

The Grown-up People's Feet

There are things we remember because we can't forget them and there are things we remember because we don't want to forget them, and there are a few very special things that possess both qualities.

It was late in September of that last year, and Mary Ellen had driven in to town to pick me up from work. She pulled over to the corner of Main and Central where I was waiting, and I got into the car. Laurie was standing on the front seat, her blue eyes enormous with the marvel of a new discovery.

"Dad, I can read!" she shouted the moment she saw me. "I can *read* now, Dad!"

I pinched her button nose but she hardly noticed. She had a small red primary reader in her hands, opened to a brightly colored picture of a little girl in a swing with a little boy pushing her. Beneath the picture was a series of short paragraphs in large clear print.

"Listen to me, Dad! Listen: 'Jane is a girl. John is a boy. I see Jane. I see John!'"

"What do you think of our little Edna St. Vincent Millay?" Mary Ellen said, watching the red light.

"I think she's just wonderful!"

The light turned green, and we went up the big hill that led out of the little town on 30. It was late in September, as I said, but the hills and the fields along the highway were still brushed with the faded green of summer and the sky was hazily blue. Houses were a washed white and the violet shadows of elms and maples made unpremeditated patterns on close-cropped lawns. An empty tandem rumbled past us, touching the shoulder and whirring up a cloud of dust.

"'Oh, look at Jane. Oh, look at John.'"

"You can read 'Bed in Summer' to *me* now, Laurie," I said.

She looked up from the book. I still can't forget the way her eyes were. They made you think of deep blue lakes with the sun sparkling in them for the first time.

"Sure, Dad," she said. "I'll read it to you."

Mary Ellen turned off 30 and started up our road. "Don't you think Stevenson might be a little difficult for her, dear?"

"Oh, no," Laurie said. "You don't understand, Mother. I can *read* now!"

"You can help her over the rough spots, Mary L.," I said . . . "What's for supper, by the way?"

"Roast beef. It's still in the oven." She turned into the drive and braked by the forsythia bush.

Our house was on a rise and you could look down and see the highway with the cars hurrying back and forth like busy metallic beetles. Beyond the highway there was a fine view of the lake. On clear days you could see Canada. It was hazy that day though, and all you could see was the milky blueness of the lake interblending with the misted blueness of the sky. An intermittent wind kept rustling the big maples in the yard.

I got the evening paper out of the roadside tube, went over to the verandah and sat on the swing. Laurie was already there, the primary reader opened on her knees. We drifted gently back and forth.

"'I see Jane,' " Laurie read. "'I see John.'"

The wind kept ruffling the paper, making the headlines crawl. They were concerned with the bomb, as usual. Beneath, there was the same old dismal story of potential megatons and potential megadeaths. After awhile I let the paper slip from my hands and listened to Laurie and the wind, and the sounds Mary Ellen was making as she set the dining room table.

I can still hear the pleasant clatter of dishes, and I can still hear the soft rushing sound of the wind; but most of all I can hear Laurie's sweet child's voice saying over and over: "'Jane is a girl. John is a boy. I see Jane. I see John . . .'"

A boy and a girl and a bomb, and presently Mary Ellen calling, "Come to supper!"

What I remember most, though, was the last right of day, and the three of us sitting on the porch swing. Laurie sat in the middle, a *Child's Garden of Verses* on her lap, opened to "Bed in Summer."

"'In—'" she read.

"'In winter,'" Mary Ellen prompted.

" 'In winter I get up at night—' "
" 'And—' "
" 'And dr—' "
" 'And dress by yellow candlelight.' "
" 'In summer, quite the other way—' "
" 'I have to go to bed by day!' "
" 'Why that's wonderful, darling. I have—' "
" 'I have to go to bed and see the—' "
" 'birds still hopping—' "
" 'The birds still hopping on the tree—' "
" 'Or hear the—' "
" 'Or hear the grown-up people's feet—' "
" 'Still going—' "
" 'Still going past me in the street—' "

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As I say, there are things we remember because we can't forget them and there are things we remember because we don't want to forget them, and there are a few very special things that possess both qualities.

Laurie is a big girl now, but she does not know how to read. There would be little point in her knowing how since there is nothing to read. But once upon a time she could read a little bit, though of course she has forgotten how by now and perhaps it is just as well. There is no need for the printed word in the simple village we have built here in the hills, far from the radioactive shore of the lake; there is need for nothing here except strong backs that will not tire after long hours in the fields.

The long winter nights are empty, of course, and at first thought it might seem that books would help to fill them; but the books would be old books and they would only fill the nights with the past, and the past is better the way it is, half-forgotten, a way of life we are not quite sure we experienced at all—except for those little things we keep remembering, sitting before the hearth, the wind howling in the bitter darkness outside, shrieking in the distances as it scatters the ashes of cremated cities over the barren land.