

Petty : 1970
Wright

What It's Like

It was that time of day, between chirping birds and cricketing crickets, when the spring sun slowly goes away to let the air cool itself a little. Betsy jumped down from the tyre swing which hung from the rough oak tree by a thick rope, and toddled across the grass. She heard the tapping of claws on wood behind her, and Frisky came from the porch to lick her hand and be petted.

"Hello, Frisky dog," she said, "Were you sleeping?"

The collie panted and slapped Betsy's back with her long, excited tail. Betsy stroked her for a moment before she remembered. "I'm going to find my daddy," she told the dog earnestly and trotted across the yard, her hands extending to grasp the wire fence.

Not troubling to find the gate, she climbed the fence as if it were a ladder--up from soft grass, over, and down upon crusty soil. Like a freed baby animal, she scampered across the open space of ground toward the pig lot.

Betsy soon reached the splintery stockade separating her from the hogs and from the cows near the barn some distance beyond. She stood for a moment, catching her breath, and called, "Ya milkin' the cows, Daddy?"

"Yup, what ya doin, Bets?"

"I was playing on the swing, and then I came to find you."

"I'll be through pretty soon."

The little girl stood idly kicking the dirt and clutching a rough, oblong board which was part of the lot! The pigs squealed and grunted, an occasional one or two ambling over to sniff under the boards at her feet. She thought about pigs, wondering what they looked like. She thought they wouldn't be furry. Would they be hairy at all? Mommy said that hogs and sows were dirty, and they certainly did smell like it, but what did they look like?

Somehow, other people, everyone but Betsy, could see things without touching them. Everyone knew, for example, without ever having to touch her, that Frisky was big and furry with four feet, a long wagging tail, and soft floppy ears. Betsy was different, though. She remembered that, when she had

been three years old, she had thought herself the same as everybody else; but now she was four and knew better.

Her mind kept thinking about Daddy and Mommy and David and Michael and all the people in the whole world except herself knowing everything about pigs. Suddenly, she set her jaw and climbed quickly over the wooden fence into the lot.

Betsy had never before been inside the lot alone and worried, briefly, that Daddy would mind. She forgot it, though, when a pig grunted and sniffed its way slowly toward her, and she became curious again.

"Betsy! Get back over that fence!" came Daddy's voice, loud and commanding.

She started; and something turned over in her stomach, causing her to feel dizzy and weak-kneed. She obeyed quickly and stood leaning on the outside of the fence so that the pig, having almost reached her, contented itself with sniffing under the boards.

"Don't you ever do that again!" shouted Daddy, "You could get hurt."

Betsy wondered how pigs could hurt little girls. Feeling that she must be the only child around who had never seen a pig, she frowned and kicked a rock. Why did she have to be different, anyway?

Blind, they called it. Her brother Michael had said, "Betsy, you're blind."

"No, I'm not," she had answered, but then her other, oldest brother, David, who was also her good friend, had said it too:

"Yes, you are, Betsy. You're blind, and you can't see."

"Yes, I can! I can too see! If I'm blind, then you and Michael are blind too."

"No, we're not," said Michael, "just you, Betsy."

And Betsy had asked Mommy, who never told any lies; and Mommy had said that Michael and David were telling the truth. Betsy was not quite sure what blind meant, but somehow it was something she was ^{she was} which made her different from everyone else she knew, and she accepted it because Mommy said it was true.

"Hi there, goony bird." Daddy was stepping over the fence and out of the lot, swinging two milk buckets from his big,

*improves?
(not much
in it, but
the sentence
seemed
rough
there.)*

hairy hands.

"I'm not a goony bird; I'm Betsy."

"You're Betsy! Who's Betsy?"

"Betsy's me, you silly Daddy. You're teasing again."

He laughed and started toward the house saying, "Let's go have some supper." She held onto the handle of one of the buckets, running to keep up with her daddy's long strides.

"Karen?" he called, setting the milk buckets down as they entered the house.

"In the kitchen, Luke. Wash your hands; supper's about ready." She stood at the stove, ladeling food from pans into serving dishes; and he kissed her on his way to the sink. Michael and David were already sitting at the table, giggling and making noises with their spoons.

Are you moving to another point-of-view instead of single? The change is subtle.

"Mommy, I watched Daddy milk the cows," said Betsy.

"Oh, did you?" She walked to the table and put some dishes down. "Luke, would you help Betsy wash her hands, please?"

Betsy sat and waited for Mommy to fill her plate. She was four years old and big enough to use a plate now instead of a bowl. Michael was five, and Daddy helped him to his food, but David was six and could help himself. Betsy wondered how it was to be big like David.

"Luke, Grandma died this morning."

"Oh, Karen! Was it . . ."

The boys were shoving each other under the table, and Daddy shouted at them to stop. Betsy shivered, ~~relieved that~~ relieved that he had no reason to shout at her.

Mommy was saying, "It wasn't painful; she just fell asleep and didn't wake up. Dad was a little shook up when he told me over the phone. I guess no matter how long you expect these things, it's always a shock when they happen."

"Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, it's probably just as well she's dead; she's been in so much pain for the last few months."

"Yes, and the whole thing has been so hard on Dad. It upset him so much every time she forgot where she was or didn't know him. And he hated to see her cry and have no way to help her."

"Are you talking about Great-Grandma OBrian?" David asked.

"Yes, David." She rose and began dishing up ice cream. Betsy really liked ice cream. She wondered what it was like to be dead.

John OBrian, Karen Brown's father, lay in bed next to his wife, trying to sleep as she was ~~doing~~, but thinking-- endlessly thinking--about his mother and all the events which had led to her death. She had fallen ~~once~~ while carrying an old chair down to the basement. John's father was always saying,

"I don't understand it. There was no need for Maggy to be carrying that chair. I could have moved it for her as soon as I got home. All she needed to do was ask."

Will OBrian's friends would always agree ardently that Maggy should never have attempted to move that chair. Nevertheless, she had attempted it; and, being 84 years old, her bones simply refused to mend.

John's mother had gone into the hospital protesting that she had never been sick a day in her life and didn't intend to be now. Her leg would heal, and she would be up and around in no time. John had been worried, and with good reason, he reminded himself; for Mother had never quite been herself again.

suggests she's been or gone One day about a month after the accident, John had walked into his mother's hospital room and found her in a frenzy. Karen ^{was} ~~had been~~ there, looking flustered; and Maggy had said,

"John, I'm so glad you've come. I'm so cold, and someone has to get me in out of this rain. Won't you please help me!"

The sterile, white walls had spun round momentarily. "Yes, Mother, of course I'll take you in out of the rain. There's no sense in your having to get wet like this." He had gone home that night and cried unconsolably, wondering ~~that~~ if farm chores and supper and all the everyday things of life were still there to be dealt with.

His mother's condition had grown progressively worse. Her broken leg hurt her badly so that often she cried. ~~People began to~~ *(correction: People had begun to)* appear on the white hospital walls and talk to her about nonsensical things and threaten her with their feverish laughter. Sometimes Maggy had forgotten that John could not see the people too and had

carried on her side of the conversation with them as if he understood. When she remembered that no one but herself saw the people on the walls, she had implored them tearfully to go away; but almost always they stayed.

Sometimes when John went to visit her, she would look at him in confused anger and say, "I don't know you, and I don't know where I am. Why do you keep saying you are my son? I don't even have a son. My name is Maggy Clay--Margaret Clay OBrian--and I don't know any of these people here!"

Other times, John remembered, she had tried sadly to reason her way out of the foggy confusion: "I know you say I fell down and broke my leg, that this is a hospital. I know that you are my son, but I just can't remember."

Occasionally, some of the fog cleared away; and Maggy had remembered some things. Once, as John sat beside her bed, she had awakened in an anxious state and cried, "That poor baby! What about Karen's baby? She ^{was} hurt so bad from the car wreck I'm afraid she's going to die!"

"Now, Mother; that wreck was three years ago. Betsy is a fine, healthy little girl now." As proof of this, the child had been brought to the hospital to sit on her great-grandmother's bed for five minutes and chatter of Frisky and baby chickens and her older brothers.

Gradually, Maggy had slept more and more of the time. Then yesterday, quite mercifully, thought John, Mother had died in her sleep.

He sighed and rose to take another sleeping pill. He had so much work to do tomorrow, and the evening would bring the entire community to his father's house for the viewing of the body. He must get some rest somehow. Returning to his bed, John OBrian waited expectantly to fall into a heavy, drugged sleep.

Betsy was sitting in the bathtub, using the soap for a boat, and humming to herself when Mommy came in: "'Elizabeth! Haven't you washed yourself yet?" She took the soap and washcloth from Betsy's hand and began to wash her face.

Betsy stiffened: "No, Mommy! I can do it myself. Let me do it!"

"Mommy's in a hurry, Honey; we have to get ready to go see Great-Grandpa."

Reluctantly, Betsy gave in because she had to ask a question: "Why doesn't soap float like a boat, Mommy?"

"Because it doesn't have enough air in it."

"Oh." Mommy had pulled her foot out of the water to soap it. That tickled, and Betsy giggled.

"Now, I want you to be a good girl tonight and not bother Great-Grandpa too much," said Mommy.

"Okay. Is Great-Grandma dead?"

"Yes."

"Will she be there too?"

"Yes."

"Will she talk to us?"

"No, dead people don't talk."

"Will she hear us there?"

"No, dear, dead people don't hear."

"What do they do?"

"It will be like she's asleep. Her spirit is in heaven now so she doesn't need her body any more. That's why they have a funeral and ^{to} bury it in the ground."

"Oh. What's a fume . . ."

"Stand up, now, we have to hurry."

Betsy's Great-Grandparents O'Brien lived in a house in town instead of on a farm like the Browns. She liked this house because it had a big porch-swing on the front porch; and she and the boys could swing as high as they wanted, almost flying, until Great-Grandma came out and told them to stop.

"Betsy liked Great-Grandma. Before she got sick, it was fun to visit her in her house. She would sit on Great-Grandma's thin lap while Great-Grandpa sat across the room. Pretty soon, the two of them would forget Betsy and begin to remember when they were young. He said that Great-Grandma had been the best horsewoman in the whole town. "Why, Maggy Clay could ride sidesaddle for miles at a dead run."

She would chuckle mildly and say, "Now, Will, you know you always beat me when we used to race."

He would laugh too then, and Betsy would feel cheerful and forget to be silent.

One day, Great-Grandma had broken her leg; and Betsy never went to visit her at home any more. When she did go, only Great-Grandpa would be there all alone; and he never told stories any more.

One afternoon, Mommy had awakened her from her nap:

"Wake up, baby; we're going to put a pretty dress on you and go to see Great-Grandma in the hospital."

Betsy had yawned, "What's a hospital?"

"It's a place where sick people go to sleep in giant beds and get well."

It had been a cold day with snow outside, Betsy remembered, and they had gone to see Great-Grandma in the ford.

Betsy had not liked the hospital very much. It had made her feel uneasy from the very first because the air was stale and smelled like polio shots. Mommy had had to promise that Betsy would not have to get a shot before she would allow herself to be led, unprotesting, into Great-Grandma's room.

Grandpa O'Brien had been already there and had lifted her to sit on the high bed. Great-Grandma's familiar hand, dry and wrinkled, rough and warm, had taken Betsy's hand.

"Hello, Betsy."

"Hello."

"Have you been a good girl?"

"Yes, I have."

"What have you been doing?"

"I gathered the eggs with Mommy and held a baby chicken and played cowboys and Indians with Michael and Frisky."

Great-Grandma had asked some other questions that grown-ups were always asking like how was Betsy today and how old was she now, and the little girl had answered them as she always did.

Then Great-Grandma had grown quiet and sad. She had said, "I'm sorry, baby."

"Why, Great-Grandma?"

"I'm sorry your eyes were so hurt."

"But my eyes don't hurt, Great-Grandma, they're fi . . ."

Mommy had said suddenly that it was time to leave: "Betsy ^{will let you get} ~~today and feeling better today.~~ some rest now, Grandma. I'm so glad to see you feeling better today." They had gone then, leaving

Grandpa behind in Great-Grandma's hospital room.

They were in the ford again, only Daddy was driving this time. The car stopped, and she knew that they were in front of Great-Grandpa's house. David and Michael piled out and raced ahead, and Betsy walked up the driveway holding Mommy's hand.

Grandma ~~xxx~~ and Grandpa O'Brien were there along with some aunts and uncles and other people that Betsy didn't remember. She and the boys played on the porch-swing for a little while until Mommy made them stop because some grown-up people on the porch wanted to sit in it.

So Betsy wandered into the house to listen to some more grown-ups talk. Uncle Mike and some other men were there to tease her and give her a nickel because she told them she was four years old. Aunt Lydia talked to her for a long time because she heard Betsy say "dara" after stubbing her toe on the couch. Aunt Lydia said that "dara" was a word that Betsy must never, never say; but Betsy didn't quite understand why.

Then she saw Great-Grandpa. She bumped into him as he stood near a table in the corner of the living room.

"Hello, Betsy," he said.

"Hi, Great-Grandpa."

"Betsy, here's Great-Grandma. Would you like to see her?"

"Okay."

"Here's her head, and here's her hand."

It was shaped like a head, but cold and very hard, as if it had no skin at all but only bone. The hand was the same, cold and rigid. It was nothing like Great-Grandma's ~~xxxx~~ hand, but it was her hand. Great-Grandpa never told any lies.

Betsy turned and walked slowly outside to ask Daddy when it would be time to go home.

Karen Brown lay staring at a magazine, trying to read herself to sleep. Beside her, Luke was already snoring softly; nothing ever kept him awake at night, a phenomenon which Karen envied.

She reflected that, on the whole, this evening hadn't been as trying as it could have been. Grandpa didn't seem to

be taking Grandma's death too hard; though Mom had said that he had sat with her all day, combing her hair and talking to her as if she were still alive. Maybe he took the death rather calmly because he was so old himself: Karen didn't know.

Anyway, she had been honestly relieved when Mom had refused to let her look at the body:

"Old wives' tale or not, Karen, there may be something to it. If a pregnant woman looks at a corpse, it may cause the baby to turn and be a breech birth."

Probably, she thought, tonight had been hardest on Dad. She knew it was dreadfully painful for him to look at something dead and remember that it had been his mother. Thank God the funeral was tomorrow, and then the whole nightmare would be over at last.

She put down her magazine and turned out the lamp. Anyway, it was good of Luke's mother to keep the children tomorrow so that they wouldn't have to go to the funeral. They were too young to have to learn much about death just yet, and tonight had been tiring enough for them.

As Karen fell asleep, she recalled vaguely that Betsy had looked a little pale as they had left to come home from Grandpa's. Perhaps she was coming down with a cold or something; Karen must remember to take her temperature in the morning.

Good flow — keeps one reading.

Vivid.

The move from Betsy's point-of-view to an omniscient one needs to be made more smoothly, say at a ¶ change. It comes suddenly, mid. ¶ on p 3.

Very
effective

Your best
story this
term.

I became lost in grandma & great-grandma etc. I had to re-read, & read back to get clear whose great-grandma this was, & whose grandma, whose mother. You might check the relevant parts & see whether you can clarify all this w/o stopping the fluency of the story.

More shape to the story would help. It's like a chunk lifted from a novel. Can you point to a turn/climax here?