. Sam came from a big, noisy, loving family. Children were treasured, each baby a gift from God to be celebrated through every milestone of his life. No small feat considering Sam's parents had borne four sons and raised them all to be good men.

Sam would do the right thing, but that right thing wasn't what Taite wanted.

Not that she didn't ache with longing for them to be together for the rest of their days. She lived and breathed dreams of their wedding. She didn't have a ring on her finger, but they had often talked about how they would someday marry. Well, maybe she had talked about it more than he had, but he had never stopped her from daydreaming. Sometimes he told her to slow down, to remember that they couldn't

make plans until he had completed his medical internship and residency. And that was years away. But mostly he listened with a silly, crazy-in-love smile on his face.

The only thing her daydream hadn't included was children. She had never mentioned this part of her daydream to Sam: no children. Not now. Not ever.

Family meant pain. And she was more or less certain her genetic makeup was predisposed to reject those she loved and to have them reject her. Much as she loved Sam, a fear gnawed deep inside that he, too, might abandon her someday. She had never told him how she felt. He wouldn't understand. Rejection by someone he loved was as alien to him as finding polliwogs in a bottle of designer water.

She was having difficulty drawing the line between honesty and self-preservation. It was one thing to keep something hypothetical from him, such as her desire to have no children. It was quite another to keep the actual pregnancy to herself, especially after the test strip turned bright blue. Twice.

Sam turned to her, raised a quizzical brow, then stood and moved closer.

"Come back to me," he said, surprising her, as he sat down. He took her bare foot between both his hands and brushed off the sand. His touch was gentle.

"Come back?"

He smiled. "From that place in your mind where I'm not invited." He was too close to the truth. In her nervousness, she had created a safe, emotional distance between them. When she didn't comment, he traced the newest tattoo just above her ankle. "Whatever made you decide on Snoopy?"

She let out a pent-up breath, glad for the distraction. "It was Snoopy typing on top of his doghouse as if nothing could stop him."

Sam grinned and, placing her foot back on the sand, flopped down on his back beside her and stared up into the sky. “Why didn’t you just get a typewriter? A real one, I mean.” Though she could see only his profile, he looked amused. “I would have gotten it for you. Or a computer.”

“As long as I just talk about writing, I can’t fail.” She laughed, but it sounded thin. “Once I try on my dream and it doesn’t fit, the dream melts away. Dies. It’s happened too many times in my life.” Maybe it was the same thing that caused the dark stirring in her heart about motherhood. She studied him and silently practiced the words: *Sam, I’ve got something to tell you... It’s about the death of hopes and dreams (yours) and about fears so dark they bring nightmares and choking tears (mine)*. Yes, those words would work. He would see the futility of their plight. She would make him understand.

Sam rolled over and looked at her, his elbow bent, cheek resting on his palm. “You’ve got talent, Taite. You should use it.”

“Someday,” she said quietly, biting back the words she’d almost uttered. She let a few seconds float by with the sounds of gulls and harbor seals. She didn’t look at him but sat up, cross-legged, elbows on her knees, her gaze on the horizon where the heavens met the waters, where she supposed eternity might begin. Absently, she touched the tiny jeweled stud above her lip. It was a nervous habit she acquired soon after the piercing, which she’d had done at the same time she’d had seven rings and studs set into her right ear. She closed her eyes in concentration, ready at last to tell him.

Sam didn’t seem to notice. “I’ve been waiting to tell you my news,” he said quietly.

His news? Taite turned to look at him, his serious tone catching her attention and making her heart skip a beat. Was he about to tell her it was over, that he didn’t love her anymore? She was afraid to breathe.

“You know that fellowship I’ve been hoping for?”

She swallowed hard, relief creeping in beside her dread. “The one in Boston? The INR, didn’t you call it?”

“That’s the one. The Institute of Neurological Research.” He said the words reverently, grinning as if he’d just won the biggest lottery in California history. “There’s an unexpected opening. They’ve offered me the spot. I received the call yesterday.”

“How soon?”

“I leave in a week.”

“Oh, Sam,” she breathed, sudden tears stinging. For his happiness—how he had longed for this opportunity!—and for the muddle she was in, especially now that he would be gone.

He stood and took her hand, helping her to her feet. A breeze had kicked up off the ocean, ruffling his sandy hair and the hem of her long sundress. He raked back the hair blowing across his face and pulled her closer. “It’s my dream, babe. Our dream. It’s for our future.”

“Can I go with you?” If he said yes, she might be able to set aside her fears. For now.

He stepped back. “We couldn’t be together. Nights on call. Day after day of nonstop study. Plus I don’t have enough money to take care of us both. With the scholarship and my parents’ help...” His voice trailed off, but he’d said it before, and she knew his thoughts: His parents had sacrificed everything to see him through med school. He couldn’t ask them for anything more.

He pulled her closer. “You know how much I love you. I’ll be home for holiday breaks.” He touched her cheek, giving her a gentle smile. “This is a twelve-month program. And think of it, Taite. The time will pass quickly...especially when you consider that we’ve got a whole lifetime stretching out ahead of us.” His affection was clear.

“I’m all wrong for you,” she blurted, suddenly wanting to hurt him.

For a moment he didn't speak; then he said, "You always go there—to that place where I can't reach you." His shoulders drooped. "I love you, Taite. I have since the first day I laid eyes on you. But you can't seem to accept it."

She wished she could be happy for him, but she felt empty inside. "Honestly, Sam, can you see me as a doctor's wife?" She laughed lightly, as if it didn't matter. She looked down at her foot, turning her ankle toward him. "A tattoo, for goodness' sakes...another on my shoulder." She glanced at her bare shoulder beneath the strap of her camisole. "I can just see the expressions on the other wives' faces."

"There're always high-neck sweaters." His attempt at humor dropped like a stone between them.

Her voice rose an octave. "I'm me, Sam. Don't you see?" Dread of what she must do made her heart pound even harder. When she touched the jeweled stud, her finger trembled. "Don't expect me to change."

"You're spoiling this for me," Sam said. "This fellowship will make all the difference in the position I may be offered later—the research I want to do. Not to mention the contacts I'll make. Who knows where this will lead?" He paused. "I thought you would want to celebrate our good fortune."

She glared at him. "*Your* good fortune." She had to make this good to drive him away. Now they stood apart, but she didn't know who had moved first. He didn't answer, and she could feel his sadness. It was palpable. "Oh, why don't we just face the truth." Her voice was little more than a whisper. She tried to console herself with the thought that if she ended it first, she wouldn't have to worry about him leaving her.

"What truth?" His tone said that he suspected something and that he was angry.

Tears were streaming now. Unplanned, and not the image she

wanted, but she couldn't help it. "That it's...that *we're* all wrong. We have been for a very long time."

Several moments passed before Sam spoke, and when he did, his voice was low and hoarse. "Is this what you want, Taite? To end it?"

She pressed her lips together to keep from screaming, "No!" But if she told him about the baby, he would drop his dreams of the fellowship, of med school, and insist they marry. He would hate her for it. Then would come the day when he'd leave her. "Yes," she whispered, looking out to sea, to that hazy line at the horizon. "Yes." She longed for him to pull her into his arms, to declare his love, to tell her he would do anything to keep her by his side. But when she turned back, he only stared into her eyes with anger and dismay.

"I'm tired of trying to convince you otherwise, babe," Sam said. "Maybe you're right this time." The words left his lips before his heart realized what he'd said. Taking a deep breath, he turned away from her to pick up the picnic plates and cans of drinks. He tossed them into the basket with a dull clatter.

Sam loved Taite. She was everything he was not, everything he wanted to be but had never discovered how to pull from the creative side of his imagination. Taite had. She was a free spirit where he was an uptight planner; she was poetic where he was analytical. He was all about goals. She was all about singing the music of her soul.

He looked down at her upturned face. Her expression held an unfathomable sadness, and he longed to hug her close, assure her of his love. He longed to tell her that the image of her floating into an elegant soiree, dressed in hiking boots and a handkerchief skirt topped with a lacy camisole top, was enough to lighten his heart for a week. She had no idea how others saw her, how they warmed to her quirky, sometimes outrageous ways. She was a poet, a wordsmith who understood the

music of language, with an innate intelligence and creativity that no college degree could provide.

They'd met seven years before at Stanford when he was a senior and she was a sophomore. His brothers had insisted his right brain needed stimulating, so on a lark he had enrolled in a creative writing class taught by a short-story author, a young woman a friend had told him was an intelligent beauty. He'd expected the elective to be amusing at best and at worst a way to add three extra credits before graduating. Instead, his well-ordered world was turned on its ear, and not by the beautiful, talented professor.

It happened the first day of class. While sitting in the back row, teetering his chair against the wall, he saw the waiflike coed enter the room. Her thicket of dreadlocks caught his attention first, then her heart-shaped face. She hesitated at the doorway, her luminous dark eyes seeming to take in the lay of the land, assessing its safety before she took another step. Then she moved through the forest of chatting students and up the aisle toward him, her grace reminding him of a doe crossing a clearing.

As she approached, he was captivated by every detail that made up this odd though beautiful girl, from the freckles scattered across her nose to the boots beneath her ankle-length gypsy skirt. She flashed him a smile, and he was surprised at his disappointment when she chose to sit just ahead of him instead of in the empty seat at his side, even after he pointedly moved his books.

After she was settled, he bent near her ear, taking in the faint fragrance of something that reminded him of wildflowers in the sun, and whispered, "My name's Sam Wellington. What's yours?"

She turned, the corners of her mouth curving upward. Her gaze fell on him like sunlight, and he couldn't stop smiling. "Taite," she said, humor sparkling in her dark eyes. "Taite Abbott."

He was captivated from the beginning, but two weeks later when the professor read Taite's short story to the class, an allegory about love and loss amid a village of gnomes in a primeval forest, Sam's heart was stolen straight out of his chest.

The gulls cried as the big round wafer of a crimson sun sank lower into the horizon and brought Sam back to the present. He watched her standing a short distance away, the sea breeze ruffling the wisps that had come loose from her dreads, the sunset turning her face golden.

Unexpected tears filled his eyes. He wanted to draw her into his arms and whisper, "Oh, Taite, if you only knew how much I love you! You tempt me...oh, sweetheart, how you tempt me to throw away everything I've worked so hard for! But we have this goal, and I intend to see it through."

He remained silent, unable to speak the words in his heart, as they rode back to her rental cottage. No matter how he tried to lighten her mood, she wouldn't respond. She simply stared out her side window without speaking. She wasn't the type to use silence as a weapon; his going away was troubling her more than he'd expected.

He reached for her hand, but she pulled away. He couldn't imagine she meant what she'd said about breaking up. Their arguments never lasted longer than a day or two. He had no doubt that they would patch things up before he left for Boston.

When he called the next morning, she wasn't home. Or didn't answer. He left a message, but she didn't return his call. By the time he boarded the plane, he'd left at least a half-dozen more. Still nothing from Taite. A strange uncertainty troubled him as the attendants readied the cabin for takeoff. He pulled out his phone to try calling Taite just once more.

He dialed, then stared at the number he'd pressed, hesitating

before hitting the Send button. What if she said she needed him? Would he be willing to get off the plane, give up everything, and go to her? His new fellowship would begin at dawn the next day. He couldn't show up late.

But Taite was all that mattered. If she needed him, he would stay. He pressed the button. It rang three times on Taite's end, but as her answering machine clicked on, the announcement came that all electronic devices must be turned off immediately. With a sigh he flipped the phone closed and placed it in his jacket pocket.

The flight attendant finished her instructions, and the plane rolled back from the gate. Ten minutes later it roared down the runway and angled into a steep climb. The glint of sunlight on the ocean blinded him briefly before the airliner banked into a turn.

He leaned back and closed his eyes. All he could see was Taite: her lips turned up at the corners, the pale freckles across her nose, the pleasing curve of her cheek, the grace of her movement. He could almost smell her wildflower scent. And the music of her voice... He sighed, smiling as he remembered the sound of it.

The plane hit an air pocket, jolting him from his reverie. He turned to stare through the window. They were now well above the clouds, and the sky, so blue it looked purple, made his eyes ache.

As soon as he settled in, he would call. Surely she would answer this time. Surely she missed him as much as he missed her.

Praise for
The Last Storyteller

“*The Last Storyteller* spans three generations, two continents, and one family’s desperate attempt to mend the tears in the fabric of their hearts. All three women—grandmother Victoria, mother Isabel, and daughter Taite—ring true to me as genuine, complex, yet sympathetic characters. A rich thread of Welsh history is woven throughout this poignant modern tale, even as it explores the very contemporary issue of medical ethics. The real storyteller here is Diane Noble, whose novels never fail to touch the heart with tenderness and truth.”

—LIZ CURTIS HIGGS, best-selling author
of *Thorn in My Heart*

“I waited years for Diane to write this book, and it was worth the wait! Within these pages you’ll find heartfelt longing, holy desire, trials, and triumphs. Diane has seamlessly drawn together an ancient and contemporary story line, making it a delicious choice for any taste in fiction.”

—LISA TAWN BERGREN, best-selling author
of *The Captain’s Bride*

“Like all of Diane Noble’s wonderful novels, *The Last Storyteller* overflows with warm sensitivity and pure entertainment. The love story of Taite and Sam will long be remembered and cherished. I enjoyed it very much!”

—LINDA LEE CHAIKIN, author of *Yesterday’s Promise*
and *Today’s Embrace*

“True-to-life characters in heartbreaking situations with hope as their only buoy—these are the elements of Diane Noble’s *The Last Storyteller*. A story of redemption and forgiveness as only Diane Noble can tell it. I look forward to every novel crafted by this master storyteller.”

—TRACI DEPREE, author of *A Can of Peas*
and *Dandelions in a Jelly Jar*



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