A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF BETTY SMITH

Born to German immigrants and raised in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Smith never finished high school but was allowed to attend the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor as a special, non-degree seeking student after her first husband, George H.E. Smith, enrolled there as a law student. At Michigan, Smith wrote numerous articles, short stories, and plays. After winning the university's Avery Hopwood Award for playwrighting, she enrolled at Yale Drama School and completed a three-year course but never earned a degree, due to not having a high school diploma. In 1934, she moved to New York City with her two daughters, Nancy and Mary, to work for the Federal Theater. Smith divorced her first husband in 1938. In 1942, she submitted an early version of *Brooklyn* to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer as a script, but the story failed to generate interest at the movie studio. She also turned her manuscript into a play. In May 1942, she submitted the manuscript for Harper & Brothers' 125th Anniversary Nonfiction Contest, obscuring the fact that the it was a novel, though it was closely based Smith's life and family. Though the story was disqualified from the contest, Harper & Brothers agreed to publish it as a novel. *Brooklyn* became a best-seller and was twice adapted for film, as a theatrical release directed by Elia Kazan in 1945 and as a television movie in 1974. Smith soon married Joe Jones, a writer and journalist. During the Second World War, Jones was a soldier in the Army stationed in Virginia; he and Smith maintained a regular correspondence during his service, comprising 400 letters between them. Smith wrote other novels, including *Tomorrow Will Be Better* (1947), *Maggie-Now* (1958), and *Joy in the Morning* (1963), but none of them ever achieved the success of her debut. Smith divorced Jones in 1951 and married Robert Voris Finch, whom she'd first met at Yale Drama School. Smith was very active in Chapel Hill's the theatrical community of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, writing plays and assisting with stage productions. With Finch, she often devised plot ideas for plays and later staged them. Finch died in 1959. Smith herself died of pneumonia at a convalescent home in Shelton, Connecticut at the age of 75.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Brooklyn was published in the midst of the Second World War. In 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, thereby involving the United States in a war that many Americans had hoped to avoid entering. In 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt ordered Japanese-Americans into internment camps in a gesture that mimicked, however inadvertently, the racist policies of the Nazis in Germany. In the case of *Korematsu v. the United States*, the Supreme Court ruled that the internment of the Japanese as a precaution to espionage was constitutional. In the year in which Smith's novel was published, Detroit also erupted into a race riot that killed nine whites and twenty-five black people and injured seven hundred people. On April 12, 1945, President Roosevelt died, making Harry Truman the new commander-in-chief. A month later, Germany surrendered, concluding the war in the European arena. The dropping of nuclear bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended the war in the Pacific, after Emperor Hirohito surrendered on August 15, 1945. The Cold War with the Soviet Union began in 1947—a result of the United States' refusal to acknowledge the Russians as legitimate allies, despite cooperation during the war, due to the Soviets' wish to expand Communism.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Brooklyn was published during a period in which American literature began to depict stark social realities—such as poverty, addiction, and sexual abuse—in simple, direct prose and with dialogue that reflected how people actually spoke. By the 1940s, the new crop of American authors was more diverse than ever before, comprising more women, black writers, and homosexuals who openly wrote about how these social identities impacted people's lives. Authors from this time include Richard Wright (*Native Son*), Katherine Anne Porter (*Pale Horse, Pale Rider*), Chester Himes (*If He Hollers, Let Him Go*), Carson McCullers (*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*), and Truman Capote (*Other Voices, Other Rooms*). Several of these writers, like Smith, reflected on their childhoods through fiction. Trends in American theater also strongly impacted the urge to publish socially realistic and uncomfortable subject matter. The plays of Tennessee Williams (*The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*) and Eugene O'Neill (*A Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *The Hairy Ape*, *The Iceman Cometh*) were particularly pertinent in exploring dysfunctional family life, class tensions, and alcoholism—themes which are also present in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. According to Betty Smith's daughter, Nancy Pfeiffer, Roth's 1934 novel *Call It Sleep* was a major inspiration in Smith's decision to write about her own life as fiction. Like *Brooklyn*, Roth's novel is about the hardships of growing up poor in New York City, though his novel takes place on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and is from the perspective of a Jewish boy. Both books, however, describe the lives of poor city kids in the period before the First World War, and both were published during cataclysmic eras in American history—the Great Depression and the Second World War, respectively.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Tree Grows in Brooklyn
- **When Written:** December 1940-May 1942
- **Where Written:** Chapel Hill, North Carolina
- **When Published:** 1943
- **Literary Period:** World War II-era literature; Social Realism
- **Genre:** Fiction; Coming-of-age novel
- **Setting:** Williamsburg, Brooklyn
- **Climax:** Johnny Nolan dies of pneumonia and acute alcoholism
- **Antagonist:** Poverty and classism
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

James Dunn. American actor James Dunn won an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor in 1946 for playing Johnny Nolan in the film adaptation of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. After having starred alongside Shirley Temple in the 1930s, Dunn's career endured a slump in the early-1940s due to his reputation as an unreliable actor who drank heavily. Despite critical acclaim for *Brooklyn*, no more film offers came to Dunn. He chose to return to Broadway, where his career began, and starred as Willy Loman in a production of *Death of a Salesman* in 1951.

PLOT SUMMARY

Francie Nolan, is an eleven-year-old girl living in Williamsburg, Brooklyn with her ten-year-old brother, Neeley, her mother, Katie, and her father, Johnny. Francie and Neeley bring in additional household income by rag-picking, or collecting trash on the street and in their building, and turning in the materials to Carney's junk business for cash.

When Francie was born, she was so sickly and blue that people believed that she wouldn't live. Whenever people made this prediction, however, Katie would point to a struggling **tree** growing out of a grating nearby. Despite receiving little sustenance, the tree's steady growth demonstrated a will to live, and Katie declared that Francie, too, would survive.

From the age of three, Francie babysits her younger brother while her mother works menial jobs and her father waits for singing-waiter gigs or gets drunk to forget about the mounting pressures of his responsibilities. Francie is also an excellent student. She relishes trips to the library, where she is enchanted by **the brown bowl** full of seasonal flora that sits on the librarian's desk, and promises herself that she will read one book a day for as long as she lives. Katie fosters a love for literature in both of her children by reading them pages from Shakespeare and the Protestant Bible every night before bed.

When Francie is seven, she starts school. Though her first experiences there are harsh, they teach her about the inequalities in American society. The school is overcrowded, attended mostly by immigrant children who have difficulties with hygiene, and inhabited by cruel teachers and a sadistic principal. Francie's first teacher, Miss Briggs, is so contemptuous of poor children that she refuses to let them use the restroom, a rule that one day causes Francie to wet her pants. Her Aunt Sissy addresses the matter with Miss Briggs by claiming that Francie has a kidney problem, and then by threatening the teacher with physical harm if she does not learn to be kinder to Francie. After their conference, Francie is allowed to leave the room to use the toilet.

Francie doesn't remain in her first school for long, however. While out walking one Saturday in an unfamiliar part of Brooklyn, she discovers a little, old, red-brick school that she would like to attend. Johnny arranges for her to go there by faking Francie's address. Though the school is forty-eight blocks from where she lives, Francie relishes going to a school where the teachers are not cruel and she does not have to share a desk.

Francie begins writing plays and stories and decides that she will become a writer when she grows up. She is thus briefly disheartened when she gets her first C in English Composition due to her teacher, Mrs. Garnder, being displeased with Francie's portrayal of the harsh realities of poverty and alcoholism in one of her stories. Mrs. Garnder does not realize that Francie's story was inspired by her own life and she doesn't care. Instead, she tells Francie that the purpose of art is to create beauty that will help others forget the ugliness in the world. Francie is unconvinced.

Despite the poverty of her upbringing, Francie is enriched by her closeness to her loving family. She sees herself as a mixture of her mother's family, the Rommelys, and that of her father, the Nolans. She loves her Aunt Sissy, who is frank and caring, and her Aunt Evy, who does impressions and tells funny stories about her husband, Willie Flittman. Francie admires her grandmother Mary Rommely's mysticism, devotion to God, and talent for storytelling, but also has a bit of her grandfather Thomas Rommely's "cruel will." Francie is dreamy, like Johnny, and practical, like Katie.

During Francie's childhood, Katie works as a building custodian and keeps tenement houses clean in exchange for rent. Her husband's unreliability causes the family to rely on her for financial support. Katie's hands are "worn" from the soda and lye that she uses to wash floors. There are moments in which she feels that she has lost her attractiveness, but her feeling of wanting to be desirable again is briefly reignited when she encounters Sergeant Michael McShane at Mattie Mahoney's picnic.

With age, Katie grows into a harder woman. Though she tires of working so much, she also worries about her children growing

up and needing her less, particularly Neeley, for whom she has tenderer feelings. However, Katie is fiercely protective of both of her children and, when Francie is attacked by the child molester who has been terrorizing their neighborhood, it is Katie who shoots him between the legs with the gun that Johnny borrows from his friend, Burt.

The family endures another shock when Johnny dies at the age of thirty-four from pneumonia and complications brought on by acute alcoholism. Katie is pregnant at the time of his death with their third child, Annie Laurie. Katie is not the only one to add an additional member to the family. After delivering ten stillborn children, Aunt Sissy adopts a baby girl from Lucia, a neighborhood girl who is the daughter of Sicilian immigrants. Sissy names the girl Sarah. Soon thereafter, Sissy successfully delivers a healthy baby boy, whom she names Stephen Aaron.

The addition of Annie Laurie, whom the Nolans call Laurie, requires Francie to work more because she is the eldest. Francie's first steady, well-paying job is at the Model Press Clipping Bureau where she works as a file clerk, a job that requires her to read newspapers. Having found a job where she can fulfill her love of reading, she excels and gets promoted to fill the position of city reader.

During the First World War, Francie gets laid off from this job and becomes a teletype operator. She also enrolls in college courses, though she has not yet graduated from high school. While buying her textbooks, she meets the handsome and ambitious Ben Blake, who helps her with her studies. Not long after, she also meets Lee Rhynor through a co-worker. Francie thinks that she has fallen in love with the boy with the "shy smile." Lee breaks Francie's heart, however, when she finds out, through a letter from his wife, that he lied about wanting to marry Francie after returning from his tour of duty in France.

Though Francie resumes her relationship with Ben, she retains her desire for Lee. Meanwhile, Sergeant McShane re-enters the family's life not long after his wife finally dies after years of suffering from tuberculosis. He announces his wish to court Katie, with the intention of marrying her in the fall. Francie and Neeley approve. Though he makes it clear that he never wishes to replace Johnny, he insists on adopting Laurie and giving her his name, so that she can know what it is to have a father.

Francie notices how Neeley has grown up to look identical to Johnny and, like his father, takes on a career in music, working as a singer and piano player. Francie is now eighteen and plans to attend the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. On the eve of her departure to the Midwest, she makes a date with Ben. As she prepares for it, she sees little Florry Wendy watching her from the fire escape of the building across the yard. When Francie was Florry's age, she, too, would sit and watch young women prepare for their dates. She looks down into the yard and sees that the tree of her youth, which was cut down to make room for wash lines, has proceeded to grow back from the stump. Wistfully, Francie shuts the window looking out on to the yard and says "goodbye" to her younger self.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Francie Nolan – The main character from whose perspective the novel is based. Mary Frances Katherine "Francie" Nolan is the eldest child in the Nolan clan and, predictably, is given the most responsibility while growing up. When the novel begins, Francie is eleven years old and living in poverty in Williamsburg, a neighborhood of Brooklyn. Francie had been a sickly baby and when others predicted her death, her mother, Katie, insisted that she would live, just like the **tree** that grows out of the grating near their tenement. Francie is also an excellent student and a voracious reader, which later leads to a job at the Model Press Clipping Bureau as a newspaper reader when she is only fourteen. Francie loves both of her parents very much but favors her father, Johnny, for his dreaminess and charm. She has inherited her father's "sentimentality without his good looks." Johnny occasionally calls Francie "Prima Donna" and they share many private, tender moments together. However, Francie takes very much after her mother, Katie, in terms of her resourcefulness and practicality. As she grows older, she recognizes that she has inherited "all of Katie's soft ways," particularly with men, and half of her mother's "invisible steel." Though Francie endures harsh poverty during her childhood, she retains an optimism about life, partly instilled through her love for her family, but also by the books she reads and the inspiration she takes from simple, beautiful things, such as **the brown bowl** in the library. By the end of the novel, she is eighteen and on her way to Ann Arbor, Michigan, where she has enrolled in college.

Neeley Nolan – Francie's younger brother and the second child of Katie and Johnny. Cornelius John "Neeley" Nolan is one year younger than Francie and is born one week after Francie's first birthday. He is also the child whom Katie favors the most. Though her mother does her best to disguise this, Francie senses it. Unlike Francie, Neeley is born strong, healthy, and handsome and grows up to look almost identical to their father. When they are children, Neeley assists Francie when they go rag-picking in the building where their mother works. Unlike his sister, Neeley is only an average student. Nevertheless, Katie is more insistent with him than with Francie about his finishing high school. The family hopes that he will become a doctor because his name seems befitting of one. Neeley, however, has little interest in studying and is eager to work and help the family financially as he approaches his teen years. He works first in McGarrity's, peeling boiled eggs and cutting hunks of cheese, as part of the bar's offer of free lunch to its patrons. He claims to have an ambition to become a stock broker, though this is only due to the allure of what looks like fast and easy income. He inherits his father's looks and, later, also becomes a

singer and a piano player. When they are teenagers, Francie notices that he wears a union label in his shirt, just as their father did, and calls her "Prima Donna."

Johnny Nolan – The husband of Katie Nolan and the father of their three children, Francie, Neeley, and Laurie. Johnny is the son of Ruthie and Mickey, who were Irish immigrants. He had three brothers, Andy, Georgie, and Frankie, all of whom were also singing waiters. Johnny's true and unfulfilled ambition is to be a professional singer. He starts singing in saloons and waiting on tables when he is twelve, and he and his brothers later form a singing group—the Nolan Quartette. All of Johnny's brothers die before the age of thirty, though, and Johnny is the only one to have children. With his "wavy blond hair," blue eyes, and slender frame. Johnny has "handsome, devil-may-care" looks that match his free-spirited attitude. He is two years older than Katie, who marries him because she likes the way he sings, dances, and dresses. Despite his poverty, Johnny takes great pride in his appearance—wearing a suit always decorated with his green Waiter's Union button and going to the barber three times a week, when he has the money. He is a dreamer who privileges his desire to sing over finding work that generates better income. He is also a proud supporter of unions and a Democrat but has a reputation for being an unsteady worker, due both to his alcoholism and his unwillingness to acquire more reliable employment. Early in their marriage, Katie learns that she cannot depend on Johnny when he gets fired from a school custodial job that they initially took on together. At the end of his life, he is fired from working as a singing waiter and thrown out of the Waiters' Union. He dies of pneumonia and acute alcoholism at the age of 34.

Katie Nolan – Francie, Neeley, and Laurie's mother and Johnny Nolan's wife. The youngest daughter of Mary Rommely and Thomas Rommely, immigrants from Austria, Katie also has three sisters, Evy, Eliza, and Sissy. When Katie first appears in the novel, she is twenty-nine years old. Katie is a proud, strong, hard-working, and resourceful woman. She is also quite pretty, with curly black hair and a good figure. She is two years younger than her first husband, Johnny, and fifteen years younger than her second husband, Michael McShane. Katie meets Johnny when she is seventeen and working at the Castle Braid Factory. By then, she has already been working at the factory for four years to support her family. Katie later works as a cleaning woman and finds the family an apartment on Grand Street in Williamsburg, Brooklyn where they do not have to pay rent in exchange for Katie keeping the building clean. She takes on additional jobs, such as serving sandwiches in a café to shopgirls for several hours in the afternoon, to make additional income. Unlike her husband, she is indifferent to politics and critical of the Democratic Party. To aid in her children's education, she reads to them from the Bible and Shakespeare's plays. She is more adamant about Neeley getting an education than Francie due to her greater love for her son. She recognizes in Francie her own streak of strong will and independence.

Annie Laurie Nolan McShane – Born after Johnny's death, she is the youngest child in the Nolan clan. Katie names her after a song that Johnny used to sing, called "Annie Laurie." She has "a mass of soft black curls" and dark eyes that are set wide apart. When Sergeant Michael McShane proposes to Katie, he offers to adopt Laurie, who has never had a father. He also gives her his name.

Aunt Sissy – Katie's older sister, as well as the sister of Evy and Eliza and the eldest daughter of Thomas and Mary Rommely. Sissy is born three months after her parents arrive in the United States from Austria. When Sissy first appears in the novel, she is thirty-five and works at a rubber factory. She has "roving black eyes, black curling hair, and a high clear color." Sissy never goes to school because Mary does not know realize free public education is available to poor immigrants, too. Though Sissy is uneducated, she makes up for it by being witty, clever, warmhearted, and vivacious. She also loves children. Sissy is also openly sexual from a young age, to the shock of her family and members of the community. At ten, she develops the body of a thirty-year-old woman. At twelve, she has a twenty-year-old boyfriend. At fourteen, she is dating Jim, a twenty-five-year-old firefighter. She marries Jim after he beats up her father in a physical challenge. Sissy gets pregnant one month after they marry and plans to name the baby Mary, if it is a girl, and John, if it is a boy, but gives birth to a stillborn baby on her fifteenth birthday. By the time she is twenty, she has had four more children, and all of them are stillborn. She leaves Jim, but never divorces him due to her Catholic faith. She marries a second time and has four more stillborn children before leaving this man, too. Sissy is perceived as naïve, though quite adept at getting what she wants, especially from men. She is also warm and protective, particularly of Francie. After her third marriage, she has given birth to ten stillborn children in all. When she illegally adopts Sarah from Lucia, Sissy settles into domestic life with her latest partner, Steve. She has a second child with Steve, a biological son named Stephen Aaron.

Aunt Evy – The third daughter of Mary and Thomas Rommely and the sister of Katie, Sissy, and Eliza. Francie adores her, just as she does Aunt Sissy, due to Evy's great ability for storytelling and impressions. Aunt Evy strongly resembles Katie. She marries Willie Flittman at a young age, partly because she, like the other Rommely women, have a weakness for musical men. The couple lives "in a cheap basement flat on the fringes of a very refined neighborhood." Evy insists on this because she is a snob and a social climber. She has three children—a son named after Willie, a girl named Blossom, and another boy named Paul Jones. To assist her climb on the social ladder, she leaves the Catholic Church in favor of the Episcopalian Church. She wants her children to love music and demonstrate talent for it, so she sends Paul and Blossom to Professor Allegretto to learn the fiddle. Willie later leaves her to become a busker and Evy gets a

job at the munitions factory where he once worked.

Uncle Willie Flittman – Aunt Evy's husband. He is a discontented man who delivers milk for a living in a horse-drawn wagon. Despite missing the middle finger from his right hand, he plays the guitar well. Aside from this, however, Uncle Willie is dull. He also has a hostile relationship with his horse, Drummer, which Francie finds amusing. Uncle Willie continues to suffer from depression and takes to his bed when he finds out that he is too old to enter the army and join the war effort. Steve helps him get work at a munitions factory. Shortly thereafter, he starts practicing the bass drum and a pair of cymbals. After Francie buys him a harmonica, he adds it to his repertoire and thus forms a one-man band. His incessant drumming leads the family to move constantly, due to the disruption to the neighbors. He leaves Evy around the time that Mary Rommely dies, in favor of working as a busker. It seems that he made the decision after winning ten dollars in an amateur night at a movie house, where he competed against other one-man bands.

Aunt Eliza – Mary and Thomas Rommely's second daughter and the sister of Katie, Sissy, and Evy. She is dull, plain, and rather indifferent to life. She enters a convent at the age of sixteen, due to Mary's feeling that she owes the Church one of her daughters, and becomes Sister Ursula under "a very rigid order of nuns." She is only permitted to leave the convent if one of her parents dies. Thus, Francie sees her just once, when she is nine, at Thomas's funeral. When Francie meets Aunt Eliza, she is excited because she, too, wants to be a nun. She recoils from her aunt, however, when she sees "a fine fringe of hair on her upper lip and chin," believing that all nuns have this characteristic.

Carney – The owner of the junk business where Francie and Neeley trade the junk they find in their building for cash. He hair, moustache, and eyes are all "rusty" colored, and Francie notes how Carney is fond of little girls. He pinches her cheek and gives her an additional penny when she visits. After Francie turns thirteen and shows signs of developing, she writes in her diary about how Carney "pinches something else" during one of her visits.

Charlie – Owner of the penny candy store, Cheap Charlie's, which is located next to Carney's junk shop. Francie and Neeley go there for treats after they turn in junk for cash. Francie later realizes that the prizes in his store are fake and that Charlie uses the promise of prizes to keep the children coming back, hoping to win. Still, he gives the children a penny's worth of candy for each cent they spend in the store.

Mr. Sauerwein – The butcher from whom the Nolans buy cow's tongue. Francie notes how he is sometimes disagreeable about selling them the end of the tongue for a nickel. Usually, he sells cow's tongue to rich people for seventy-five cents a pound, but if there is a little left, he will sell "the square end" for a nickel if you have "a pull," or a slight struggle, with him over it. On the day Francie visits him, he gives it up easily, saying that he saved the piece for Katie because he likes her. He tells Francie to tell her mother, but Francie does not like Mr. Sauerwein and quietly decides not to deliver this message.

Mary Rommely – The mother of Katie, Evy, Eliza, and Sissy, the wife of Thomas Rommely, and the maternal grandmother of Francie and Neeley. She is an immigrant from Austria who arrived with Thomas. Her family describes her as "a saint." She never got an education and cannot read or write her own name. She saves enough money to buy a house in the United States, but she is swindled out of it and receives no property, due to being unable to read contracts. Despite her lack of education, she has memorized "over a thousand stories and legends" and speaks in "a low, soft" and "warmly, melodious voice" that soothes her listeners. Her daughters and granddaughters inherit her voice. An "intensely" devout Catholic, Mary knows the story of every saint and also believes in the supernatural, including ghosts and fairies. In Austria, she was admired by her community for her wisdom and people frequently sought her advice. Mary insists that her daughters speak only English at home and at school, as a way to protect them from their father's cruelty. When her daughters marry, Mary is sad to see them with "no-account men" and she weeps when they give birth to girls, knowing that a woman's life is always harder. When Francie says her "Hail Mary" prayer, she always sees her grandmother's face in her mind's eye. Mary Rommely dies at the age of eighty-five.

Thomas Rommely – The father of Katie, Evy, Eliza, and Sissy, the husband of Mary Rommely, and the maternal grandfather of Francie and Neeley. He is an immigrant from Austria. Thomas is remembered as a cruel, hateful, greedy man. However, he is also thrifty and hardworking—qualities that Katie inherits. He leaves Austria with Mary to avoid being conscripted into the army. Thomas has strict views about racial and ethnic-mixing, believing that such unions produce "mongrel children." Though he is competent in English, Thomas stubbornly refuses to speak it and forbids it in his home, though Mary has insisted that the girls speak English. As a result, the Rommely girls have little communication with their father while growing up. However, he never speaks to them anyway, except to curse them. With his wife, he is a brutal lover who kills all desire in her. When Thomas arrives from Austria, he gave his tithe of labor to the Church that the Nolans attend at Christmas. He carved the left side of the altar and saved the bits of gouged-out wood to make crucifixes for each of his three daughters, which Mary gave them on their wedding days, with the intention that the crosses would be passed down to each generation of daughters.

Ruthie Nolan – The mother of Johnny Nolan and his deceased brothers, Andy, Georgie, and Frankie. She is also the paternal grandmother of Francie and Neeley. A Catholic and an Irish immigrant, Ruthie migrated to the United States from Ireland

with her husband, Mickey. They have four sons, born a year apart. She gets them all to the sixth-grade before pulling them out of school at twelve so that they can get jobs.

Mickey – Ruthie Nolan's husband, Johnny's father, and the paternal grandfather of Francie and Neely. He emigrates from Ireland with Ruthie. They have three additional sons, Andy, Georgie, and Frankie. Each boy is born a year apart and is handsome, like their father. Johnny recalls how Mickey was never able to hold a job for very long, and he dies at the age of thirty.

Andy Nolan – Johnny's brother who dies young from tuberculosis. Along with Johnny and his other two brothers, George and Frankie, he is a singing waiter and a member of the Nolan Quartette. He is engaged to Francie Melaney before his death. With his "red-gold wavy hair and finely molded features," Andy is regarded as the handsomest of the Nolan boys. Shortly before he dies, his brothers buy him a fancy pillow so that he can enjoy a bit of luxury. Andy stains "the fine new pillow" with "a last great gush of blood" and then dies.

Flossie Gaddis – A young woman who lives below the Nolans at their third home on Grand Street in Williamsburg. She supports her mother and brother, Henny, by working as a turner in a kid-glove factory—that is, she is the person who reverses the incorrect stitching on gloves by turning them "right side out." She has a disfigured right arm, due to having fallen into scalding hot water when she was little. In her spare time, Flossie designs costumes for a masquerade ball that she attends every Saturday night. She wins first prize on a costume that has "one flowing sleeve," which the judges think symbolizes something, though she merely constructed it to hide her disfigured arm. Though Frank initially shows no interest in her, he later marries her to keep from getting drafted into the First World War. Francie describes Flossie as "starved about men," in contrast to her Aunt Sissy who is only "healthily hungry about them."

Mr. Tomony – A pawnshop owner who is rich but stingy with money. He has in fact never set foot inside his pawn shop, which he inherited, along with "an efficient manager" who looks after the place for him. He lives in rooms above his shop and enjoys the life of an aristocratic New Yorker "in the squalor of Williamsburg." Mr. Tomony is not married. Francie and the local cop on the beat see him come home on Saturday nights, supposedly from places in Manhattan, like the Waldorf, wearing a "high silk hat" and a cape, and carrying a "silver-knobbed cane" tucked under his arm.

The Librarian – A woman who stamps Francie's card each time she borrows a book, then shoves it back at her without ever smiling or looking at her. Francie asks her if she can recommend a book for a girl, in the hope of getting attention. The librarian always asks, matter-of-factly, how old the intended girl is and dutifully recommends a book. Francie admires a **brown bowl** on the librarian's desk, which has "a spray of pink wild aster in it." The librarian, Francie later realizes, has hardly ever noticed the bowl.

Mrs. Gindler – The elderly midwife who delivers Francie. She is an Irish immigrant and highly superstitious. She accuses a local woman of drying up Katie's milk when Katie is unable to nurse Francie. After Katie finds out that she is pregnant again, Mrs. Gindler offers Katie a potion to induce a miscarriage.

The Teacher's Pet – A little girl who is a student at a school near Francie's tenement building. Francie's yard faces onto the schoolyard where the little girl goes in the afternoons to clap together a pair of chalkboard erasers to release their chalk. Katie once told Francie that this is a job only reserved for teacher's pets and Francie decides that, when she goes to school, she would also like to be a teacher's pet. When the teacher's pet sees Francie watching her, she makes a show out of clapping the erasers. She then goes over to the fence separating their yards and offers Francie the opportunity to touch the felt on one of the erasers. When Francie reaches out to touch it, she spits in Francie's face and threatens to do so again if Francie won't cry.

The Doctor – The physician who gives Francie her smallpox shot. He attended Harvard and has plans to join "a smart practice" in Boston when his internship is over. He currently has to put in a few hours per week at the free clinic. The doctor is a snob who does not only recoil from the sight of Francie's dirty arm—the result of making mud pies that morning—but uses it to launch into a tirade about how the poor should be sterilized. When Francie responds with outrage, he registers surprise that she was able to understand him, assuming that she would be an immigrant who could not speak English. In the end, he is indifferent and shrugs in response to her hurt.

The Nurse – The daughter of poor Polish immigrants who spent her days working in a sweatshop and her nights going to school. The doctor with whom she works looks at Francie's arm, dirtied from making mud pies, and comments to her about how filthy poor people generally are and remarks that they should be sterilized. Instead of taking umbrage at his comment, due to her own poor upbringing, the nurse agrees with the doctor. She realizes that she will later regret her unwillingness to speak up and say something kind to Francie, but she acknowledges that she is "small" and lacks courage.

Miss Briggs – Francie's first schoolteacher. Miss Briggs is an arrogant woman who dislikes poor children but favors the children of prosperous shopkeepers. Her voice is "gentle" when she speaks to these "fortune-favored few" and "snarling" when she talks to "the great crowd of unwashed." She refuses to let Francie use the restroom during class—a habit that she has with all of the poor children she teachers—until Aunt Sissy confronts her, pretending to be Francie's mother, and lies about Francie having kidney trouble. When this fails to convince Miss Briggs, Aunt Sissy then pretends that a police officer passing in the street below is her husband. She threatens that he will

"beat the hell out of" Miss Briggs if she doesn't treat Francie with more respect.

Hildy O'Dair – Katie's former best friend and Johnny's girlfriend before he meets Katie. Hildy is a "bold" young woman of Irish descent, who knows all of the latest songs and is a good dancer. She and Katie work together at the Castle Braid Factory, but their friendship ends as a result of Hildy believing that Katie has "stolen" Johnny away from her. When Johnny dies, Hildy shows up at the funeral and sobs noticeably. When Katie overhears this, she is initially outraged that any woman would dare to express more grief than she in response to Johnny's death. When she turns around in her pew and sees that it is Hildy, she softens, remembering how much Hildy loved Johnny, too.

Jim – Aunt Sissy's first husband, or "John," whom she agrees to marry after he wins a fist-fight with her father Thomas Rommely. A fireman who later dies in a blaze, a newspaper report identifies Sissy as his widow—meaning Sissy never divorced him. This "John" leaves Sissy his pension and places her in charge of his funeral arrangements, to Steve's outrage.

Aunt Sissy's second husband – The actual name of this husband is never revealed. He and Sissy are married for four years and have four stillborn children. This second "John" is not hurt when Sissy leaves him departure. Though he likes her, he is terrified of her "frankness and overwhelming naivete" and finds her too mysterious. Sissy's second "John" settles in Wisconsin, remarries, and has three children. He divorces Sissy on the grounds of desertion.

Steve – Aunt Sissy's third husband, whom she calls "John," as she did with all of her other husbands and lovers. The family, in turn, calls him "The John," "Uncle John," or "Sissy's John." With Steve, she raises a daughter, Sarah, and settles into domestic life. Steve works at a publishing house that prints pulp magazines, which Francie likes to read. After confirming that Sissy is divorced from her second husband, Steve remarries Sissy in a Methodist church. It is heavily implied in Chapter 47 that Steve is the father of Sarah, or "Little Sissy." He and Sissy also have a biological son together, Stephen Aaron. During the First World War, Steve works as the foreman at a munitions factory on Morgan Avenue in Brooklyn.

Sergeant Michael McShane – A local police officer to whom Katie is attracted and eventually marries following Johnny's death. An Irish immigrant, McShane stayed with a family shortly after his arrival whose daughter got pregnant by a man who then left her. McShane married the girl to save her honor, and they had fourteen children together—ten of whom died of tuberculosis. Following the death of both his wife and Johnny, McShane begins courting Katie with the intention of marrying her. Francie notes that he is not as handsome as Johnny was but is impressive nonetheless. He is fifty when he proposes to Katie, who is nearly thirty-five. McShane is also financially comfortable, with a pension and real estate that altogether bring him about ten thousand dollars in income per year. The marriage plans are settled immediately, with McShane also offering to adopt Annie Laurie and to give her his name.

Jim McGarrity – The owner of a Brooklyn bar carrying his name, which Johnny frequents. He is a lonely man, and when Johnny dies, McGarrity quietly forgives his thirty-eight-dollar debt. McGarrity had liked Johnny because he was a good talker and storyteller. When he visits Katie to offer her financial help and her children jobs in his saloon, he also finds that he enjoys conversation with her. An Irish immigrant, McGarrity is married to a woman named Mae and has two children: Irene, who is Francie's age, and a ten-year-old son named Jim. Both of his children are disappointments to him. He later sells his bar and moves away to a large place on Hempstead Turnpike near Long Island. Anticipating Prohibition, he stocks his basement with liquor. His intention is to open a speakeasy called The Club Mae-Marie, where his wife, Mae, will wear an evening dress and be the club's hostess.

Mae McGarrity – Jim McGarrity's wife and the mother of their children, Irene and Jim. Mae helps McGarrity in the bar. Jim recalls that he married her when she was "a curvy, sensuous girl with dark red hair and a wide mouth." Later in life, she transforms into "a stout blowsy woman" known in Brooklyn as "the saloon type." Mae is routinely unfaithful but has a good business sense, which helps McGarrity become a well-to-do man. She likes running the saloon and spends her spare time laughing and drinking with the customers in a back room. She also has the idea of renting the rooms upstairs.

Professor Allegretto – A music instructor whom Evy hires to teach her children, Paul Jones and Blossom, how to play the fiddle. She discontinues Blossom's lessons when she finds out about how the instructor makes Blossom take her shoes off during her lessons so that he can indulge in his foot fetish. Paul continues his lessons, however, and becomes an excellent fiddle-player.

Frankie Nolan – One of Johnny Nolan's brothers, along with Andy and Georgie, and the son of Ruthie and Mickey Nolan. He dies after being pierced in the stomach by a spike on a makeshift fence while walking home drunk. A priest had never absolved Frankie of his sins, so Ruthie goes to mass "once a month for the repose of his soul which she knew wandered about purgatory."

The Tynmores – A pair of music teachers. Miss Lizzie teaches piano and Miss Maggie cultivates the voice. Katie does one hour of housework for the Tynmores in exchange for a one-hour piano lesson from Miss Lizzie. Katie takes the lessons, but she has the children watch; her aim is to teach three for the price of one. Lizzie is aware of this and allows it. Katie also provides her with a bit of lunch and coffee when she arrives for lessons, aware that the Tynmores are quite poor and rely on the generosity of their customers. Johnny offers to fix a window sash for Miss Maggie in exchange for voice lessons for

Francie, but botches it, causing Katie to have to do extra housework to make up for the cost of a window repairman. One Christmas, when Francie and Neeley are teenagers, Katie has the idea of giving the family's Christmas money to the Tynmores, who no longer give lessons and do not have enough money to eat.

Mr. Morton – The music teacher who comes to Francie's first school for thirty minutes each week. He also teaches at her second school, due to his employment being dependent on his willingness to travel around the district. He instills high culture into the children without their knowing it, teaching them high-brow compositions in the form of mundane songs. Francie and the other children adore him, and he is also attractive to the schoolteachers.

Miss Bernstone – The drawing teacher at Francie's first school. The children like her nearly as much as Mr. Morton. Miss Bernstone sympathizes with and loves the poor children more than the privileged ones. The female teachers are jealous of her because she is attractive and more likely to be married. She is warm, radiant, and "richly feminine," and speaks softly "in a clear singing voice."

Mattie Mahoney – A local Democratic politician who throws a boat excursion and picnic on the Hudson River for families in which the husband is a registered Democrat. Mahoney provides Francie with her first experience of politics. When she goes to look for Mahoney at the picnic to thank him for the wonderful day he provided, she cannot find him anywhere. A man nearby tells her that Mahoney may not exist at all. Mahoney may be the name that the party gives to whomever leads the organization in a particular year. Mahoney is re-elected on Election Day, much to Francie's excitement.

Mr. Jenson – A janitor at Francie's second school who is described as "a ruddy white-haired man." He is friends with the principal and has an unusual degree of authority at the school. It is rumored that Mr. Jenson is an exceptionally well-educated man but took the janitorial job because it paid better than being a schoolteacher. He assists with providing discipline, but he does not scold unruly boys. Instead, he lectures them on proper conduct and good citizenship.

Gussie – A six-year-old boy in Francie's neighborhood. He is known for suckling on his mother's breast until the age of four, depriving his younger sister, Little Tilly, of their mother's milk. He continues to suckle until, one day, his mother paints her breast black and draws a monstrous-looking mouth on the nipple in red lipstick. After this, Gussie is weaned off of his mother's breast for good and drinks black coffee instead.

Little Tilly –Gussie's three-year-old sister. Johnny one day takes her, Francie, and Neeley to Canarsie to go fishing. Johnny feels sorry for Tilly, due to her being the younger sister of a boy whom he finds repulsive. Tilly does not speak at all during the trip until Johnny drops her off at her apartment. Her mother is outraged when Tilly arrives dripping wet and smelling of vomit from having thrown up on the way home. She finally utters, "T'anks," before her mother ushers her inside.

Joanna – A young woman who works at a factory. She has an adorable but illegitimate child who was born as the result of a romance with a neighborhood boy. Katie describes Joanna as "bad" and holds her up to Francie as an example of how not to be. Joanna is an object of disdain among the neighborhood women due to her lack of shamelessness about having had a child out of wedlock. Joanna has no father and Francie decides that Joanna's real crime is not that "she had been bad, but that she had not been smart enough to get the boy to church."

Burt – The night watchman at a bank on the corner. He is a friend of Johnny's and lends him the gun that Katie uses to protect Francie from the child molester when she finds him in the hallway of the building, trying to assault her daughter. Johnny and Burt have an arrangement in which Johnny agrees to watch the bank while Burt runs home to check on his much younger wife, whom he believes has lovers over at their apartment when Burt is working. When he returns home, he never finds his wife with a man; she is always sound asleep. One day, however, Burt's fears come true when his wife leaves him for an Italian man closer to her own age.

The Child Molester – A "thin and undersized" man whom Francie encounters near the cellar of her building. The predator has already killed a seven-year-old girl from Francie's neighborhood. He wears "a shabby dark suit" and has "thick bushy hair," "a beaked nose," and a mouth that looks like "a thin crooked line." When he comes toward Francie with "his lower garments opened," Katie shoots him with the gun that Johnny got from Burt. The child molester survives the shooting and is sent to prison.

Lucia – A beautiful sixteen-year-old neighborhood girl who is the daughter of Sicilian immigrants. She gets pregnant as the result of an affair with a married man and becomes such a source of shame that her father locks her up in her room and refuses to feed her anything but bread and water. When Sissy hears about this, she makes an arrangement to take the baby off of the family's hands after it is born. Sissy brings Lucia proper meals while her father is out at work, and Lucia later gives birth to a healthy baby girl whom Sissy christens as Sarah. Lucia and her family eventually return to Italy and Sissy never hears from them again. Aunt Sissy later confesses to Katie that it was Steve who told her about the girl's pregnancy and where she lived. This exchange heavily implies that Steve is the married man with whom Lucia had an affair.

Sarah – A baby girl, born to Lucia, whom Aunt Sissy illegally adopts. The little girl eventually becomes known as "Little Sissy." While Sarah is still in the womb, Sissy gets the idea of feeding her Sicilian mother a diet of Irish-German food so that the baby will not "be so much of an Italian." It is heavily implied that Steve, Sissy's third husband, is the child's father.

Miss Garnder – Francie's English teacher. She starts to give Francie C's in English composition, though Francie normally gets A's, because she disapproves of Francie writing about unpleasant aspects of life, such as poverty and alcoholism. She encourages Francie to focus on beauty instead and claims that she, too, endured a poor upbringing. However, her father was a minister who had a meager but fixed income, and her mother had the benefit of having a maid to help with housework. Hearing this, Francie does not think that her teacher can identify at all with her pain.

Miss Irma Armstrong – The special city reader at the Model Press Clipping Bureau, where Francie works as a file clerk. Miss Armstrong is the highest paid file clerk. She is also kind and tries to befriend Francie, who has no friends among the other clerks. There is a rumor around the office that Miss Armstrong is the boss's mistress, which Francie learns to be true when her boss says that Miss Armstrong is leaving the office to marry him. When Miss Armstrong leaves the office—she insists that a woman should not work after marriage—she recommends that Francie take over her job as the city reader. Miss Armstrong briefly returns to the job during the First World War, after her husband loses most of his readers to the Civil Service and lays off those who remain, before he closes the bureau down altogether.

The Boss at Model Press Clipping Bureau – Francie's supervisor who later marries Miss Armstrong. He then promotes Francie to Miss Armstrong's former position as the city reader. He pays Francie much less than his other employees but gives her a raise of twenty dollars a week, which seems like a lot to Francie, though it is still less than what he would have had to pay one of the other file clerks for the same job. During the war, he loses most of his staff to the Civil Service and lays off those who remain. He, Miss Armstrong, and Francie perform the remaining work before he shuts down the bureau altogether.

Ben Blake – A handsome, well-dressed nineteen-year-old and paramour of Francie's. Ben befriends Francie in the college bookstore when he advises her on how to save money on books. He is very ambitious, serving as the editor of his high school magazine, president of his class, and the half-back on the school's football team. He also spends his afternoons working for a law firm, and plans to go to law school before eventually becoming a politician. While in college, he enrolls in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps. He gives Francie his high school ring, with the promise that, in five years, he will be in a position to marry and she will be "old enough to know her own mind." Francie acknowledges that she likes Ben "an awful lot," but she is not sure that she loves him, due to her sense that he is always very sure of himself and is unlikely to need her.

Anita – A young woman who works with Francie at the Communications Corporation, where she operates a teletype machine in Francie's row. She asks Francie to entertain her boyfriend Joey's friend, Lee, so that the couple can be alone together. Anita leaves the Communications Corporation months before Francie and goes to work somewhere else without leaving behind an address.

Corporal Leo "Lee" Rhynor – A "tall and gangling" twenty-two-year old from a small town in Pennsylvania who does not strike Francie as handsome but whose "shy smile" attracts her nonetheless. He is friends with Joey. On their first date, he and Francie go out for chop suey at a restaurant called Ruby's. He has siblings back home, as well as a fiancée. He asks Francie if she will spend a night with him before he ships out to France for the First World War, saying that he loves her and wants to marry her when he returns home; she agrees. Later, Francie receives a letter from Lee's wife, Mrs. Elizabeth Rhynor, telling her that she and Lee recently married, thanking Francie for entertaining him in New York, and apologizing to Francie for Lee's pretending to be in love with her.

Florry Wendy – A little girl who lives in a building across from Francie. While Francie gets ready for her date with Ben, she wonders if anyone is watching her, just as she used to watch young women prepare for their dates when she was a girl. While she is having the thought, she peers out of her window and sees Florry Wendy sitting on a fire escape and looking at Francie through the bars. Florry Wendy is a "slender little thing of ten [...] with a book in her lap and a bag of candy at hand." The little girl reminds Francie so much of herself at Florry's age that Francie calls her by her own name instead of "Florry." The little girl corrects her. Francie closes the window on the home that she will soon leave and says "goodbye" to the little girl as though she is saying goodbye to her childhood self.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Gimpy – Owner of a candy store across the street from Charlie's. He gets his name from the fact that he is lame. People in the neighborhood view him as a gentle, harmless man until he molests a little girl in the back room of his store.

Maude Donovan – A friend of Francie's who is described as her "once-in-a-while girlfriend." She is an orphan who lives with two unmarried aunts who work at home as seamstresses.

Frank – The driver of a horse-drawn wagon. He is a "nice" and handsome young man "with rosy cheeks," and girls like to flirt with him. He later marries Flossie Gaddis to avoid being conscripted into the First World War, which he rightfully senses will soon involve the United States.

Henny Gaddis – Flossie Gaddis's brother. He is nineteen years old and looks healthy, but has tuberculosis and knows that he will soon die. Despite this, he is "avid for life" and does not understand why he is "doomed."

Francie Melaney – Andy Nolan's fiancée and Francie's namesake. The elder Francie postpones her marriage to Andy, hoping that he will recover from tuberculosis, though he never

does. Francie then makes a vow never to marry.

Dr. Aaron Aaronstein – The doctor who delivers Aunt Sissy's first live baby, Stephen Aaron. Sissy's son is named after Dr. Aaronstein, whom she credits for reviving the baby when he emerged from her womb looking blue. Sissy takes Dr. Aaronstein's hands and covers them with kisses, in gratitude for her son's survival.

Stephen Aaron – Aunt Sissy's second child and the first live baby among the eleven to whom she has given birth. He is named after her third husband and the boy's father, Steve, and the doctor who delivered and revived him, Dr. Aaron Aaronstein.

Joey – Anita's boyfriend. He is a soldier who will soon enter the First World War. He is friends with Lee. When Francie first sees him, she notices a "short" and "stubby" young man who is "beaming" and holding Anita's arm "possessively."

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

POVERTY AND PERSEVERANCE

Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is the coming-of-age story of Francie Nolan, whose family struggles with poverty in early twentieth-century Williamsburg. Francie is hardly alone in this: Smith describes how her protagonist attends school with a "great crowd of unwashed" children who, because of their poverty, are often discriminated against by the very people whose job it is to care for them, particularly teachers and doctors. These children are reminders of how many people are excluded from the same American Dream that encouraged their parents or grandparents to leave their ancestral lands. They are also indicators of how many of the problems from the Old World followed immigrants into the New. Johnny Nolan, Francie's father, for instance, was born to Irish immigrants who fled to New York to escape the potato famine. Though Johnny does not escape the poverty of his forebears, he and his wife, Katie, teach their children how to endure such poverty and retain hope in overcoming it. Through a combination of resourcefulness and a deep appreciation for the little pleasures in life, Francie and her family manage to find happiness in conditions that seem insufferable.

Katie, for instance, teaches her children to be resourceful, a skill that lessens poverty's blow. While she finds just enough work as a janitor to keep a roof over the family's heads, Francie and her younger brother, Neeley, go rag-picking in their building every Saturday to bring in additional income. Eleven-year-old Francie and her ten-year-old brother go to Carney, the owner of the local junk business, with the rags, paper, metal, rubber, and other junk that they've collected during the week from "the dumbwaiter shelves of the day's accumulated trash," as well as the tin foil from cigarette and chewing gum wrappers that Francie finds in the gutters on her way home from school. The children thus learn to find bounty in limited resources. Though this, Smith shows how poverty doesn't give people the luxury of being wasteful; instead, the poor become gifted in finding value even in objects that others throw away.

Though Francie and Neeley are taunted by other children for rag-picking, they're proud to earn enough pennies to buy the things they want and to save money. Rag-picking teaches them to be self-reliant and responsible with money. After one trip to Carney's, they divide sixteen cents—half goes into their bank and they divide the remaining eight pennies between them. Francie enjoys the privileges that money gives her, such as going to the nickel-and-dime store and touching things with the possibility of buying them. Though she is poor, Francie learns that the objects she covets are attainable through thrift and hard work.

Francie's poverty also teaches her how to find pleasure in simple things, such as food. The family's relationship with food involves their gleaning pleasure out of the little they can afford, but not feeling so desperate that they think it is impossible to throw anything away.

Francie loves the smell of hot coffee and she enjoys feeling the warmth that the coffee gives off in her cup—warmth that's often difficult to come by in the Nolans' chilly flat. At the end of one meal, however, Francie pours the coffee down the sink, to the outrage of her Aunts Evy and Sissy. Katie explains that Francie is entitled to a cup of coffee and that, if it satisfies her more to throw it out, that's fine. Katie reasons that it's good for the poor to waste something once in a while, to get the feeling of how it is not to worry about money and having to scrounge all the time. Though her children are poor, she doesn't want them to internalize desperation as a permanent way of life.

Katie's tactic helps the children learn to enjoy small joys despite their poverty. One evening, Katie comes in with a bundle of wood, a can of condensed milk, and three bananas and announces that they will have oatmeal again for supper. Francie and Neeley are initially displeased to have another dinner of oatmeal, but they quickly express gratitude for the bananas when they realize, from their mother's sigh, how hard she has worked to prepare this simple meal for them. To lift the mood, Francie suggests that Katie play the piano while they eat, so that it will feel as though they are in a restaurant. Francie is eager to create the mood of luxury that the family does not typically get to enjoy. They then light the oil stove and reminisce about past Christmases. A meal that the children were dreading thus quickly becomes a happy occasion due to

their resourcefulness and ability to take delight in simple pleasures.

By the time Francie is a teenager, the lessons she has learned from growing up poor teach her that happiness is not out of reach, and rather exists in the little things that most people take for granted—"a cup of strong hot coffee when you're blue," "a book to read when you're alone," or just being with someone you love.

EDUCATION AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

Betty Smith's protagonist, Francie Nolan, is an eleven-year-old girl who is curious about the world but shut out from much of it due to poverty. It is her grandmother, Mary Rommely, who insists that her own daughter, Katie, start a library for Francie. According to Mary, the most essential reading consists of the Protestant Bible, Shakespeare, and German fairy tales. Books, she says, inspire imagination, which will encourage Francie to think beyond her current circumstances. Mary's advice proves to be right: education helps Francie push beyond the parameters of Williamsburg and beyond the expectations for a girl of her class. Her drive to improve herself through scholasticism is exemplary of the American Dream, which claims to reward ambition and merit over lineage.

The world opens up for Francie when she learns to read. Soon after, stories become a means of escape and a way to create the friendship and sense of belonging that she doesn't otherwise have. Francie doesn't only read stories but also creates her own out of mundane experiences. Storytelling becomes her means for making sense out of the world and feeling more connected to it.

She seeks out books for every mood—poetry "for quiet companionship" and adventure stories for when she tires of quiet hours. She figures that she will take more interest in romances and read biographies "when she [wants] to feel a closeness to someone." Francie's ravenous appetite for books nourishes an interest in the world beyond her Brooklyn neighborhood. Reading also helps her generate personal discipline; she promises herself that she will read one book a day as long as she lives, ensuring that she will always feel a part of the world that seems so distant from her in real life.

Francie uses her love of literature to also develop a passion for mathematics. She relates more easily to abstract numbers by creating stories for them. She devises a game in which she thinks of numbers as members of a family and variables as sweethearts who complicate life for the family, or boyfriends who cause trouble. Francie's "game" makes arithmetic "a warm and human thing" that she can use to occupy her time and, perhaps, forget about the sorrows within her own family by finding cohesion within the numbers.

Francie seeks this sense of cohesion not only within her own household but also in Brooklyn. Reading gives her the opportunity to create herself, and part of what she seeks to create is a deeper sense of rootedness in her country and her community. For this reason, it becomes imperative for Francie to leave her first school, which is filled with the poor children of immigrants and the teachers who openly despise them, and instead enroll in a school filled with Americans who "could not be bulldozed and exploited as could the immigrants and second-generation Americans." This decision, which occurs to Francie as an epiphany, is the first step that she takes on her own in improving her circumstances and getting closer to her family's wish to achieve the American Dream.

While walking through an unfamiliar, suburban Brooklyn neighborhood one Saturday in October, Francie sees "a little old school" whose "old bricks glowed garnet." There is grass on the school grounds instead of cement, and the territory across from the school is "practically open country." The "open country" implies that there is space for her to grow here, unlike in her old neighborhood. Francie's sense that the bricks glow like a precious stone further indicates how she has idealized the school, seeing it as a place of opportunity and assimilation.

She admires how the neighborhood at this school is "peopled by fifth and sixth generation Americans," descended from families that "had been Americans for more than a hundred years back" and "were mostly [of] Scotch, English and Welsh extraction." These origins, which were common among most of the original European settlers, make these residents seem more typically American. Their old houses "had been standing there when Washington maneuvered his troops across Long Island." The people in this neighborhood have the sense of belonging that is more tenuous in Francie's old school, where everyone seems to have one foot in their old country and the other in the new. By convincing her parents to let her leave the old school and fake her address so that she can attend this new one, Francie establishes herself more firmly in her community as someone who belongs and deserves the same opportunities as those who have been there for generations.

Francie's determination culminates in her enrolling in classes at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, despite the fact that she has not yet earned a high school diploma. The "open country" across from her new school in the unfamiliar Brooklyn neighborhood thus foreshadows her eventual departure from Brooklyn in favor of even newer and more unfamiliar territory in the Midwest.

GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND VULNERABILITY

In *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Betty Smith explores the importance of sex in women's lives but notes how sex also undermines women, due to social expectations that

they comply with male desire while denying their own. Shame undergirds most sexual relations between men and women in Francie's 1912 Williamsburg neighborhood. Shame also fosters an environment in which girls are routinely sexually abused and compelled to keep their violation a secret. Smith explores the intimate lives of women and girls to illustrate the everyday misogyny that exists in Francie's world—a behavior that Francie and many other women internalize and perpetuate only to the benefit of men, many of whom mistreat them. Smith illustrates how gender and sexuality complicated the lives of poor, working-class women at the turn of the century, revealing the hypocrisy, misogyny, and shame that shrouded Americans' attitudes toward sex.

The main concern among women in Francie's world is pregnancy. In families that can barely afford to feed their existing members, the prospect of an additional family member, particularly from an unmarried daughter, is met with horror. Through Francie's observations of Lucia, Joanna, and even Katie Nolan's experiences, Smith depicts how, during a time without safe birth control, women often had to resign themselves to pregnancy and accept that they would be mothers, whether they wanted to be or not.

Joanna is a local teenager who gives birth out of wedlock. Instead of hiding herself and her child in shame, Joanna freely walks with her baby in the street. The local women are enraged by this and hurl rocks at her but hit the baby instead. Smith uses the classic trope of throwing stones to demonstrate how the women try to make themselves appear more honorable by declaring Joanna a shameful and undesirable member of their community. They had the "decency" to marry the men whom they wanted to sleep with, while Joanna chose pleasure over obligation.

Lucia, a sixteen-year-old Sicilian immigrant girl, does not face condemnation from the neighborhood but from within her own family after a married man impregnates her. Lucia's father shuts her up in her room and feeds her only bread and water, as though she has committed a crime by having sex out of wedlock. Smith complicates Lucia's "sin" by strongly suggesting that it was Steve, Aunt Sissy's third "John," the nickname that Sissy gives to all of her lovers and husbands, who may have impregnated Lucia. When Sissy then adopts Lucia's baby, the public "sin" of illegitimacy helps Sissy to fulfill her desired, and socially acceptable, role as a mother.

Aunt Sissy herself is unapologetically sexual and defiant of social norms. Others perceive this attitude as an aspect of her naivete and lack of education. However, it is more likely a reflection of Sissy's insistence on personal satisfaction, which eludes many of the Williamsburg women who feel shame in response to their bodies and their desires.

Sissy develops the body of a thirty-year-old woman when she is ten. Boys come after her and Sissy "[is] after all the boys." She consequently develops a scandalous reputation. However, no one passes judgment on the men who take advantage of her sexuality. Thomas Rommely's outrage over her courtship with her soon-to-be first husband, Jim, who is twenty-five when Sissy is fourteen, has less to do with the psychological damage that such a relationship could cause Sissy than it does with Thomas's concern over the relationship's impact on the family's reputation.

Sissy leaves Jim (without divorcing him) when she becomes frustrated after giving birth to four stillborn children. Though they separate, Sissy visits him occasionally at the firehouse when she gets "lonesome for a man." This "lonesome" feeling is unsatisfied sexual desire. Sissy takes sex from men when she wants it and leaves them after her desire is satisfied.

Though Sissy's girlhood relationships with older men are not regarded as sexual abuse, the parents in Sissy's neighborhood live in fear of their young daughters becoming the victims of sexual predators. Criminal sex is the only kind that parents will mention, though timidly, to their daughters, while "normal sex" remains a mystery. This attitude toward sex, which wavers between horror and secrecy, makes it difficult for girls to develop a healthy sexuality, leaving them to associate sex more with violence and shame than intimacy and pleasure.

One day, a seven-year-old girl from Francie's block, remembered as "quiet and obedient," is found dead, "lying across a busted-down doll carriage in the cellar of a nearby house." Her dress and undergarments are torn, and her shoes and "little red socks [are] thrown on an ash heap." The image of the dead little girl lying on the doll carriage goes further than evoking a sense of lost innocence; it shows the reader that someone believed that the girl's life was disposable. Though the little girl's death evokes sorrow from people in the community, that feeling is not extended to teenage girls, like Lucia, who get pregnant by older men. Instead, those girls are blamed. Though the community rightfully regards the child molester as a threat to their safety, he is perhaps partly a product of a general disregard for the lives of women and girls.

Though everyone suspects that the child molester who killed the seven-year-old girl has a preference for small children, he eventually attacks Francie, who is fourteen at the time, in her building. Katie thwarts him by shooting him between the legs, and the predator is soon sent to prison. The adults' method of helping Francie cope with her trauma is to tell her that it is all a bad dream. The tactic succeeds in pushing the incident to the back of her mind, but it also makes her slightly mistrustful of older men, such as Jim McGarrity. The lie that the attempted rape was just "a bad dream" reinforces the notion that sexual assault is not something to be discussed and that mention of it will only cause the girl and her family to revisit a shame that should only belong to the perpetrator.

Smith's exploration of sex criticizes Americans' misogynistic and hypocritical attitudes at the turn of the century. A microcosm of the United States at this time, Williamsburg is a

community that wishes to preserve an illusion of innocence while contending with the unavoidable problems of modern urban life—sex crimes, the lack of birth control, and women who are divided between their traditional roles and their growing wishes for sexual freedom and expression.

ROMANTICISM VS. PRAGMATISM

The protagonist of the novel, eleven-year-old Francie Nolan, recognizes herself as a combination "of all the Rommelys and all the Nolans." The Rommelys are her mother's Austrian family, and the Nolans are Irish. Unsurprisingly, she bears the most resemblance to her parents, Johnny and Katie. She has her father's "sentimentality without his good looks" and her mother's "soft ways" but just half of Katie's "invisible steel." From her father, Francie develops the ability to dream, while her mother bestows in her a commitment to hard work as a means to achieve one's goals. Francie is made up of individually cultivated qualities, too, derived from the books that she reads and the material objects that she relates to, including "the flower in the **brown bowl**" at the library and "the **tree** growing rankly in the yard." Francie is both delicate and strong, rooted in a particular place yet broad-minded. Francie's mutual expressions of romanticism and pragmatism show how she has more successfully combined these qualities from her parents, which were overly present in each of them, to achieve greater balance in her own life.

Despite being an alcoholic and an unstable wage earner, Johnny remains a loving and attentive father and husband. Unlike his wife, he has little interest in generating steady income and is not averse to taking risks with money that Katie would never take, such as by gambling on horses. Though he is irresponsible, Johnny is instrumental in helping Francie to understand that her dreams are largely attainable, even without the benefit of money.

It is Johnny to whom Francie appeals when she discovers the school of her dreams. She knows that Katie will not agree to move "just because *she* [Francie] felt like going to another school." The emphasis underscores Francie's awareness that her mother does not favor her enough to make such an adjustment, though she might be inclined to do so for Neeley. Francie is too young to understand that her family doesn't have the means to move her to another neighborhood, but her father is willing to tell "a lie that helps someone out" by faking Francie's address so that she can attend the school. Not only does Johnny's trick provide Francie with a better education, it also helps her understand that morality is not always so black-and-white, and that one can occasionally bend the rules while chasing their dream.

Regardless of this ability to inspire hope in his daughter, Johnny has little for himself. He lives very much in the moment, enjoying hot coffee and a sunny day more than most would, due to his sense of being "doomed." He admits to Francie that he is not "a hard-working man" and "never wanted a family," which is why he drinks—he cannot handle his responsibilities and wishes to forget that he will never fulfill his dream of becoming a professional singer. Johnny's inability to accept his life lends him an aura of romantic fatalism—that is, he accepts that he is powerless to a fate that determines he will die young, tragically, and unhappy, despite being loved.

Katie, on the other hand, refuses to accept defeat. Her steadfastness and practicality contrast with her husband's whimsy. She is careful with money and takes no risks with it. Her pragmatic example demonstrates to Francie that hard work and thriftiness are also helpful values in life, which she retains even after the family's finances improve.

Katie works as a janitor in tenement houses to ensure that her family will always have a roof over their heads, due to her agreement to keep the buildings clean in exchange for shelter and a wage. Katie carefully saves money, following the example of her mother, Mary Rommely, in making a bank out of an empty can of condensed milk, in which she saves five cents per day. It is she who ensures that the family has the means to pay for emergencies and Johnny's carfare to jobs.

Due to being a poor cleaning woman, Katie pays little attention to her appearance. Katie tries to convince herself that fulfillment comes from knowing that her work can support her family. However, she looks sorrowfully at how her well-formed hands have become worn from the soda and lye that she uses to scrub floors. When Sergeant Michael McShane expresses an interest in her at the Mattie Mahoney picnic, she remembers that she is still a young and attractive woman, something that she has forgotten as a result of working "so hard" and becoming too ensconced in her role as a caretaker.

Francie ultimately learns that she needn't choose between her parents' values. Each had been right in their individual values but wrong in their extreme commitments to those values. In her own life, Francie is neither obsessively concerned with money nor careless with it. She rejects her mother's abandonment of her femininity as a result of becoming the family's main wage earner, insisting that taking on a more traditionally masculine role does not make one less of a woman. Additionally, Francie rejects her father's sense of doom by never giving up in the face of life's disappointments, while retaining his ability to create a path out of what seems like a dead end.

CLASS AND SNOBBERY

It is at school where Francie Nolan, "huddled with other children of her kind," learns about "the class system of a great Democracy." Smith ironically uses language from the poem engraved on the Statue of Liberty, "The New Colossus," by Emma Lazarus, to depict the inconsistency between America's promise of being a land

without class distinctions—a place that supposedly welcomes poor, "huddled masses"—with the practice of excluding and segregating these groups from those who have money and are more solidly established. Francie sees how middle-class Americans are not only treated with more kindness and humanity, but how they also have access to better schools and live in neighborhoods that are greener and more spacious. Smith uses the subject of class to show how the United States, despite its presumed commitments to equality and opportunity for all, repeated the class divisions of the old world, in which upper classes subordinate lower classes and lower classes perpetuate the classist attitudes of those who dominate.

In the novel, class discrimination is particularly pronounced among those whose job it is to care for others—teachers and doctors. When Francie experiences contempt toward from these people as a child, she learns that society expects her to feel shame for her poverty when the true shame is that many people are destitute in a prosperous nation.

Miss Briggs, Francie's teacher at her first school, smiles at the children of "the prosperous storekeepers of the neighborhood" and seats them "in the choicest places in the front row." Her voice is "gentle" when she speaks to them. Conversely, she snarls "when she [speaks] to the great crowd of unwashed." The poor children do not form solidarity against her because they are young and crave her love and approval. Instead, they adopt Miss Briggs's "snarling manner" when they speak to each other. The poor children's attitude comes from thinking that one of them might be lucky enough to win favor with Miss Briggs if they mimic her hatred of the poor. They cannot hate the prosperous children because they want too badly to be a part of their class, where one is not only promised cleanliness, in contrast to the "unwashed," but also respect and kindness.

When Francie goes to the doctor for a vaccine, he reacts with disgust at Francie's dirty arm, which he thinks results from not washing, though it is actually the result of Francie and Neeley making mud pies and not having enough time to wash, as Katie told them to, before their appointment. It never occurs to the doctor that the children may have been playing outside. His attitude suggests a general contempt for poor immigrants. When the nurse, a child of poor Polish immigrants, sympathizes with his view, Francie is doubly heartbroken, assuming that a woman would have a warmer attitude toward children. She does not realize that, like her classmates who side with Miss Briggs over each other, the nurse aligns with the doctor and echoes his contempt for the poor to attain some of his power.

Similarly, even those with limited means seek proximity to those with wealth. Aunt Evy, for example, is a snob and a social climber who believes that, if she mimics the manners of wealthier and more established Americans, then she, too, will acquire some of their advantages. She and her depressed husband, Willie, live "in a cheap basement flat on the fringes of a very refined neighborhood." She is willing to live in substandard conditions simply for the privilege of being near her so-called betters. In a way, Aunt Evy's attempts at social climbing are quintessentially American—she believes that she can obtain a higher social status through personal effort, despite lacking money or a distinguished lineage.

Evy also makes some adjustments to her cultural heritage to help her and her children better fit in to the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant world. She leaves the Catholic Church in favor of the Episcopalian Church to aid in her social climbing. She regards Protestants as more "refined" than Catholics and decides that this change will be her "first step toward refinement" and being "somebody." For Evy, being "somebody" means distancing oneself from Brooklyn's immigrant communities, many of which belong to the Catholic Church.

In the early-1900s, those with less money and status felt compelled to look down on those within their own class, while looking up to those in higher classes, due to the internalized belief that there was something contemptible about being poor. By regarding the problem of poverty as inherent instead of social, poor people believed that they could overcome their statuses by mimicking "their betters," which included expressing contempt for the poor. Instead, Francie embraces her sense of belonging to two worlds—that of her lowly origins and the more privileged world that opens up to her due to her talents. In this regard, she is more quintessentially American than any of the classist people she knows, due to her ability to achieve success through merit and self-reliance and not by ingratiating herself to any particular group.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE TREE

The tree with the umbrella leaves is a symbol of hope and endurance, as well as an indication that it is possible to dream and to be an individual in a setting that often demands conformity and pragmatism. It is the one tree in Francie's yard that is "neither a pine nor a hemlock," suggesting that these varieties are more common. Instead, it has a lot of "pointed leaves" radiating from the bough, which give it the appearance of "a lot of opened green umbrellas." Some people call it the Tree of Heaven. Though it struggles to reach the sky, the tree grows "lushly" out of cement in the tenement districts. The tree resembles the people in its Williamsburg neighborhood, many of whom live full, complex lives that are limited by economic circumstances. They, too, seek to rise above their stations, or "reach the sky," but this proves difficult in their crowded and impoverished setting. They, too, seem to struggle to grow out of the concrete of their tenements and

into better lives. Francie reasons that the tree likes poor people. Its "umbrellas [curl] over around and under her third-floor fire escape," providing shelter and shade on a summer day in 1912. When she sits there, she imagines that she is living in a tree, as though she exists in the lush natural world that is becoming increasingly elusive in Brooklyn.

Later, the landlord arranges to have the tree cut down because housewives complain that their laundry gets entangled in its branches. However, the tree does not die. Instead, a new tree grows from its stump "and its trunk [grows] along the ground until it [reaches] a place where there [are] no wash lines above it," allowing it to grow freely toward the sky. The tree's endurance parallels with that of Francie. Unlike the fir tree that she and Neeley bought as a Christmas tree and nourished "with waterings and manurings" until it got sickly and died, the tree in the yard can survive on its own. Attempts to cut it down only make it grow back more powerfully. Similarly, despite the ill-fortune that threatens to "cut her down"—poverty, mistreatment by teachers, an attack by a sex offender, and the grief that ensues after the death of her alcoholic father—Francie continues to flourish. The tree, like Francie, is a thing apart from its poor Williamsburg neighborhood, but it also belongs there. It is noticeably different, just as Francie's ambition and love for books make her noticeably different. However, both the tree and Francie are rooted in Williamsburg. Thus, the landlord is unsuccessful in completely removing the tree and Francie, too, remains connected to Williamsburg, despite her family's eventual move and her own plans to leave for Michigan.

THE BROWN BOWL

Francie admires the "little golden-brown pottery jug" filled with flowers that sits at the end of the librarian's desk—a thing that the librarian hardly notices until Francie mentions it. The janitor—or "somebody"—has placed the bowl there and routinely fills it with flowers. The bowl is a "season indicator" that contains "a few sprigs of bittersweet" in the fall, holly at Christmas, pussy willow near spring, and nasturtiums in the summer. The flowers, in turn, symbolize Francie's hopes for change and beauty, despite the constancy of her family's circumstances, particularly the Nolans' poverty and Johnny's alcoholism. The bowl never changes, but the flowers do. Francie's delight with the bowl of flowers suggests her ability to see beyond circumstances that do not change in favor of recognizing the occasional novelties that life can offer. This is reminiscent of Francie and Neeley's ability to express gratitude for small pleasures, such as eating a banana with an oatmeal dinner.

Francie fantasizes about having her own home one day, in which she will have a desk like the librarian's in her parlor, which will have white walls and many books. The brown bowl is the only decorative feature that Francie imagines in her future home, indicating a taste for beauty that reminds her of the natural world that eludes her in cluttered, urban Brooklyn. The librarian's indifference to the bowl is also a reminder that what may be a relatively mundane object to one person can become something of immense significance to someone else. The brown bowl contains more hope for Francie than the entire city of New York, which she finds relatively disappointing. The bowl, on the other hand, always contains something fresh and beautiful; it alludes to the change and growth that Francie desires for herself and her family. Even when it seems as though her circumstances will not change, Francie can look to the bowl as an indicator of life's cycles as well as its potential for novelty.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Collins edition of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* published in 1943.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"The one tree in Francie's yard was neither a pine nor a hemlock [...] Some people called it the Tree of Heaven. No matter where its seed fell, it made a tree which struggled to reach the sky. It grew in boarded up lots and out neglected rubbish heaps and it was the only tree that grew out of cement. It grew lushly, but only in the tenements districts. You took a walk on a Sunday afternoon and came to a nice neighborhood, very refined. You saw a small one of these trees through the iron gate leading to someone's yard and you knew that soon that section of Brooklyn would get to be a tenement district. The tree knew. It came there first. Afterwards, poor foreigners seeped in and the quiet old brownstone houses were hacked up into flats, feather beds were pushed out on the window sills to air and the Tree of Heaven flourished. That was the kind of tree it was. It liked poor people.

Related Characters: Francie Nolan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

The novel starts with a description of the tree that provides Francie with refuge from the summer day's heat. The species of the tree is never identified; all the reader knows is what it is not. What distinguishes the tree is its struggle to

live and the fact that it grows out of cement. Smith lends it these characteristics to humanize the tree, suggesting that it chooses harsher circumstances out of fealty to the poor. Throughout the novel, along with the brown bowl, the tree becomes an object with which Francie identifies and an object to which she is likened. She, too, is struggling to grow up in a tenement district. The tree's lived experience is also comparable to that of the people from the neighborhood, who do not "reach the sky"—that is, they do not achieve their best lives, but they are nevertheless "lush," or full, with experience.

Smith also uses the tree as a reference point to explore how neighborhoods rapidly change. She uses the second-person, as though she is guiding the reader through Williamsburg and describing the evolution of the neighborhood as a result of mass immigration at the beginning of the twentieth-century.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ And the child, Francie Nolan, was of all the Rommelys and all the Nolans. She had the violent weaknesses and passion for beauty of the shanty Nolans. She was a mosaic of her grandmother Rommely's mysticism, her tale-telling, her great belief in everything and her compassion for the weak ones. She had a lot of her grandfather Rommely's cruel will. She had some of her Aunt Evy's talent for mimicking, some of Ruthie Nolan's possessiveness. She had Aunt Sissy's love for life and her love for children. She had Johnny's sentimentality without his good looks. She had all of Katie's soft ways and only half of the invisible steel of Katie [...] She was the books she read in the library. She was the flower in the brown bowl. Part of her life was made from the tree growing rankly in the yard [...] She was all of these things and of something more [...] It was something that had been born into her and her only [...]

Related Characters: Francie Nolan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 72-73

Explanation and Analysis

This chapter focuses on Francie's family history, particularly how she developed her character from the influences of both sides of her family but also possesses characteristics that are uniquely her own. The quote not only situates Francie within her family but also reveals her as a blend of masculine and feminine tendencies, Irish and Austrian influences, and the moral strengths and weaknesses of both sides of her family. Additionally, Francie relates both to the known world, which is revealed by her relationship to books, and to the curious aspects of nature, represented by "the flower in the brown bowl" and "the tree growing rankly in the yard." The flower is a metaphor for her delicate nature—the result of inheriting "all of Katie's soft ways" and her father's "sentimentality"—while the tree is symbolic of her struggles to grow up amidst the poverty and brutality of her community.

The combination of these qualities, in addition to "something more" that is uniquely her own, go into the unique and individual creation of Francie's character. Smith asserts that there is no one else like Francie, which works both to establish Francie as a memorable character but also reinforces the sense that everyone, no matter how poor or easily dismissed, matters and deserves to occupy space in the world. Similarly, Smith establishes the tree as a unique breed that asserts its right to exist, despite later being cut down.

❝ Francie, huddled with other children of her kind, learned more that first day than she realized. She learned of the class system of a great Democracy. She was puzzled and hurt by teacher's attitude. Obviously the teacher hated her and others like her for no other reason than that they were what they were. Teacher acted as though they had no right to be in the school but that she was forced to accept them and was doing so with as little grace as possible. She begrudged them the few crumbs of learning she threw at them. Like the doctor at the health center, she too acted as though they had no right to live. It would seem as if all the unwanted children would stick together and be one against the things that were against them. But not so. They hated each other as much as the teacher hated them. They aped teacher's snarling manner when they spoke to each other.

Related Characters: Miss Briggs, Francie Nolan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

Francie's first day at school unexpectedly teaches her about classism and snobbery. Miss Briggs is a snob who favors the children of prosperous shopkeepers. These children are not only clean but bring her gifts to maintain their privileged standing with her. The "few crumb of learning" mirror the

other ways in which children are routinely starved, often literally, as a result of poverty. The author points out how the shame of poverty, particularly in a nation that greatly respects the financially successful, encourages these children to have contempt for each other. They mimic the teacher with the hope that, in embracing her values, she will bestow one or two of them with some special favor. Thus, the children internalize the view that only those with more wealth are worthy of respect and, if they are poor and dirty, it must be because there is something inherently unworthy about them. Though public school is supposed to be an institution that collapses inequalities among children, the attitude of Miss Briggs and others' like her merely work to teach the children that they will never be able to compete fairly in the world.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Feeling his arms around her and instinctively adjusting herself to his rhythm, Katie knew that he was the man she wanted. She'd ask nothing more than to look at him and to listen to him for the rest of her life. Then and there, she decided that those privileges were worth slaving for all her life. Maybe that decision was her great mistake. She should have waited until some man came along who felt that way about her. Then her children would not have gone hungry; she would not have had to scrub floors for their living and her memory of him would have remained a tender shining thing. But she wanted Johnny Nolan and no one else and she set out to get him.

Related Characters: Hildy O'Dair, Johnny Nolan, Katie Nolan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

During a flashback, which occurs in the context of an evening conversation, Johnny and Katie recall how they met. Her best friend at the time, Hildy O'Dair, was dating Johnny and invited Katie to join them at a dance. Though a date had been arranged for Katie, she takes no interest in him and spends the evening watching Johnny. When he asks her for a courtesy dance, she decides to pursue him.

Smith uses their first dance as a metaphor for their inevitable coupling, particularly the way in which Katie will adjust her life in unexpected ways to make up for Johnny's unreliability, just as she eagerly as she adjusts to his rhythm during the dance. She is enamored with his looks and his voice—the qualities for which Johnny becomes best-known. She perceives these qualities as more extraordinary than her own, which is why she describes her ability to look at and listen to him as "privileges." Smith intimates that the first problem between Katie and Johnny is that she loves him more than he loves her. This unevenness in their affection for each other may be partly to blame for Katie's willingness to remain with Johnny, despite his inability to contribute significantly to the family. Though he made it impossible to live with him, Katie refused to live without him, due to her need to hold on to her memory of him as a "tender shining thing" long after she stops idealizing him.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ "Look at that tree growing up there out of that grating. It gets no sun, and water only when it rains. It's growing out of sour earth. And it's strong because its hard struggle to live is making it strong. My children will be strong that way."

"Aw, somebody ought to cut that tree down, the homely thing."

"If there was only one tree like that in the world, you would think it was beautiful," said Katie. "But because there are so many, you just can't see how beautiful it really is."

Related Characters: Katie Nolan (speaker), Francie Nolan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

During a conversation with her neighbors, Katie is trying to convince them, and herself, that baby Francie will live, despite how fragile the infant looks. She uses the tree that grows out of the cement as a point of reference to illustrate to the other women how something that gets little nourishment can still survive, propelled simply by its will to live. The lack of sun and water on which the tree depends is comparable to the poverty in which Francie will be raised, which will contribute to her poor nourishment. The "sour earth" is comparable to the difficulties of growing up in Williamsburg, where Francie will face traumatizing dangers. Katie knows that her daughter will struggle to grow up, just as the tree does, but believes that this struggle will make her strong. She knows that Francie's environment will work to diminish her spirit, just as the neighbor advocates for the tree to be cut down. There are many children who look like Francie on the surface, just as there are many trees like the

one to which Katie is referring. Though Francie is as poor and hungry-looking as they are, she possesses a beauty and uniqueness that results from her strength of character.

❝ Life was going too swiftly for Johnny. He had a wife and two babies before

he was old enough to vote. His life was finished before it had a chance to begin. He was doomed and no one knew it better than Johnny Nolan. Katie had the same hardships as Johnny and she was nineteen, two years younger. It might be said that she, too, was doomed. Her life, too, was over before it began. But there the similarity ended. Johnny knew he was doomed and accepted it. Katie wouldn't accept it. She started a new life where her old one left off. She exchanged her tenderness for capability. She gave up her dreams

and took over hard realities in their place. Katie had a fierce desire for survival which made her a fighter. Johnny had a hankering after immortality which made him a useless dreamer. And that was the great difference between these two who loved each other so well.

Related Characters: Neeley Nolan, Johnny Nolan, Katie Nolan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96-97

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after Neeley is born, Johnny begins to feel overwhelmed by his mounting responsibilities. His solution to this problem is to abdicate from them altogether in favor of drinking and taking one-night jobs. He realizes too late that he has taken on too much too soon. The author demonstrates sympathy for Johnny without letting the reader forget that Katie is in the same predicament but, unlike him, she doesn't use it as an excuse to give up on life. Instead, she adjusts herself to her new circumstances, exhibiting a resourcefulness and strength that Johnny doesn't have.

Johnny chooses to embrace the tragedy of his circumstances, lending him a romantic aura that helps him retain his appeal to those around him (Katie's immense love for him may be partly due to her sense that he will not last long). Knowing that he will never become a professional singer, Johnny chooses instead to fashion himself into a kind of romantic hero. On the other hand, Katie knows that Johnny will never be a husband she can depend on, so she relinquishes her vulnerability in favor of being "a fighter" and works to make Neeley the man that she thinks Johnny should have been. Johnny and Katie each assume new roles over the course of their marriage in attempts to make their lives more bearable. Katie's choice of survival means that she believes in a future for herself and her children, while Johnny has given up on the future.

Chapter 15 Quotes

❝ As she was about to touch this soft beautifulness, the little girl snatched it away and spat full in Francie's face. Francie closed her eyes tightly to keep the hurt bitter tears from spilling out. The other girl stood there curiously, waiting for the tears. When none came, she taunted:

"Why don't you bust out crying, you dockle? Want I should spit in your face again?"

Francie turned and went down into the cellar and sat in the dark a long time waiting until the waves of hurt stopped breaking over her. It was the first of many disillusionments that were to come as her capacity to feel things grew. She never liked blackboard erasers after that.

Related Characters: The Teacher's Pet (speaker), Francie Nolan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 129

Explanation and Analysis

At the new apartment on Grand Street, there's a schoolyard that faces onto Francie's yard and a gate that separates her yard from that of the school. The gate also serves as a metaphorical marker of the division between Francie and the teacher's pet. One mid-afternoon, a little girl who is a student at the school goes outside to clap the chalk out of a pair of erasers. Francie presses her face to the fence to watch the girl. Knowing that she has an audience, the little girl makes a show out of clapping the erasers together.

Katie once told Francie that clapping the erasers is a special job given to a teacher's pet. Francie imagines that, when it's time for her to go to school, she, too, will be a teacher's pet. The little girl offers Francie an opportunity to touch the felt on the erasers. Just as Francie prepares to reach out to touch the folds, however, the little girl spits in Francie's face. This action results from the girl's awareness that Francie is poor and, in her view, unworthy of respect.

Smith never gives the reader any clear indication of the class status of the teacher's pet. However, we learn from Francie's later experiences in school that teachers tend to

favor middle-class children. It is, therefore, likely that the little girl is of a higher social status and has learned the classism that is practiced by the adults around her.

Francie refuses to give the little girl the satisfaction of seeing her cry. The tears would signal defeat and Francie refuses to let the girl think that she has the capacity to hurt her, though she, in fact, has. The "disillusionment" within Francie is her realization that she will be denied opportunities due to classism, and she forever associates blackboard erasers with that memory.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ A person who pulls himself up from a low environment via the bootstrap

route has two choices. Having risen above his environment, he can

forget it; or, he can rise above it and never forget it and keep compassion

and understanding in his heart for those he has left behind him in the

cruel upclimb. The nurse had chosen the forgetting way. Yet, as she stood there, she knew that years later she would be haunted by the sorrow in

the face of that starveling child and that she would wish bitterly that she

had said a comforting word then and done something towards the saving

of her immortal soul. She had the knowledge that she was small but she

lacked the courage to be otherwise.

Related Characters: Neeley Nolan, The Doctor , The Nurse , Francie Nolan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

Francie and Neeley go to the free clinic near their home for a smallpox vaccination. They had been making mud pies that Saturday morning in August and nearly forget to go. Both of their parents are working, so a neighbor has to remind them to get to the clinic by 11:00 a.m. They have no time to wash, so they leave just as they are.

Francie is the first to get the shot. The doctor who tends to her immediately remarks on how filthy she is and talks about how this is generally the case with the impoverished people of this neighborhood. He remarks on how there is little excuse for this, given how cheap soap and water are. Finally, he says that such people should be sterilized to keep from having more filthy children.

The doctor is of an upper-middle class background, while the nurse who assists him is of a lower-class background and the daughter of Polish immigrants. Like the poor children in Francie's school who turn on one another and fawn over the middle-class children who ignore them, the nurse sides with the doctor to find favor with him and to distance herself from her own lowly upbringing. Her conscience puts her ill at ease with this choice, however. She knows that she will regret her lack of kindness, probably due to her ability to identify with France's poverty and hunger. The nurse is "small" because she chooses class worship over moral righteousness; the latter would have forced her to point out the wrongness of the doctor's words and would have risked her losing favor with him.

Chapter 22 Quotes

❝ OH, MAGIC HOUR WHEN A CHILD FIRST KNOWS IT CAN READ PRINTED WORDS! [...] From that time on, the world was hers for the reading. She would never be lonely again, never miss the lack of intimate friends. Books became her friends and there was one for every mood. There was poetry for quiet companionship. There was adventure when she tired of quiet hours. There would be love stories when she came into adolescence and

when she wanted to feel a closeness to someone she could read a biography.

On that day when she first knew she could read, she made a vow to read one book a day as long as she lived.

Related Characters: Francie Nolan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 166-167

Explanation and Analysis

Francie's learning to read becomes a revelation, as the world opens up to her through her ability to read about it. Smith describes how Francie compensates for her lonely childhood by learning about friendship and intimacy through reading. Not only do books provide Francie with companionship and the ability to access experiences unavailable to her, reading also makes her ambitious. Francie's commitment to read one book per day turns her

into an auto-didact—that is, she seeks to teach herself all of the things she wants to know about the world and provide herself with the instruction that she doesn't get at her first school.

This individualized scholastic preparation also eventually pushes Francie to find another school, where she can acquire better instruction to complement everything that she learns in books. Francie's pursuit of learning through literature is connected to the American Dream because she is seizing opportunities that are otherwise denied to her. The library is the one place where information is not withheld from her.

Chapter 23 Quotes

❝ Francie was out walking one Saturday in October and she chanced on an unfamiliar neighborhood. Here were no tenements or raucous shabby stores. There were old houses that had been standing there when Washington

maneuvered his troops across Long Island [...] She walked on further and came to a little old school. Its old bricks glowed garnet in the late afternoon sun. There was no fence around the school yard and the school grounds were grass and not cement. Across from the school, it was practically open country—a meadow with goldenrod, wild asters and clover growing in it. Francie's heart turned over. This was it! This was the school she wanted to go to. But how could she get to go there? [...] Her parents would have to move to that neighborhood if she wanted to go to that school. Francie knew that Mama wouldn't move just because she felt like going to another school. She walked home slowly thinking about it.

Related Characters: Katie Nolan, Francie Nolan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 168-169

Explanation and Analysis

Francie discovers the school that she would like to attend. It exists in a quiet, middle-class suburb inhabited by Americans whose ancestors immigrated to the new world several generations back. The neighborhood in which the school exists is the antithesis of Francie's Williamsburg community. Smith uses the point of contrast to represent how this school will be an improvement from the routine abuse and lack of attention that Francie receives at her current school. Francie's choice also signals her aspirational values. She wants to identify with other established Americans and doesn't want to experience the treatment that is routinely doled out to the poor, soiled children of immigrants. Francie isn't a snob, but she is frequently misidentified in her neighborhood as a child of immigrants.

The school seems to glow because Francie has fallen in love with it and its surrounding environment. The presence of grass and the open meadow with flowers across from the school align with Francie's wish to have proximity to nature. This "open country" also foreshadows her later move to the Midwest. This neighborhood is Francie's first experience with the possibility of living another kind of life, one with more opportunity and more personal space, made accessible through education. Her vision of the school is a glimpse of the life that the reader imagines she will have when she leaves for Ann Arbor at the end of the novel.

Chapter 26 Quotes

❝ Gently, Teacher explained the difference between a lie and a story. A lie was something you told because you were mean or a coward. A story was something you made up out of something that might have happened. Only you didn't tell it like it was; you told it like you thought it should have been [...] Katie was annoyed at this tendency and kept warning Francie to tell the plain truth and to stop romancing. But Francie just couldn't tell the plain undecorated truth. She had to put something to it [...] Although Katie had this same flair for coloring an incident and Johnny himself lived in a half-dream world, yet they tried to squelch these things in their child. Maybe they had a good reason. Maybe they knew their own gift of imagination colored too rosily the poverty and brutality of their lives and made them able to endure it. Perhaps Katie thought that if they did not have this faculty they would be clearer-minded; see things as they really were, and seeing them loathe them and somehow find a way to make them better.

Related Characters: Johnny Nolan, Katie Nolan, Francie Nolan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 198-199

Explanation and Analysis

Francie tells an elaborate story about giving a small pumpkin pie from her class's Thanksgiving presentation to a poor family to hide the fact that she ate the pie while walking home from school. Like the other children in her class, Francie doesn't want to admit to her circumstances, in which food is hard to come by; though she and the others are poor, they have a strong sense of pride. So, when the teacher had asked if anyone wanted the pie, they'd all

refrained from agreeing to take it, perceiving the offer as charity. Francie's teacher knows that Francie later ate the pie, however. And when Francie realizes that her teacher is not fooled by her story, she cries out of fear that her teacher will send a note home, only for the school to find out that the white house she gave as her address is not her home.

Yet Francie's teacher sympathizes with her instead of getting angry and explains to Francie that there is some benefit in embellishing. In this way, Francie gets the validation for her storytelling that she doesn't get at home. Katie discourages Francie's fancifulness, out of fear that, like Johnny, she will deny reality to her own detriment. For Francie, however, her teacher's explanation comes as a great relief. Not only does she find an outlet in writing, which prevents her from growing into "a tremendous liar," but she develops a way of coping with the disappointments of her reality through storytelling.

Chapter 30 Quotes

❝ Most women had the one thing in common: they had great pain when they gave birth to their children. This should make a bond that held them all together; it should make them love and protect each other against the man-world. But it was not so. It seemed like their great birth pains shrank their hearts and their souls. They stuck together for only one thing: to trample on some other woman [...] whether it was by throwing stones or by mean gossip. It was the only kind of loyalty they seemed to have. Men were different. They might hate each other but they stuck together against the world and against any woman who would ensnare one of them. "As long as I live, I will never have a woman for a friend. I will never trust any woman again, except maybe Mama and sometimes Aunt Evy and Aunt Sissy."

Related Characters: Francie Nolan (speaker), Aunt Sissy , Aunt Evy, Katie Nolan, Joanna

Related Themes:

Page Number: 237-238

Explanation and Analysis

These are Francie's thoughts after watching Joanna get stoned by a group of women in her neighborhood who are outraged that the young woman would go out in public with her illegitimate baby daughter. Joanna is an outcast, not so much because she had sex out of wedlock, but because she didn't then marry the boy who impregnated her. The women who condemn Joanna are not interested in what prevented the boy from marrying her (his mother and sisters convinced him that Joanna was trying to trap him), and instead use her to position themselves as morally superior for following the convention of ensuring that they were married before their children came along.

Francie is outraged by their hatred of Joanna and uses this experience as proof that women are no good because they have no sense of loyalty. Francie is too young not to read the encounter literally and doesn't yet have the education to help her understand the misogyny and patriarchal dominance that undergirds the women's behavior. The women have internalized the beliefs that their virginity and their insistence on saving sex only for marriage makes them nobler, though this arrangement only makes it easier for men to control them. Furthermore, it appalls Francie that Joanna should be criminalized for falling in love and enjoying sex. Francie's appreciation for romance collides with the women's puritanical rigidity.

Chapter 33 Quotes

❝ If normal sex was a great mystery in the neighborhood, criminal sex was

an open book. In all poor and congested city areas, the prowling sex fiend

is a nightmarish horror that haunts parents. There seems to be one in every neighborhood. There was one in Williamsburg in that year when Francie turned fourteen. For a long time, he had been molesting little girls, and although the police were on a continual lookout for him, he was never caught. One of the reasons was that when a little girl was attacked, the parents kept it secret so that no one would know and discriminate against the child and look on her as a thing apart and make it impossible for her to resume a normal childhood with her playmates.

Related Characters: Carney, Katie Nolan, The Child Molester, Francie Nolan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 251

Explanation and Analysis

Francie is nearly fourteen and developing curiosity about sex. This is aided by her developing body. She writes in her diary about being pinched by Carney after turning in a pile of junk for cash, and the encounter foreshadows her eventual abuse at the hands of the molester who has been terrorizing her neighborhood. Parents do not bother to explain the desires for sensory pleasure and intimacy that make up "normal" sexual relations, but they are eager to

discuss the terror of being violated by a predator. Parents thus use the sex fiend, however inadvertently, to reinforce the sexually repressive view that sexuality is a thing to be avoided and feared.

The unwillingness of parents to report sexual assaults to the police results from concern over their children (presumably, always their daughters) being regarded as spoiled. A little girl who has been molested is, in their view, no longer a virgin; unwanted and illicit sexual experience still counts as sexual experience. Smith describes a victim of sexual assault as "a thing apart" to underscore how she is characterized thereafter by her experience, which causes others to lose sight of who she is.

Chapter 39 Quotes

❝ One delves into the imagination and finds beauty there. The writer,

like the artist, must strive for beauty always [...] Drunkenness is neither truth nor beauty. It's a vice. Drunkards belong in jail, not in stories. And poverty. There is no excuse for that. There's work enough for all who want it. People are poor because they're too lazy to work. There's nothing beautiful about laziness.

Related Characters: Miss Garnder (speaker), Katie Nolan, Johnny Nolan, Francie Nolan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 321-322

Explanation and Analysis

Miss Garnder, Francie's English teacher at her new school, explains why she has been giving Francie C's in English composition. Instead of writing about the mundane yet pleasant things that inspired Francie's previous stories, Francie has been written stories based on her difficult family life. Miss Garnder rejects these stories without understanding their inspiration, because they remind her of the ugliness and vulnerability that exists in the world.

Miss Garnder speaks to Francie with great authority about life but understands little about it. She insists that drunkenness is not truth but merely "a vice," though vices exist in the world and are, therefore, as real as anything else. She also argues that the poor are to blame for their own condition because they are lazy. Miss Garnder is a kinder teacher than Francie's previous instructor, Miss Briggs, but her views toward those in poverty are ultimately no different. Miss Garnder looks down on the poor and is judgmental toward those who exhibit weakness. Francie will later develop the maturity to pity Miss Garnder for her single-minded need to be right in order to justify her lack of empathy for those who have had more difficult lives.

Chapter 52 Quotes

❝ "People always think that happiness is a faraway thing," thought Francie, "something complicated and hard to get. Yet, what little things can make it up; a place of shelter when it rains—a cup of strong hot coffee when you're blue; for a man, a cigarette for contentment; a book to read when you're alone-just to be with someone you love. Those things make happiness."

Related Characters: Francie Nolan (speaker), Corporal Leo "Lee" Rhynor, Johnny Nolan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 457

Explanation and Analysis

Francie is out on her second date with Lee. On their way home, it starts to rain, and the couple takes shelter in the doorway of a vacant store. Lee announces that he's leaving early in the morning to go back to Pennsylvania so that he can spend time with his mother before shipping out to France. He asks Francie to spend the night with him and tells her that he loves her. Francie chooses not to spend the night with him, due to the facts that she is a virgin and Lee has a fiancée back home. However, she enjoys the chaste moment that she shares with him.

Francie recognizes happiness as something that exists in the present. In this way, she is different from her parents, who have always imagined a better life in the future or in another setting. Her mention of "a cup of strong hot coffee" as a source of happiness is reminiscent of moments during her childhood when she would comfort herself with a cup of coffee when she was alone in the family flat. Similarly, the books she read while growing up also served as sources of companionship. Francie combines these objects, on which she learned to depend, with the things that bring her happiness in adulthood. Francie's appreciation of simple comforts cause her to resemble Johnny, who also took comfort in mundane things, such as cups of coffee and sunny days.

And he asked for her whole life as simply as he'd ask for a date. And she promised away her whole life as simply as she'd offer a hand in greeting

or farewell. It stopped raining after a while and the stars came out.

Related Characters: Corporal Leo "Lee" Rhynor, Francie Nolan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 460

Explanation and Analysis

Lee has asked to marry Francie him and she has accepted his proposal. Lee is the first man who has ever expressed romantic and sexual interest in Francie. She accepts his proposal not because she loves him—she hardly knows him—but because she longs for the romantic fantasy of love about which she has only read. She is also eager to embrace her womanhood and independence, and falling in love is a key aspect of that. Smith illustrates how neither Lee nor Francie understands the commitment of marriage, which is why Lee asks for her hand with such levity. Similarly, Francie offers her hand with no more than the fantasy of marriage in mind; she forgets about the sacrifices and hardships that her mother has endured over the years due to the commitment of marriage. Smith uses the sudden end of the storm and appearance of the stars to suggest that Francie's lifelong feeling of loneliness has dissipated in this moment because she thinks that she has Lee.

Chapter 56 Quotes

He buttoned up his coat jauntily and Francie saw that he wore their father's signet ring. It was true then—what Granma had said: that the Rommely women had the gift of seeing the ghosts of their beloved dead. Francie saw her

father.

Related Characters: Katie Nolan, Mary Rommely, Johnny Nolan, Neeley Nolan, Francie Nolan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 490

Explanation and Analysis

Neeley is preparing to go out on a job. He, like his father, has become a singer and a piano player. Katie, however, is eager to draw a distinction between them: Johnny was an entertainer who sang what others wanted to hear, while Neeley sings and plays what he wants, which she thinks makes him an artist. Katie never says this but implies it, and Francie expresses what she is thinking. Katie, thus, convinces herself that she has turned Neeley into the man that Johnny should have been. However, when Francie looks at Neeley, she sees so much of her father. Their resemblance is so eerie that Francie imagines that she's seeing the ghost of her father. Neeley even calls Francie "Prima Donna," just as their father did. Neeley's stark resemblance to his father, coupled with his ability to avoid his father's pitfalls harks back to Mary Rommely's assertion to Katie, at the beginning of the novel, that things would improve with each generation.

She liked Ben. She liked him an awful lot. She wished that she could love him. If only he wasn't so sure of himself all the time. If only he'd stumble just

once. If only he needed her. Ah, well. She had five years to think it over.

Related Characters: Corporal Leo "Lee" Rhynor, Johnny Nolan, Katie Nolan, Ben Blake, Francie Nolan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 492

Explanation and Analysis

Like her mother, Francie quietly wishes to suffer for love. She also expects to look after a man, just as Katie looked after Johnny. This is what Francie thinks love entails—an element of suffering and depending on the other's need. Ben's intelligence, ambition, and attention to his future appeal greatly to Francie and set him as a foil for Johnny, who had little sense of the future. Francie knows that Ben would complement her well, given his encouragement of her academic ambitions, but she still longs for Lee. Part of Francie's longing has to do with the appeal of people whom we cannot have. Francie hardly knew Lee, but she remains richly engaged in a fantasy of what their lives could have been like together. That fantasy is more appealing still than any real relationship that she might have with Ben, who is more attainable but does not express any need for Francie's affections. Francie neglects the fact that Lee expressed a need for her to manipulate her into going to bed with him. However, this foolhardiness, which Ben lacks, may also partly explain her attachment to that previous relationship.

> She looked towards the window. Yes, across two yards she saw a little

girl sitting on a fire escape with a book in her lap and a bag of candy at hand. The girl was peering through the bars at Francie […] She was a slender little thing of ten, and her name was Florry Wendy […] She looked down into the yard. The tree whose leaf umbrellas had curled around, under and over her fire escape had been cut down because the housewives complained that wash on the lines got entangled in its branches […] But the tree hadn't died […] A new tree had grown from the stump and its trunk had grown along the ground until it reached a place where there were no wash lines above it. Then it had started to grow towards the sky again. Annie, the fir tree, that the Nolans had cherished with waterings and manurings, had long since sickened and died. But this tree in the yard—this tree that men chopped down … this tree that they built a bonfire around, trying to burn up its stump—this tree lived! It lived! And nothing could destroy it.

Related Characters: Ben Blake, Florry Wendy, Francie Nolan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 493

Explanation and Analysis

As Francie is preparing for a date with Ben Blake, she wonders if a little girl is watching her across the yard, just as she used to watch young women preparing for their dates. As she is having the thought, she spies Florry Wendy. The sight of the little girl, only a year younger than Francie when she first moved to Grand Street, with the book and the bag of candy helps Francie recall her childhood self. Florry is a mirror image of who she was, and Francie's ability to see her remembered self through Florry helps her realize that she has grown up, despite having been raised in conditions that sought to impede or prevent her growth altogether. Similarly, the tree under which she sat as a child, which has since been cut down, has grown back. Between the visions of Florry and the tree in relation to Francie, the reader is to understand that it is resilience that has marked Francie's early life. Now that her family is no longer struggling financially and she is moving to Ann Arbor, Francie can "close the window," or move on from this portion of her life, in favor of experiencing something new.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Though most of Brooklyn in the summer of 1912 could be described as "somber," the word "serene" more appropriately applies to Williamsburg. There is one **tree** in Francie Nolan's yard. It looks like "a lot of opened green umbrellas." It grows lushly but struggles to reach the sky. Some call it the Tree of Heaven. It grows in "boarded up lots" and out of trash heaps. It is the only tree that seems to grow out of cement. It seems to like poor people.

The tree appears throughout the novel as a symbol of endurance. It takes on human-like characteristics in some instances, which is the author's effort to indicate that Francie, like the tree, struggles against her circumstances (not only to survive, but to be great and unique in an environment where failure seems predetermined).

It is Saturday in Brooklyn, which is when most people get paid. People eat well, make love, and enjoy their lives before crowding in to mass on Sunday morning. They then sleep for the rest of the day with free consciences. On Saturdays, Francie and her brother, Neeley, go to the junkie. Like many other Brooklyn kids, they collect rags, paper, metal, and other bits of trash during the week, then they haul it in to Carney's. Other kids taunt them for being rag-pickers, though those children also pick around in trash to earn much needed money for their families.

Life in this Brooklyn community revolves around pay day. People are not particularly interested in money, but it is the means with which they can live meaningful and enjoyable lives amidst the drudgery of their obligations. Though rag-picking is a good way of making money, the poor children are too proud to admit that they scavenge in exchange for cash.

Carney's junk business is located in a former stable that is in disrepair. He always gives Francie an extra penny if she does not shrink away from him when he pinches her cheek. He gives her sixteen cents for the junk, which Neeley divides. Francie allows Neeley to handle the money because he is the boy. He puts eight cents in the bank, according to their rule, and splits the remaining eight cents between them.

Carney's behavior with little girls foreshadows Smith's later exploration of the exploitation and abuse of little girls. What seems like a harmless action is indicative of Carney's strange need for attention from little girls and his willingness to reward that attention with money.

Francie and Neeley then head to Cheap Charlie's candy store. It is a penny candy store that caters particularly to children who have just turned in junk for cash. It is, however, "a boy's store," so Francie only stands in the doorway while Neeley picks penny candy over a penny prize. Francie has never heard of anyone winning one of the nice prizes behind the counter, including roller skates, a catcher's mitt, and a doll with real hair. Francie decides that, one day, when she has fifty cents she will buy all of the picks on the board and win all of the prizes.

Cheap Charlie's is one of the places where Francie engages in her fantasy of having all of the things that her parents cannot afford to buy for her. The fact that Charlie's is regarded as "a boy's store" suggests that these items are more elusive and unattainable for Francie due to her gender. Though Francie will one day work, like her mother, there is an understanding that her wages will be for her children.

Francie then goes across the street to Gimpy's candy store. Gimpy was long regarded as a gentle man who was kind to children, until he lured a little girl into the back room of his store to molest her. Francie thinks about spending one of her pennies for a Gimpy Special—a prize bag. She stands in line behind Maudie Donovan. Maudie chooses a large bag and gets a few pieces of candy and "a coarse cambric handkerchief." Once, Francie got "a small bottle of strong scent." Francie decides not to spend her penny at Gimpy's.

Strangely, the community allows Gimpy to keep his candy store open, despite the common knowledge about his crime. This willingness to keep his open secret implies that the community values Gimpy's business too much to run him out of town. It is significant, too, that a child molester would choose a business that gives him direct access to children and that he specializes in gifts for girls.

Francie walks up Manhattan Avenue to Broadway, which is the location of the finest nickel-and-dime store in Brooklyn. With the addition of Carney's penny, Francie has a nickel to spend in the store. She enjoys touching all of the things, with the possibility that she can buy something. After "an orgy of touching things," she settles on a nickel's worth of pink-and-white peppermint wafers. She walks back home down Graham Avenue, which is a Jewish ghetto. She remembers how her mother told her that Jesus was Jewish, though Francie thought he was Catholic.

For Francie, there is more pleasure in the possibility of buying things than there is in the actual act. In a way, her poverty gives her more appreciation for things and a greater understanding of the ephemerality of objects—she can never possess all the things that she wants, so she enjoys her short time with them. Her misunderstanding about Jesus is less the result of possessiveness than childhood ignorance.

It is noon when Francie arrives home. Her mother, Katie, comes in soon after her with her broom and pail. She works as "a janitress" and keeps three tenement houses clean. Looking at her mother's pretty face and well-formed hands, Francie thinks that people would find it difficult to believe that she scrubs floors to support a family of four. People in the neighborhood, however, know her situation: she is married to Johnny Nolan, a loveable and handsome drunk.

Katie is a woman who lives according to necessity, whereas Johnny is someone who lives according to his desires. Both are reacting, albeit in different ways, to the desperation of their circumstances. Katie finds meaning through her ability to provide for her family, while Johnny finds it by engaging in what brings him pleasure.

After Francie puts the eight cents from junk-collecting into the family bank, Katie instructs her on how to buy lunch. Francie is to take eight cents for "a quarter loaf of Jew rye bread" and is to ensure that it is fresh. Katie then tells her to go to Sauerwein's delicatessen and ask for "the end-of-the-tongue for a nickel." When she gets to Sauerwein's, he tells Francie that he has saved this part of the cow for Katie because he likes her and he tells Francie to share this information with Katie. Francie does not like Mr. Sauerwein and will not tell her mother what he said.

Francie's distaste in response to Mr. Sauerwein's request comes from both her jealousy that a man other than her father would take interest in Katie and, possibly, from Francie's growing awareness of the entitlement of some men. She seems to resent Sauerwein's implication that his willingness to save Katie a piece of meat entitles him to special attention from her mother.

At the baker's, Francie picks out four buns with the most sugar on them. Johnny does not come home for dinner. Usually, he spends Saturdays at the Union Headquarters, waiting for a job. Francie, Neeley, and Katie have a nice dinner without him. They slice up the rye bread and each eat two pieces with butter and thick slices of the cow's tongue. They each have a sugar bun with hot coffee. Katie always makes a pot in the morning, then reheats it as the day goes on, adding chicory to make it taste stronger. Everyone in the household gets three cups a day with milk. Even when one is alone in the flat with nothing to do, a cup of hot, bitter, black coffee makes you feel like you have something.

Though the family has "a nice dinner" without him, Johnny's absence is deeply felt. Francie picks out four buns, indicating that she never neglects him. Her ability to take comfort in a cup of coffee may also come from her sense of missing her father on Saturdays and of missing the companionship of children (other than her brother) in general. Her ability to appreciate the coffee while she is alone in her flat indicates her understanding that there are some people who do not even have this benefit.

After having her coffee, Francie goes to Losher's bread factory to buy the family's semi-weekly supply of stale bread. Francie waits for the double doors to open, which will release the bread. In the meantime, she plays one of her favorite games: creating stories for the other customers. She watches an old man with no teeth and battered shoes. She imagines what he must have been like as a baby and as a young man. Suddenly, the double doors open and the bread truck backs up. Francie intensely calls out for "six loaves and a pie not too crushed." The counterman is impressed by her intensity, gives her what she asks for, and takes her two dimes. She pushes her way out of the crowd and drops a loaf, which she is unable to pick up; there is no room to bend over in the massive crowd.

Francie enlivens mundane tasks by engaging in the practice of storytelling. Her habit not only makes an excursion to the bread factory less tedious, it also enriches her connection to humanity and enhances her ability to sympathize with those whom others might normally overlook. Francie's "intensity" in response to the counterman illustrates the competition for affordable food. There is no shortage of bread at this time, but wages are too low for people to afford bread at the normal price.

When Francie returns home, she finds out that Katie has gone out with Aunt Sissy to see a matinee, and Neeley is heading to the lots to play baseball. Francie follows him there, though Neeley does not want her around. She has nothing to do until the library opens at 2:00. Three of Neeley's friends are waiting for him. They bully a Jewish boy on their way to the lot. They chase another boy who sells pretzels, until his mother yells at them to leave her son alone and get off of their block. When the boys finally arrive at the lot, they start a four-man baseball game. They play furiously, sweating, cursing, and punching each other. Francie tires of watching them. She walks to the library.

Though the Nolans are poor, they spend their Saturdays engaging in the leisure activities they like. Katie and Sissy choose the escape of the movies. Neeley, like many neighborhood boys, plays baseball but extends that competitiveness in his interactions with other children. The children compete for territory, determined by ethnic and religious loyalties, and they menace children who appear to have more than they, such as the pretzel seller.

CHAPTER 2

The library is "a little old shabby place." Francie thinks that all of the world's books are in the library and she plans to read all of the world's books. Francie enters and closes the door quietly behind her, as one should in the library. She looks at the little **brown bowl** at the end of the librarian's desk. It is holding multi-colored nasturtiums. Francie decides that, when she gets her own home, she'll have a desk like the librarian's. It'll hold pencils, "always sharpened for writing," a brown bowl "with a flower or some leaves or berries always in it," and plenty of books.

Despite the unimpressive appearance of the library, it contains, for Francie, the entire world. The books reinforce her awareness that the world is much bigger than her Brooklyn neighborhood. The contents of the brown bowl offer some contact with natural beauty.

Francie is working her way through the alphabet and is in the B's. She takes a book to the librarian and asks her if she can recommend a book for an eleven-year-old girl. Francie asks the librarian the same question each week and the librarian never looks up. All of the names on the library cards are the same to her. A smile or a friendly comment from this woman would mean a lot to Francie. The librarian only recommends two books each time Francie asks the question: *If I Were King* by McCarthy and *Beverly of Graustark*. Francie takes her books and goes home.

The library is a place that expands Francie's awareness of humanity, and that includes her experience of the librarian's callous indifference. The librarian's attitude suggests classism—the children who attend the library are poor—but it could also be the result of her irritation with the city's overcrowding and her own dislike of children.

Francie reads and feels at peace with the world, alone in the apartment with a small bowl of candy to eat. By 4:00 PM, tenements across from Francie's yard come to life with women returning from their shopping, children returning home, and young women preparing for dates. Francie focuses on the young women, watching them wash at their kitchen sinks because none of the tenement flats have bathrooms.

Francie's actions in the apartment foreshadow the end of the novel, when a little girl with a bag of candy will be watching her prepare for a date. The closeness of living in tenements opens people's private lives up to spectatorship. Francie learns as much from these scenes as she does from her books.

Francie stops reading when Fraber's horse and wagon return with their driver, Frank. The horse is beautiful and its stable is finer than any house in Brooklyn. Fraber is a local dentist. Frank dons an apron while he washies the horse, Bob. Bob makes her think of Uncle Willie Flittman's horse, Drummer, who pulls a milk wagon. However, Willie and Drummer have a hostile relationship, whereas Bob and Frank are friends. To hear Uncle Willie describe it, the horse stays awake at nights thinking of ways to torment Willie.

Smith points out the beauty of the stable in contrast to the houses in Brooklyn to suggest that the animals that belong to the well-to-do are sometimes better treated and better kept than human beings. The contrast in the men's relationships to their horses reveals something about their relationships to the world. Willie is suspicious and contentious due to his depression.

On the street, half a dozen boys loiter and cling to the stable's iron gate, watching Frank wash the horse. They make up stories about the gentle animal being a fearsome creature. One of them picks up a stone and throws it at Bob. The boys wait for the horse to lose its temper. Instead, Frank speaks to them gently, warning them not to do it again; otherwise, he'll "break a couple of [their] asses." Frank then scoops down and picks up a cobblestone as though to throw it. The larger boys leave, but the smaller ones remain because they want to see Frank feed Bob his oats.

Having only seen and experienced brutality, the children project that onto Bob. When Frank threatens them to protect Bob, he is speaking to them in the only language they understand. The poverty and violence of their community makes it difficult for them to grasp how Frank could express such tenderness toward an animal.

After Frank hangs Bob's feed bag on his neck, he gets to work washing the wagon. He whistles "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" while he works, which draws the attention of Flossie Gaddis. She sticks her head out the window and greets Frank, who is indifferent to her presence. She invites him to the Shamrock Club, but he makes a lazy excuse to get out of the date. Flossie tells him to "go to hell" and slams the window shut. Francie feels sorry for Flossie because she is always running after men. Aunt Sissy runs after men, too, but the men run "to meet her halfway." Flossie is starved for men, while Sissy has a healthy appetite, and this makes a big difference.

Flossie's feeling that she has to run after men comes as a result of her disfigured arm, which she knows makes her less appealing than other women. Flossie is "starved for men" because she is lonely and worries that she will not experience the love and romantic attention that are normal aspects of most women's lives. She chases after men out of a fear that she will miss out on the companionship that she desires.

CHAPTER 3

Johnny comes home at 5:00 PM. He asks where Katie is and Francie says that she went to a movie with Aunt Sissy. Johnny is happy because it is a beautiful day and he has a job. The day feels like "a present" to him. Francie also gives him a slice of rye bread. Johnny is pleased to see that it was prepared by union bakers.

Johnny's romantic outlook on life brings him comfort from the family's poverty as well as his feeling of impotence in both being unable to change their circumstances and forcing the family to rely on Katie to stay afloat.

Francie once visited the Union Headquarters to bring Johnny an apron and carfare to get to a job. He was wearing the tuxedo that he wore all the time because it was his only suit. He introduced her to the other men, who looked at "the thin child in her ragged dress" and exchanged glances. Unlike Johnny, they all had regular jobs and only worked as singing waiters for extra money. Johnny spoke proudly of his wife and children, but Francie overheard a short man talking about how Johnny takes his wages home to Katie but spends his tips at McGarrity's bar. Francie was hurt to hear this, but she figured that the short man and the man to whom he was talking are exceptions; everyone loves her father.

It disappoints Francie to hear someone speak negatively of her father who she admires to the point of idealization. Her love and sense of protectiveness make her feel as though she has been insulted by what the short man says. However, she also needs to view his attitude toward Johnny as "an exception" in order to remain in denial about the fact that her father is a lousy provider. The men can see that, despite his pride for Francie, he is unable to keep her properly fed. His instability offends their sense of responsibility.

Francie pulls her thoughts away from that memory and listens to her father, who is reminiscing with her. Johnny smokes a cigar and recalls that he was never able to hold a job for long. He describes how he started working in restaurants and saloons, singing and waiting on tables. What he really wanted was to become a professional singer. He admits that he's not a hard worker and never really wanted a family, which is why he drinks. He figures that he'll never really make it in life. However, he married Katie because he fell in love with her and because she's a good woman.

Johnny speaks to Francie frankly about the circumstances of his life, despite the possibility that some of what he says (never wanting a family) might hurt her. He is a creative personality who is frustrated by his inability to fulfill his ambition, due to familial responsibilities. He clings to his art by focusing on the singing-waiting business.

Johnny throws his "half-smoked cigar" out of the window and tells Francie that, if he gets a lot in tips, he'll use the money to bet on a good horse. He imagines winning as much as five hundred dollars! He knows that this is just a fantasy, but he enjoys talking about it. He tells Francie that they—just the two of them—will take a trip "way down south" with the money. Francie loves her father for telling this story. She then takes seven cents to go out and buy him a dickey and a paper collar.

Johnny endures his poverty by imagining the possibility of being very rich. For him, money comes as the result of luck, whereas for Katie, it comes only through hard work. Katie would despise her husband's suggestion of gambling as a legitimate means of earning income. His idea of going down South suggests a wish to escape New York.

When Francie returns, she helps her father get dressed then walks with him to the trolley car. She sees women smiling at Johnny until they notice Francie by his side. They pass Gabriel's Hardware Store and look at a pair of roller skates—something that Katie would never make time to do. Johnny talks as though he'll buy Francie a pair of skates one day. Then, the Graham Avenue trolley comes and Johnny swings himself up onto the platform. He holds on to the bar and leans way out to wave at Francie, who imagines that there is no man as gallant as her father.

There is something sentimental or wistful about the relationship between Johnny and Francie. They share many special moments alone together throughout the book. Johnny enhances Francie's capacity to dream and to think that the things that the family cannot afford could become attainable through a mixture of faith and good luck. Johnny talks about getting these skates in the same way that Francie imagines winning the ones at Charlie's.

CHAPTER 4

Francie goes back into her building and visits Flossie Gaddis to see what costume she has designed. On her way in, she greets Flossie's brother, Henny, who looks healthy, despite having tuberculosis. Every Saturday night, Flossie goes to a masquerade ball, wearing a different costume each time, each designed to hide her disfigured arm. The costume that she wears on this particular night is a "popular conception of what a Klondike dance hall girl wore." Flossie has won two dozen "tightly rolled, never-used silk umbrellas," all of different colors, as prizes for her costumes. Francie feels that the Grim Reaper is hiding behind these costumes and their brilliant colors, waiting for Henny.

Flossie and Henny are examples of how some people in Francie's neighborhood persevere and find ways to be happy, despite their suffering. Flossie finds ways to make herself beautiful, despite the perceived ugliness of her arm. She works so hard at designing costumes because she wants her talent to become her distinguishing characteristic, not her childhood injury. Henny's "healthy" look emanates from within—it his will to live, despite his awareness that he will soon succumb to his illness.

CHAPTER 5

Katie comes home at 6:00 PM with Aunt Sissy. Francie is glad to see Sissy, who is her favorite aunt. Katie is wearing a jade green hat, which complements her creamy skin and she hides her workworn hands in white cotton gloves. Sissy brought Francie a corncob pipe, one of the rubber toys produced by her factory. Francie hopes that Sissy will stay for dinner, but she insists that she has to go home to make sure that "her husband still [loves] her." Katie and Francie laugh, but Francie does not understand what she means. Before she leaves, Sissy promises that she'll return on the first of the month with some pulp magazines from her husband Steve's publishing house. Francie reads the detective stories, love stories, wild west stories, and supernatural stories avidly then sells them to the neighborhood stationary store at half-price. The money goes into Katie's tin-can bank.

Having already demonstrated Francie's closeness to her brother and her father, Smith elucidates how Francie relates to the women in her family. Though her mother is a menial laborer, she retains some ability to enjoy her youth and beauty by wearing the jade green hat. When Francie laughs at her aunt's joke, despite not understanding it, this is her attempt to bring herself closer to her aunt and her mother by identifying with their humor. Smith also alerts the reader to Francie's wide-ranging tastes in literature and her business acumen. This is the first time that she finds a way to make money out of her love of reading.


For Saturday supper, Katie makes a meal out of stale bread. She pours boiling water over a loaf, makes a paste, seasons it, then adds minced onion and an egg (when eggs are cheap). She bakes it, then covers it in a sauce made from ketchup, two cups of boiling water, seasoning, a bit of strong coffee, and flour to thicken it. What is left over is fried the next day in bacon fat. Katie also makes bread pudding from slices of stale bread, using cinnamon, sugar, and "a penny apple sliced thin." Sometimes she made *Weg Geschnissen*, which was made from the bits of bread that would normally be thrown out. Katie, instead, dips them in batter and fries them. Francie buys a penny's worth of brown rock candy, which is crushed with a rolling pin and sprinkled on top just before eating. The Nolans live mostly on stale bread.

Katie's ingenuity with the bread results from having to stretch it into several meals. Creativity in cuisine often results from poverty. Katie creates a dish that is not only nourishing (e.g., onion, egg) but flavorful with the additions of coffee and ketchup. Katie calls the bits of bread Weg Geschnissen, which is a modified form of the German verb 'weggeschmissen,' which means "to throw away." Though Katie encourages her children to waste coffee from time to time, they can't afford to do so with bread, which is costly for them and an important source of nourishment.

Sometimes, especially at the end of "a long cold dark winter," Francie craves only a pickle. She goes to a store on Moore Street owned by a Jewish patriarch with "a long white beard, black skull cap and toothless gums." Francie asks for a "sheeny" pickle. The merchant hates this word, though he doesn't know why. He calls her "*Goyem*." Francie heard a rumor that the merchant only sells to Gentiles out of one vat and that he spits in it, or does worse. Francie doesn't believe this. He stirs in the vat, muttering curses. He is thrown into "a hysterical passion" when Francie asks for a pickle from the bottom of the vat. Eventually, he pulls out "a fine fat pickle, greenish yellow and hard at the ends." Francie nibbles and sucks the pickle all day. When the Nolans have bread and potatoes too many times at home, Francie eats a pickle and finds that the repetitive meal tastes good all over again.

The word "sheeny" is an ethnic slur against Jews, though Francie doesn't know it. She only says it because everyone else does. The merchant also doesn't exactly understand the word's meaning, though he knows that people say it to insult him. The pickle breaks up the monotony of the meals in the Nolan home. The sour pickle is a novelty item, which not only tastes very different from what Francie normally eats but also requires her to go into a different section of her neighborhood to obtain it. Thus, the experience of the pickle breaks up the long, depressing winter by providing Francie with a novel experience that she can afford.

CHAPTER 6

When Neeley comes home, he and Francie go to buy meat. Katie instructs them to get "a five-cent soup bone off of Hassler's" and then go to Werner's for ten cents' worth of chopped round steak. She insists that the children not allow the butcher to give them the meat left over on the plate. She also gives them an onion to take with them. When they go to get the round steak, it takes a long time for the butcher to notice Francie and Neeley.

Due to having little money, Katie is careful about how much meat she asks the children to buy, as well as what kind. The butcher does not notice Francie and Neeley because they are children, which makes them easier to ignore than his other customers.

Francie places the order. The butcher is furious when she demands freshly cut meat, despite there being plenty left over on the plate. He hacks off a piece and prepares to wrap it before Francie mentions that it must be ground. The butcher curses and shoves it into the chopper. Just as he prepares to slam it onto the paper, Francie pushes forward the onion for him to chop into it. "Jesus!" the butcher exclaims. Quickly, Francie asks for a piece of suet for frying and he spews more expletives. He slices off the fat, lets it fall to the floor in revenge, then slams it onto the mound of meat before snatching Francie's dime.

This is one of a few instances in the book in which Smith finds moments of levity in desperate circumstances. Francie struggles with the cantankerous butcher so that she can remain faithful to her mother's order. Meanwhile, the butcher, Werner, clearly hates his work, though the author never gives any indication about why. It's possible that he inherited a business that he didn't want.

Francie and Neeley then go to Hassler's for the soup bone. Hassler is a good butcher for bones but a bad one for meat because he grinds it behind closed doors, leading people to mistrust what he gives them. Neeley waits outside with the package from Werner's because if Hassler sees that a customer has bought meat from elsewhere, he'll proudly tell them to get their bone where they bought their meat. Francie orders a bone with some meat on it for five cents. Hassler tells Francie a "stale joke" then goes to the icebox to get "a gleaming white bone with creamy marrow." He instructs Francie to tell her mother to take the marrow out and spread it on bread with salt and pepper to make a sandwich. He then slices off a piece of liverwurst, just for Francie. Francie is sorry to deceive such a nice man.

Hassler is Werner's foil. Whereas the latter hates dealing with customers and ignores children, Hassler tells jokes and gives Francie a free piece of meat. He also provides a tip on how the Nolans can get an additional meal out of the soup bone. Francie perceives him as "nice" because he is more helpful than he needs to be, particularly to customers that do not entirely trust him.

Francie then buys "two cents' worth of soup greens" from the green grocer. She gets "an emasculated carrot, a droopy leaf of celery, a soft tomato and a fresh sprig of parsley." These will be boiled with the soup bone. The pieces of meat will float away from the bone into the broth and fat noodles will be added to the soup. This, with the seasoned marrow spread on a slice of bread, would make "a good Sunday dinner."

Smith vividly describes the condition of the vegetables. She writes "emasculated carrot" to indicate that it's short and the celery is "droopy" because it is wilting. Smith's language contrasts the family's powerlessness, due to poverty, with their willingness to make the best of what they have.

After dinner, which includes fried meat, potatoes, smashed pie, and coffee, Neeley goes out to play with his friends. Maudie Donovan then comes around to go with Francie to confession. The church is "smoky with incense and guttering candles." When it is her turn, Francie pulls aside the curtain and kneels in the confessional. Quickly, she confesses her sins and the priest, Father O'Flynn, absolves them. Maudie is sitting outside on the steps when Francie emerges. Maudie buys an ice cream sandwich for a penny and lets Francie have a bite. They promise to go to confession again the following Saturday.

Francie's religious faith provides her with some moral guidance and links her to her Irish and Austrian heritages. Faith sometimes gives desperate people the ability to endure. However, Smith presents the Catholic Church as a place whose strange rituals make little sense. Francie performs the rite of confession as though by rote, not with any sense of spiritual awareness.

When Francie gets home, Aunt Evy and Uncle Willie Flittman are there. Uncle Willie is playing his guitar. After his last song, he goes out for a pitcher of beer and Aunt Evy treats the Nolans to pumpernickel bread and "a dime's worth of Limburger cheese" for sandwiches. After Uncle Willie gets drunk, he confesses his sense of failure and his feeling that no one—not even his horse—respects him. He recalls how Drummer peed on him once while he was washing him. Katie, Evy, and Francie fight to suppress laughter. Evy insists that she loves Willie, but he no longer thinks this is true. Evy tells him that it's time to go home.

Like Katie, Evy is married to a vulnerable man who relies on her strength. Smith upends gender roles and expectations by portraying most of the Rommely sisters' husbands as weaker and less reliable than their wives. Her purpose in illustrating this weakness is not to denigrate the men but, perhaps, to suggest that they, too, were hurt by traditional gender norms. Johnny is a nurturing man but not a good provider. Willie is a creative type who seems stuck in a job that doesn't suit him.

Before bed, Francie and Neeley have to read a page from Shakespeare and from the Bible, as rule. On Saturday nights, Francie is allowed to sleep in the front room. She makes a bed by pushing two chairs together and placing them beside the window so that she can watch people. At 2:00 AM, Francie hears her father singing softly and coming up the stairs. He's singing "Molly Malone." Johnny and Katie play a game in which she opens the door and lets him in before he finishes the song. Gamely, she opens the door before finishes the final lyric.

Katie hopes that, with this reading instruction, the children will develop imagination and facility with language. This works for Francie, who reads the lives of her neighbors as though they were books. Katie's insistence on reading to her children to expand their imaginations mirrors Johnny's belief that the world can become more accessible through imagination.

Francie and Neeley get out of bed and everyone gathers at the table while Johnny pulls out the three dollars that he has earned. He gives each of his children a nickel, which Katie instructs them to put in the bank. Johnny also brings home some food from the wedding feast, including "half of a cold broiled lobster, five stone-cold fried oysters, an inch jar of caviar and a wedge of Roquefort cheese." The children do not like the food much, but they are too hungry not to devour it. After eating, Francie realizes that she broke the fast that was supposed to last from midnight to next morning's mass. She will not receive communion and will have "a real sin" to confess to her priest next week.

The Nolans have a late-night feast, consisting of the most elegant and expensive food they have ever had. The children do not know anything about the quality of what they're eating. Despite her hunger, Francie feels guilty about eating and, thus, breaking her promise to God. This is an indication of how seriously she takes her Catholic faith. Johnny's generosity with his tips, indicated by his gift of a nickel to the children, complements Katie's pragmatism in this instance.

Neeley goes back to bed and falls asleep immediately. Francie goes back to sitting by the window. Katie and Johnny sit in the kitchen, where they talk until daybreak. Johnny tells her about his work and all the people he has seen. The Nolans are so hungry for life that they fill themselves up, not only with their own lives, but with those of others. Francie looks out the window and sees a girl with her boyfriend. They stand pressed close together until her father arrives downstairs "in his long underdrawers" and chases him away. The girl runs upstairs, giggling. Then, Mr. Tomony arrives home in his hansom cab. He swings back his "white satin Inverness cape" to pay the driver. Francie loves Saturdays and hates to see it end by going to sleep.

Neeley is the only member of the Nolan clan who is satisfied after eating. This is one indication of how he differs from his relatives in his simpler approach to life. Neeley's needs are more easily met, while his parents and his sister remain hungry for sensory experience. Johnny fills Katie up with others' lives by telling her stories about people. Concurrently, Francie watches the stories of others' lives play out on the streets of Williamsburg. These imaginative pleasures take their minds off of their hardships.

During other nights in the week, Francie overhears "the indistinct voices" of "the childlike bride" who lives with her "apelike truck-driver husband." The wife's voice is always "soft and pleading" while his is "rough and demanding." Then, there is a short silence broken finally by his snores and her weeping. Thinking of the girl's sobs, Francie's hands instinctively go to cover her ears. Then, she remembers that it is Saturday; she won't hear the sobs tonight. Sunday will be peaceful, too. She will think "long thoughts about the nasturtiums in **the brown bowl**." Katie and Johnny reminisce in the kitchen, recalling when they first met. Johnny was dating Hildy O'Dair at the time.

Francie relishes the peace of the weekend, when people seem to enjoy their lives and have some respite from the misery that visits them during most of the week. There is a contrast between the unhappy and unequal couple and Katie and Johnny, who are different but not ill-matched. Their memories bind them and give them comfort when they have nothing else. Francie's awareness of the other couple, however, teaches her that not all unions are so peaceful. To forget this asymmetry in life, she thinks of the bowl.

CHAPTER 7

In the summer of 1900, Johnny Nolan meets Katie Rommely. Hildy O'Dair, Katie's best friend, invites Katie along when she and her boyfriend, Johnny, go dancing on Saturday night. Johnny arranges for a date for Katie and the four of them ride out to Canarsie on a trolley. However, Katie dislikes the vulgar boy who has been provided for her. Instead, she watches Johnny dance. She likes his long, slender feet and the shine on his shoes. She admires his "beautiful rhythm." She overhears the girls at the next table describe what "a nifty dresser" he is. Although he is not her guy, Katie feels proud of him. Johnny gives Katie a courtesy dance. Feeling his arms around her and adjusting herself to his rhythm, Katie decides right away that she wants Johnny.

Smith paints Katie as the aggressor in her pursuit of Johnny, which upends traditional gender norms (particularly for this time) regarding courtship rituals. However, her willingness to betray her best friend in favor of a man is in keeping with the stereotype that women are frequently disloyal to one another. It seems that Katie likes Johnny, not just because he is handsome and debonair, but also because he gives her hope. His attention to his appearance is unusual among men of her station.

One day, Katie tells her forelady that she has menstrual cramps and cannot work. She gets out fifteen minutes before closing time to meet Johnny, who is waiting on the corner with his friends. Johnny sees Katie and waves at her. The other boys leave them to engage in a conversation that neither Johnny nor Katie can remember years later. What they remember best is that they realized they were in love.

Katie uses the most common "womanly" complaint to get out of work and meet Johnny before Hildy can reach him. Her actions are calculating, but she is no more guilty than Johnny, due to his equal desire to be with Katie.

When the factory whistle blows, the other girls stream out of the Castle Braid Factory, including Hildy. She smiles "possessively" when she sees Johnny, but the smile turns into a grimace of hate when she sees him with Katie. Hildy accuses Katie of stealing Johnny away and lunges at her with a hairpin. Johnny steps between them and gets the scratch down his cheek that was intended for Katie. Johnny explains that he can't marry Hildy; he never knew what true love was until he met Katie. He expresses remorse for leading Hildy on. Hildy mourns both the loss of her boyfriend and her best friend and walks away "with her shoulders sagging." Johnny runs after her and kisses her tenderly while saying farewell.

Hildy takes her anger out on Katie because of the tendency to see other women as the cause of men going astray. When Johnny steps forward to take the scratch intended for Katie, it is a just assumption of his guilt for leaving her for Katie and for letting Hildy think that he loved her enough to marry her; it seems that he never did. However, Johnny's tender goodbye to Hildy indicates that he may have believed that he loved her and certainly cared for her deeply.

Katie and Johnny become engaged after a four-month courtship. They marry in Katie's church on New Year's Day 1901. Katie's father, Thomas, never forgave her for marrying, because he was no longer entitled to the income that she had been earning at the factory since the age of thirteen.

Thomas resents Katie for giving Johnny the money to which he had been entitled as her caretaker. However, now that Johnny is the man who is supposed to look after Katie, he will get her wages.


CHAPTER 8

The Rommely clan produces strong women, while the Nolans produce beautiful, weak men who grow "handsomer, weaker, and more beguiling with each generation." After Andy Nolan dies, the boys swear that they will never leave their mother, Ruthie. Six months later, Johnny marries Katie. Johnny's choice earns Katie her new mother-in-law's hatred. Ruthie hoped to keep "all of her fine boys home" until either she or they died. Ruthie becomes sure that Katie tricked Johnny into marrying her.

Smith performs a gender reversal in which it is the Nolan men who are beautiful and vulnerable, while the Rommely women are strong and hearty. Though Smith mentions that the Rommely women are "pretty," she focuses far more on the men's beauty. The beauty of the Nolan men complements their ephemeral existences: beauty doesn't last long and neither do they.

Georgie and Frankie like Katie, but they resent Johnny for leaving them to look after their mother. As a wedding present, they decide to give Johnny and Katie Andy's old pillow. Ruthie sews a new ticking over it to hide the ugly stain that Andy made shortly before he died. They consider the pillow too good for ordinary use and only bring it out when someone is sick. It becomes known in the family as "the sick pillow." Neither Katie nor Francie know that it was once "a death pillow."

Ruthie Nolan has an unhealthy attachment to her sons, which likely results from her perpetual loneliness after the death of her husband, Mickey. The gift of Andy's pillow foreshadows Johnny's own death years later. Though he is found huddled in a doorway, he will die soon thereafter in a hospital bed.

About a year after Johnny got married, Frankie, "whom many thought even handsomer than Andy," stumbles home drunk and falls on a makeshift spiked fence that someone made to protect a square foot of grass in front of their house stoop. He gets up and makes it home, where he dies overnight. Frankie, like the other Nolan boys, dies young and in a way that is brought out by recklessness. Johnny is the only one of them to make it to thirty.

Frankie, like Johnny, probably had a drinking problem. Like Frankie, Johnny, too, will die of recklessness. This pattern among the Nolan boys lends them a romantic, rebellious air. It is difficult to know if the Nolans were really as handsome as everyone says or if they merely seemed so due to their youth and self-destructive ways.

CHAPTER 9

After their marriage, Johnny and Katie go to live on Bogart Street in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Johnny chooses the street because he likes its "thrilling dark sound." The couple is happy in their first year of marriage. Katie persuades Johnny to give up the singing-waiter business. They start a job together taking care of a public school and they both love it. Their day starts in the evening. The school that they look after is "old and small and warm." They walk there together, arm-in-arm. Sometimes, they even skip. They play games while they work. Katie likes to pretend to be a teacher. They especially enjoy cleaning the assembly room, where there's a piano that Johnny can play. At 2:00 AM, they go into the teacher's room and make coffee and eat sandwiches, then they lie in each other's arms on the sofa. They empty the wastebaskets but save pencils and chalk that are "not too stubby." When Francie is growing up, they'll feel "rich" for having so many pencils and so much chalk.

Though Johnny and Katie do not have much, the strength of their love enriches them. Before the children come along, they have only themselves to worry about and this greatly diminishes their worries about money. Katie, early in her marriage to Johnny, mirrors a lot of her husband's whimsy though she maintains her natural practical sense when she asks him to give up the unreliable singing-waiting business. Johnny, at this point in their lives, adopts some of Katie's practicality by agreeing to give up a job that he likes in favor of pleasing her. The children did not exactly spoil this cooperation between them, they instead pushed both Johnny and Katie further over to their own sides, so each could have something to hold on to.

At the public school job, Katie and Johnny each earn fifty dollars a month, which is a good salary for people of their class at this time. In a few months, they are surprised to find out that Katie is pregnant. She continues working, but it becomes too difficult for her to dust under desks. Johnny takes over all of the tasks. The couple is still happy, but Johnny is becoming increasingly worried.

Johnny feels overwhelmed by the responsibility of becoming a parent. He also likely worries about the personal compromises he will have to continue to make to care for a child. Furthermore, Katie will need to depend on him for the latter part of her pregnancy.

Katie is screaming in pain when Johnny and Mrs. Gindler, the midwife, finally arrive. The apartment is filled with women from the neighborhood who reminisce about their own birthing experiences. They shoo Johnny away and attend to Katie, who is in labor all day. He goes to see his mother, but Ruthie uses the occasion to complain about how Johnny will never return to her with a child to look after. He then goes to drink with his brother, Georgie, who is working on a dance. The brothers go to a saloon and Johnny forgets that he is supposed to be at the school working. Towards dawn, Johnny goes back to Ruthie's house and falls into "a troubled sleep." Though he does not yet know it, that night, after twenty-four hours of labor, Katie gives "bloody birth to a fragile baby girl." The infant is born with a caul, which is an indication that she will do great things in the world.

Ruthie uses the occasion of Francie's birth to lament her loss of Johnny, to whom she has an unhealthy attachment. While with Georgie, Johnny neglects his responsibilities. This occurs not only because he is drinking but because Georgie reminds him of the pleasure of singing and dancing, which he agreed to give up to become a husband and father. Johnny's "troubled sleep" likely comes from his feeling that he is living a life that feels inauthentic to him. Meanwhile, Francie is born with little strength but a distinguishing characteristic. The caul foreshadows her extraordinary will to live.

Aunt Evy comes over soon after Mrs. Gindler leaves. She brings along some sweet butter and a package of soda crackers and makes tea. Evy looks at the baby and thinks that the child doesn't look very well, but she says nothing to Katie. When Johnny arrives home, Evy thinks about lecturing him but, seeing his pale and frightened face, she thinks better of it and chooses to kiss him and make him fresh coffee.

Evy notices that Johnny is overwhelmed and has a lot to think about in regard to his new parental responsibilities. Her demonstration of love and her silence are ways of showing him support. Though Francie looks physically vulnerable, Johnny exhibits emotional vulnerability.

Johnny looks at the baby. He is holding some avocadoes that he bought, then he collapses and cries beside Katie's bed. Katie cries, too. She is weak from delivering the baby, but she is the one to comfort Johnny and assure him that she will take care of him. Johnny begins to feel better. He then suggests that they name their daughter after Francie Melaney. They think that it will mend her broken heart if she can be the baby's godmother. The child will also have the name that Andy's fiancée would have had: Francie Nolan.

The avocadoes are indicative of Johnny's wish to provide. When he cries, it is a demonstration of his fear in response to being a father. Johnny's choice to name the baby after Andy's fiancée is not only an attempt to honor his brother, it also suggests that Johnny is living the life that Andy should have had.

While Johnny is in the kitchen, drinking coffee, a boy comes from the school with a note from the principal saying that Johnny is fired due to neglect. Johnny is to come to the school and collect his last pay. Johnny destroys the note and says nothing to Katie. It turns out that some pipes burst while Johnny was away from the job. The principal says that the Board of Education will pay for the damage. He then pays Johnny out of his own pocket after Johnny signs a voucher turning over the coming paycheck to the principal. Though Johnny tries to explain his circumstances, the principal says that he should have been more careful about his job, knowing that he had a baby on the way.

Johnny's firing from this job will be the first in a series of failures due to his neglectfulness as a result of drinking. He says nothing to Katie because he doesn't want her to worry about money. Johnny's attempt to explain the situation suggests that he overestimates others' willingness to sympathize with circumstances or personal weaknesses. The principal's reaction is typical: the property that was destroyed is deemed more important than Johnny's ability to support his child.


After Johnny takes Mary Rommely to see Katie, he goes out to look for another job. Katie confesses that she knows that she can't count on Johnny and will have to look after him. Katie wishes for no more children. Mary says that she and Thomas had little in the old country, but, in some ways, life in America has been harder. Katie asks why her mother emigrated from Austria. Mary says that, in the old country, a man can be no more than his father. He is beholden to the past. In the new country, "he belongs to the future." Mary insists that things are getting better for the next generations because Francie was born to parents who can read and write.

Katie's mother explains the difference between being poor in the United States and being poor in Europe. In Europe, there was no hope in overcoming poverty. Education and the promise of owning property were only bestowed to those who were born into privileged circumstances. America's promise lay in the possibility that anyone, through industriousness and optimism, could rise above one's circumstances.


Katie insists that she doesn't want Francie to work as hard as Katie does. Mary says that the secret lies in reading and writing. She encourages Katie to teach her daughter language through Shakespeare and the Protestant Bible. Mary prefers the Protestant Bible because it "contains more of the loveliness of the greatest story on this earth and beyond it." She says that Katie must tell Francie the legends and fairy tales "of the old country." Mary also points out that Katie should encourage Francie to believe in angels, ghosts, and even Santa Claus to bestow her with imagination. Mary thinks that it's good to believe in something and then not believe. It's important, she says, for Francie to learn suffering; it builds character.

Mary chooses Shakespeare and the Bible because she believes that they are among the greatest works ever written. The legends and fairy tales connect Francie to the world of the unknown, reminding her that there are things beyond human understanding. By believing in Santa and then no longer believing, Mary thinks that Francie will learn early how to handle disappointment and loss.

Mary's next bit of advice is that Katie must own land. Ironically, Katie finds this most absurd, given that she can barely afford to pay her rent. Mary tells Katie how to make a bank out of an empty can of condensed milk. She is to put five cents per day into the can. Mary says that she can do it in small ways, such as bargaining on groceries or suffering cold for an extra hour instead of starting another fire in the stove with a bushel of coal. Katie initially does not believe that this will work, but Mary says that she once saved enough money for a house but was swindled out of it because she could not read or write.

Mary's next lesson is on the importance of frugality and using money as a means to plan for a better future. For Katie, money is so scarce that she can't imagine having enough to put away toward savings. However, Mary reminds her that there are small things that one can do to prepare for the future. Mary's story of being swindled out of land was a common one in the late-19th and early-20th century, particularly during the land grabs in the Plains.

Mary then saved again, though it was harder with all of the children. Then, when the Rommelys moved, Thomas found the money and bought a rooster and many hens. He said that they would profit from the eggs. On the first night, "twenty starving cats" killed some of the chickens, Mary says that some Italians stole more, and the police then came and told Thomas that it was illegal to keep chickens in the yard. The cop demanded five dollars not to take Thomas to the station. There, alas, went the last of Mary's savings. Still, she is saving again.

Mary's story about Thomas reinforces the notion that men sometimes believed that they had better skills than their wives with managing money, but often ended up squandering it. Thomas's scheme to get rich off of chickens humorously alludes to the expression, "Don't count your chicks before they hatch." He was so sure that the plan would work that he didn't account for these mishaps.

Sissy goes to Katie's apartment after work. She declares Francie "the most beautiful baby in the world," though Johnny is skeptical, given how "blue and wizened" she is. Sissy then goes out and buys deli treats on credit. She brings the supper of sliced cow's tongue, smoked salmon, smoked sturgeon, and crisp rolls for she, Katie, and Johnny to share. Sissy announces that she is going to stay overnight, which worries Katie because there is only one bed. Sissy then says that she should sleep with Johnny so that she could get "a fine baby like Francie." Katie frowns. Though her sister is joking, there is "something true and direct about Sissy." Katie begins to lecture her, but Johnny announces that he needs to go over to the school. He cannot yet tell Katie that he lost his job there.

Sissy's universal love for children, as well as her remarkable insight despite her naivete, allow her to see what is beautiful about Francie long before anyone else can. Sissy's joke about sleeping with Johnny goes unappreciated because Katie thinks that, on some level, her sister may mean it. Despite their closeness, Katie doesn't entirely trust Sissy due to her promiscuity. Meanwhile, Johnny fears telling Katie that he lost his job because he knows that she'll worry about money. He doesn't yet know that Katie has already made up her mind about him being unreliable.

Johnny's brother, Georgie, tells him that they need another man at his restaurant to sing and wait on tables. As a result, he drifts back into the singing-waiting business and never takes another job. Katie tells Sissy about her fears and worries regarding the future. She also tells her older sister about the talk she had earlier with their mother. The idea of the bank interests Sissy so much that she gets out of the bed she is sharing with Katie and makes the bank right away out of a can of condensed milk.

Johnny's choice to remain in the singing-waiting business is related to his need to maintain some connection to the singing career he could never have. Katie fears that his unwillingness to find any other form of work will keep them poor. Sissy takes action and makes the bank right away to help her sister feel better and more hopeful about the future.

Sissy starts the bank off by putting a nickel in. She then gets back into bed and gets excited again when Katie tells her about the two books for Francie. Sissy promises that she will get the books and that they will be the baby's christening present. That night, Francie sleeps snugly between her mother and Aunt Sissy.

Katie seems to regard the ideas about the bank and the books practically, viewing them as ways to help her family get its start. For Sissy, it's exciting. She envisions a hopeful new beginning that Katie can't yet see.

Sissy gets "a worn-out copy" of Shakespeare from the files at the library. The librarian gives it to her for a quarter because they were about to discard it. However, they cannot help her with getting a Bible. A few days after buying the volume of Shakespeare, Sissy wakes up one morning "in a quiet family hotel" beside her latest "John" (a man named Charlie) and points to a book on the dresser. He confirms that it's a Protestant Bible. Sissy says that she's going to take it and he says that would be fine; that's why they put it there. Sissy is pleasantly surprised to learn this.

Despite not having much money, Sissy finds ways to get Francie's library started. In her naivete, she thinks that she's stealing a Bible from the hotel. Though she's spent plenty of time in such places, she doesn't know that Bibles are always made available to lodgers. However, the fact that she cannot read would make her unable to tell one book from another.

Charlie worries that Sissy is taking the Bible to reform him, in which case he'll have to go back to his wife. Sissy says that she has no intention of doing this. Firstly, she can't read. Secondly, she has no interest in what others think. She learns good from bad through how she feels about things. Charlie says that he wishes he could marry Sissy, but he's Catholic and can't get divorced. Sissy doesn't mind. She doesn't believe in divorce either.

Sissy's lack of education, in a way, makes her much freer than most people. Her reliance on understanding morality through her own feelings about things makes her more natural and authentic than most people. Though she, too, is Catholic, she doesn't allow religion to dictate how she should live.

CHAPTER 10

Katie insists that Francie will live, but she worries over how fragile she is. This is complicated by her inability to nurse her daughter. Katie believes it when Mrs. Gindler tells her that an old woman named Nelly Grogan put a curse on her to prevent her from nursing, so she asks the midwife how she can get her milk back. Mrs. Gindler tells her to wait until the moon is full, make a doll named Nelly Grogan, and "stick three rusty pins in it." Then, the midwife promises, Katie's milk will flow "like the River Shannon." Katie follows the instruction, but her milk doesn't flow. Sissy tells Katie that her lack of milk comes from her being pregnant again.

Though Sissy is less educated than Katie, she is more attuned to all things corporeal and, for this reason, is able to deduce that Katie is pregnant again. Katie's lack of understanding about her body convinces her that superstition can solve the problem of her inability to nurse. This is the first time in the novel that Katie has expressed any belief in superstition. It leads one to wonder if she's convincing herself to believe in superstition because she doesn't want to face the truth.

When Katie tells Johnny, he worries again. The idea of a second child makes him feel "trapped." He is twenty and Katie is eighteen. He goes out and gets drunk in response to the news, feeling too defeated to do anything else. Mrs. Gindler comes around later to see how the charm worked. Katie tells her that she is pregnant. The midwife offers Katie "a bottle of evil-looking dark brown stuff," which she pulls out of a petticoat pocket. Katie is reluctant and, ultimately, tells the midwife that she doesn't want the concoction. Mrs. Gindler warns Katie against her choice, reminding her of her youth, her difficulties with Francie, and Johnny's unreliability. Before she leaves, the midwife offers her services for when Katie's time comes. She also offers the "optimistic advice" that, if Katie keeps running up and down the stairs, she may have a miscarriage.

Johnny is worried that another child will mire them even more deeply in poverty. Mrs. Gindler's potion is intended to induce a miscarriage. The midwife's belief in the supernatural coupled with Katie's vision of the concoction as "evil-looking dark brown stuff" conjures up the image of a witch offering a princess an evil potion. Katie makes a choice that is the opposite of that of the protagonist of fairy tales by refusing the potion. It may be Katie's Catholic beliefs that keep her from terminating the pregnancy; there's also the possibility that she wants the baby, viewing it as a second chance to have a healthier child.

Francie's brother is born one week after her first birthday. Unlike Francie, he is born strong and healthy. Katie suddenly feels "a wild tenderness for him" and "a flash of contempt" for the weak child she bore a year ago. She is ashamed of this contempt because she knows it isn't Francie's fault. However, Katie also knows that she will love the boy more. She will simply do her best not to let the girl see it.

Katie loves the boy more both because he is healthier and because he is a boy, meaning that his existence will give Katie a chance to fashion him into the kind of man that she hoped Johnny would be. Katie has contempt for Francie's weakness because it reminds her of her own feminine weakness.

Katie names the boy Cornelius, after a noble character she once saw an actor portray on stage. As the boy grows up, he adopts the Brooklynese nickname Neeley. Neeley becomes Katie's entire world, with Johnny taking second place and Francie going somewhere in the back of her mother's heart. Katie is determined to turn her son, who looks identical to his father, into the man Johnny should have been.

Katie's name choice signals her belief that her son will achieve some greatness. By taking inspiration from a stage star, she foreshadows Neeley's future career as a singer and piano player. She is also demonstrating her admiration, however inadvertently, for men in the arts.

As the children grow up, Katie loses her tenderness and develops what people call "character." She still loves Johnny dearly, but she is no longer wildly in love with him. She loves Francie because she feels sorry for her. By the time Neeley is a year old, she stops depending on Johnny. He drinks heavily and only works when he is offered one-night jobs. He brings home his wages but keeps his tips for liquor. Johnny accepts that he's doomed, while Katie refuses to accept this fate. Her "fierce desire for survival" makes her a fighter who gives up her dreams in favor of harsh realities. Johnny, on the other hand, holds on to his dreams, particularly his "hankering after immortality."

Katie settles into the life that she has made for herself. She is no longer madly in love with Johnny because she sees his weaknesses too clearly. Her sorrow for Francie is a projection of her own realization that being born female means that one will suffer because of men. Despite this suffering, Katie insists on getting through life. Johnny, on the other hand, cannot content himself with his life and gives up on it. When his dreams no longer sustain him, he turns to liquor.

CHAPTER 11

Johnny celebrates his voting birthday by going on a three-day drinking binge. Katie locks him in the bedroom so that he can't get more to drink, which causes him to start to get delirium tremens. Johnny wails, begging for a drink. The neighbors bang on the door and tell Katie to do something. By the late afternoon, Katie can't stand it any longer and goes over to visit Sissy at the rubber factory, with her two babies in a buggy. Sissy agrees to come over later and fix Johnny up.

At this time, the legal age to vote was twenty-one. Smith uses the verb "celebrate" ironically because Johnny is clearly miserable and wants to forget that he is only twenty-one with a wife and two children. His experience with delirium tremens is an indication that he is thoroughly addicted to alcohol and has made it so that he can't survive without a drink.

Sissy consults with a gentleman friend who gives her instructions. She conceals a half pint of good whisky between her breasts, laces her corset, and buttons her dress over it. She goes to Katie's and asks to be left alone with Johnny. Katie locks Sissy in the bedroom with Johnny. Johnny begs Sissy for a drink and she offers him one while undoing her corset. Johnny misunderstands and begs her not to go any further. She tells him not to be silly and pulls out the bottle, which he promptly grabs. Sissy lets Johnny take a long drink, then she pries the bottle from his fingers. He eventually falls asleep, and she lies awake, holding him in the darkness.

Katie appeals to Sissy for help because she will provide aid without judgement. Sissy also provides Johnny with the physical comfort and nurturing that he needs, though this is initially mistaken for a sexual come-on. Sissy's maternal attention to Johnny is necessary. He can't get it from his mother who is merely possessive of him and he no longer gets this physical comfort from Katie, who he knows regards him as too much of a disappointment to be affectionate toward him.

Whenever Johnny wakes up and becomes afraid, Sissy gives him a drink of whisky. Whenever he jerks away from her, she opens her arms to invite him back and he rests his head against her breast. Towards dawn, he begins to relax and Sissy leaves him alone to sleep on a pillow. Sissy throws the whisky bottle down an airshaft.

Sissy alternates between giving Johnny drink and nurturing, realizing that he can't live without either. Her breast substitutes for the love and security that he can't get from either his mother, Ruthie, or Katie.

When Sissy goes back into the kitchen, Katie looks at her disordered clothing with "swollen and suspicious" eyes and tells Sissy that she hopes that she has not forgotten that they are sisters. Sissy dismisses the accusation and Katie is reassured enough to focus on Johnny. Sissy says that he will be fine when he wakes up, but she warns Katie not to nag him. If Katie nags him, Sissy warns, she will lure Johnny away. Katie agrees not to nag then breaks down and cries.

Sissy is attracted to Johnny, but it's highly unlikely that she would try to seduce him and even unlikelier that he would submit to her. Sissy threatens this because she knows that it is easier to reach Katie by saying something harsh than it is by being tender with her. Sissy knows that she has to handle Katie and Johnny differently.

Katie wonders aloud why she married Johnny. Sissy says that Katie married him because she wanted to sleep with Johnny but did not want to take a risk "without a church wedding." Sissy insists that sex is the most important thing in a marriage anyway, and if the sex is good, the marriage is good. Katie wonders about Sissy's morality. Katie has no doubt that Sissy is "a bad girl" and that her soul will likely wander Purgatory. She says nothing but leans over and kisses Sissy's cheek. Katie admits that, aside from Johnny's drinking, she loves everything about him and will try to overlook what she doesn't like. However, this is a lie; Katie is not the type to overlook things.

Katie doesn't want to admit that there may be some truth in what Sissy is saying. To avoid that truth, she characterizes Sissy as "a bad girl"—that is, she accepts everyone else's belief that Sissy is immoral because she is uninhibited in her desire for sex and her pursuit of it. Katie did "the right thing" by marrying Johnny but now realizes, too late, that he was never really equipped to be a husband.

CHAPTER 12

Katie is ashamed to stay in the neighborhood after Johnny's drinking binge. She finds a house where she can get free rent in exchange for keeping the building clean. Katie packs their few belongings and has it all loaded into an ice wagon. The first thing she does in the new home is nail down the bank in the closet. While she puts up the lace curtains, Mary Rommely comes over and sprinkles the rooms with holy water to drive out devils. By supper time, they are settled in. After supper, Katie reads the babies to sleep with a page of Shakespeare and a page of the Bible. The Nolans then go to sleep at their new home on Lorimer Street, which is still in Williamsburg but almost where Greenpoint begins.

Katie is ashamed that everyone in their old neighborhood found out about Johnny's alcoholism. Unlike Sissy, a good reputation is important to Katie. It may have also been important for her to leave the old apartment so that she could put the memory of Johnny's bad night behind the family. Mary's act of sprinkling the apartment with holy water seems to be an attempt to ward off another incident like the one that convinced Katie to move.

CHAPTER 13

Lorimer Street is "more refined" than Bogart Street. Its residents are comprised of mail carriers, firemen, and store owners who do well enough not to have to live in their back rooms. The Nolans' flat has a bathroom with a bathtub. To Francie, this is the largest body of water she has ever seen. Katie and Johnny work to keep the building clean in exchange for their rent. During the summer, the children spend most of their days on the stoop. They are the only children in the building. Francie is nearly four and already responsible for watching Neeley, who is nearly three, while their parents work.

By "more refined," Smith is implying that people who live on Lorimer Street make more money and have steadier jobs than those who live on Bogart Street. As a result, the Nolans live in a nicer apartment. The fact that Francie and Neeley are the only children in the building also suggests that the mail carriers, firefighters, and store owners who live in the building are mostly unmarried. The benefit is that Neeley and Francie have their own outdoor space.

A year passes. Katie works harder every season. Johnny works less and drinks more. Katie continues to read to them and humorously improvises when she reaches stage directions in the Shakespearean plays that she does not understand. Pennies accumulate in the tin-can bank. On warm days, Francie plays alone in the streets or on the stoop. She yearns for playmates, but she cannot relate easily to other little girls. They make fun of her speech, which is heavily influenced by Katie's readings. Instead, Francie plays with imaginary children, whom she imagines to be nicer than real companions. Still, she finds it difficult to tune out their games and songs, from which she is excluded.

Katie and Johnny are growing farther apart due to a difference in their priorities. Katie is parenting on her own and preparing, single-handedly, for her family's financial future. Francie's longing for playmates makes her lonely, but it doesn't convince her to change who she is. Katie's readings have made her a highly literate and articulate girl, which separates and distinguishes her from most of the children in her neighborhood who are probably not read to.

CHAPTER 14

Life is good on Lorimer Street and the Nolans would have continued living there if it weren't for Sissy's business with the tricycle and the balloons, which later "ruined and disgraced the Nolans." Sissy is laid off from work and, that day, decides to go see Francie and Neeley while Katie is working. She suddenly sees "a handsome tricycle." It's unattended and Sissy wastes no time in seizing it. She gets the children from the apartment and lets them ride it. Then, a woman comes along with a cop and comes at Sissy screaming, "Robber!" She tells the officer that Sissy stole the tricycle. Sissy sweetly explains that she was just borrowing it to give her niece and nephew a ride. The cop busies himself with staring at Sissy's breasts, then turns to the outraged woman, whom he now accuses of being "stingy," and says that he will ensure she gets the tricycle back safely.

The "balloons" may be a euphemism for condoms. In regard to the tricycle episode, the family's shame seems to be a bit exaggerated, though it likely stems from Sissy's willingness to use her sexuality to avoid trouble with the police. In her naivete, she sees no problem with allowing the children to use another child's tricycle without asking. The general mistrust, as well as the poverty, that pervades the neighborhood makes the woman think that Sissy was trying to steal the tricycle. It's interesting, however, that the Nolans blame Sissy for the officer's attention, while it was his gaze that sexualized her.

The thing that finally drives the Nolans from Lorimer Street involves sex, though one could also perceive the episode as quite innocent. On Saturday afternoons, Johnny is at Union Headquarters, waiting for a job, and Katie fixes sandwiches and coffee for shopgirls at Gorling's Department Store. Sissy knows that the children will be alone, so she goes to keep them company. She brings along a sweet-smelling cigar box, some tissue paper, and paste for her and the children to make paper cups to decorate the inside of the lid. At 5:00 PM, Sissy has a chop suey date and gets up to leave. The children beg her not to go. She looks for something in her purse with which they can amuse themselves in her absence.

Smith equivocates between the Nolans' reaction to Sissy's behavior and Sissy's likely perception. As the narrator, this is her way of maintaining objective distance and letting the reader decide about Sissy's behavior. However, Smith is subtle in recounting the episode. The "sweet-smelling cigar box," which Sissy uses for an innocent arts-and-crafts project with the children, contrasts with the "something" in her purse. Sissy brings with her, wherever she goes, elements of innocence and supposed corruption.

While Sissy looks through her purse, Francie sees a cigarette box. On the cover, there is a picture of "a man lying on a couch, knees crossed, one foot dangling in the air and smoking a cigarette which made a big smoke ring over his head." Inside of the ring, there is a picture of girl who is meant to be his fantasy. She is bare-breasted. The name on the box is *American Dreams*. It is produced at Sissy's factory. The children want the box. Sissy gives it to them but insists that they not open it because it contains cigarettes.

Cigarette boxes during this time very frequently contained sexually suggestive illustrations. Sissy's possession of this box signals that she would be perceived as inappropriate—both because the box contains what would have been considered an explicit picture at the time and because women did not smoke during this decade. A woman who did was regarded as being unladylike.

After Sissy leaves, Francie and Neeley stare at the picture. They shake the box and imagine that there are snakes or worms inside, not cigarettes. When they open the box, they find the contents uninteresting. As it turns out, there are no cigarettes inside. The children then make up games to play with the box. Neeley ties the box's contents to a string and dangles them outside of a window. They take turns jumping on the box, breaking it into bits. They forget about the string hanging out of the window. Johnny happens to be walking back home to get a fresh dickey and collar for an evening job. When he sees what is hanging outside of the window, his face burns with shame. He tells Katie about it when she comes home.

To Francie and Neeley, the picture of the partially nude woman means nothing other than what it is. To Sissy, who also possesses a childlike naivete that could also be regarded as a natural and direct approach to sex, there is also nothing wrong with the picture. However, Johnny and Katie, who have socially-ingrained ideas about sex, which teach them that it's shameful, project their own sense that the cards are offensive.

Katie later questions Francie closely. Later, Katie talks with Evy and they both agree that, for the sake of their daughters, Sissy has to stay away because she is "bad." They also agree not to tell Mary because Sissy is "her eye-apple." When Johnny comes home, Katie tells him that Sissy is never again allowed into their home. In the morning, they make plans to move.

Evy and Katie are particularly concerned about Sissy's influence on their girls because they don't want their daughters to be influenced by Sissy's casual attitude toward sex, out of fear that they, too, will grow up to be promiscuous.

Katie finds another building where she can serve as janitor on Grand Street in Williamsburg. The new flat is not as nice as their old place on Lorimer Street. There is no stoop and there is no bathroom. They share a toilet with two other families. The only bright spot is that they have the roof to themselves. On moving day, while Katie argues with the movers, Johnny takes Francie up to the roof, where she can see the Williamsburg Bridge, the Manhattan skyline across the river, and the Brooklyn Bridge.

The new place is a step down from where they were. Unlike the place on Lorimer Street, the new apartment is a reminder of how poor they are. However, their view of the city, which they have all to themselves, makes them seem rich in another sense. The view makes the small world of their tenement seem larger.

Johnny asks Francie how old she is. She says that she will soon be seven, which means that she will be starting school in September. Francie tells her father that Katie said that Francie must wait a year for school so that she and Neeley can start together and protect each other against bullies. Johnny muses at how he and Katie have been married for seven years and have had three homes. He says that the house on Grand Street will be his last home.

Johnny's question about Francie's age is an indication of what an inattentive parent he is. On the other hand, he is able to count how many years he's been married and how many homes in which he has lived, using these as markers, it seems, of his personal devolution, which will ultimately lead to death.

CHAPTER 15

The new flat has four rooms. They are called "railroad rooms" because they each lead into the other. There is also a **tree** growing in the yard. It only reaches the second story. There are four feet of a schoolyard that face onto Francie's yard. An iron mesh fence separates the yards. Sometimes Francie plays there during recess. One mid-afternoon, Francie is in her yard when a little girl goes into the schoolyard to clap erasers together, freeing them of chalk dust. Francie watches her, with her face close to the iron mesh. Katie once told her that this is a job reserved for a teacher's pet. Francie is unsure of what this term means, but she promises herself that, when she's old enough to go to school, she will bark, meow, and chirp as best she can to become a "pet," too.

The tree in the yard is the same kind of tree as the one that Katie pointed to when Francie was a struggling infant. The tree reappears throughout the novel, particularly during times when the family endures more hardship than usual. Francie's experience with the teacher's pet gives her a glimpse of what school life would be like. Not only would she learn new things, which she covets, but she could have the privilege of being such a loved and respected member of her classroom that her teacher would ask her for special favors.

The teacher's pet, aware of Francie's admiration, shows off by clapping erasers behind her back. She then offers to let Francie see them closely. Francie nods in appreciation. The girl brings the erasers close to the iron mesh. Just as Francie reaches out to touch "the vari-colored felt layers blended together by a film of powdered chalk," the girl snatches them away and spits in Francie's face. When Francie does not cry, the girl demands that she should and threatens to spit on Francie again. Francie turns away and flees into the cellar. She waits until the waves of hurt subside. She has experienced the first of many disillusionments and never likes blackboard erasers after that.

When the teacher's pet spits in Francie's face, it communicates to Francie that some privileges will be denied to her, though she will not yet learn why until she attends school herself. At the moment, the girl's act of cruelty seems singular—merely an excuse for a mean child to show another what she cannot have. She doesn't like blackboard erasers after this because it reminds her of a time when someone was mean for no discernible reason.

The most wonderful thing about the front room in the Nolan apartment is the piano. Piano-moving is a great project and a costly one, requiring the movers to rope and hoist it out of a window. The job costs fifteen dollars and the previous renter of the apartment did not have it, so she asked Katie if she could leave it and if the family would take care of it for her until she could send for it. Katie was pleased to make the promise, but the woman never collected the piano, which she bought cheap from a rich house. The woman never learned to play but loved the beauty of the piano, which "dresses up the whole room."

The unexpected gift of the piano gives the children their first exposure to musical culture. Though Johnny regularly sings, it is regarded as a form of entertainment, not an art. The piano is one point over which Johnny and Katie bond, due to his love of performing music and her love of hearing it. However, for her, having the piano is a means of giving her children access to a privileged world that would normally be inaccessible to them.

CHAPTER 16

The most mysterious shop in the neighborhood belongs to a Chinese man who wears a pigtail wrapped around his head. It is a laundry with only one window. When Francie takes Johnny's soiled shirt there, the man whisks it under the counter, takes out "a square of mysteriously textured paper," dips a thin brush into a pot of India ink and makes a few strokes, indicating that "this magic document" is a ticket, or *tickee*, in exchange for the shirt. When Francie returns and pays for the wrapped shirt, the man gives her two lychee nuts. Francie loves them and wonders about the hard nut at the center. Rumor has it that each stone contains a smaller stone. This is Francie's first experience with infinity.

Much of Francie's education comes through her experience of her neighborhood, which is becoming increasingly diverse. The Chinese man, like many Chinese immigrants at the time, runs a laundry because this is the only business that they haven't been barred from. To Francie, the Chinese man and his shop are "mysterious" because his looks, his manners, style of dress, and the lychee treat that he gives her are all parts of a very different world. Unlike her interactions with Jewish immigrants, there is no hostility here.

CHAPTER 17

Katie decides to provide the family with piano lessons. She gets the idea from a white card that was left in a flat window below. She calls the ladies, the Tynmores, who put up the announcement. Miss Lizzie teaches piano and Miss Maggie cultivates voice. They charge a quarter per lesson. Katie bargains instead to do one hour of cleaning at the ladies' apartment in exchange for one hour of lessons. Miss Lizzie initially resists, arguing that her time is more valuable than Katie's time. Katie insists that time is time and she gets Miss Lizzie to agree.

Though Lizzie Tynmore and her sister, Maggie, are just as poor as Katie, they have the benefit of being more cultivated women. This, in Lizzie's view, places them in a higher class that has nothing to do with money. Therefore, Lizzie gets the idea that her time is more valuable than Katie's. Katie insists that all working people value their time.


Miss Lizzie Tynmore arrives for the first lesson at exactly 5:00 PM. She brings a metronome. She removes her kid gloves and blows into each finger, then smoothing and folding the gloves. After limbering her fingers and looking at the clock, she starts the metronome, takes her seat, and begins the lesson. Francie is so fascinated by the metronome that she is paying little attention to how Miss Tynmore places Katie's hands on the keys. The "soothing monotonous clicking" causes Neeley to fall asleep.

Katie and the children see that there is care and preparation that goes into playing the piano. It is not as simple as someone sitting down to play a tune. The hypnotic sound and movement of the metronome seems to hypnotize Katie, while it puts Neeley to sleep. Katie's intention was to get them to watch the lesson so that they could learn, too, but it doesn't work out this time.

When the lesson ends, Katie expresses her gratitude for Miss Tynmore's excellent instruction. Miss Tynmore is pleased by the flattery but makes Katie aware of the fact that she knows that she is seeking instruction for three for the price of one. However, Miss Tynmore agrees not to charge for the children. Katie thanks her, but Miss Tynmore stands up and waits. Katie thinks it is about the agreed upon time for doing the Tynmores' housework, but Miss Tynmore timidly explains that, when she gives lessons, her customers usually offer her tea or coffee. Katie brings her coffee and a sugar bun. The Tynmores survive on these offers of snacks and beverages, though most of their customers offer them no more than soda crackers due to not wanting to pay a quarter and providing lunch, too. So, Lizzie Tynmore looks forward to afternoons at the Nolans, where there is a bun or a bologna sandwich to sustain her.

The Tynmores are good teachers, but they rely on the patronage of a community that can barely afford to pay them. As a result, they live in poverty and depend also on donations of food. The Nolans are more generous than other parents in the neighborhood, though they have as little to spare. The Tynmores are similar to Johnny, in that they, too, are artists who get by on very little money, though the Tynmores are far more reliable. As the sisters age, they will find it harder to sustain their work schedules and will rely more on charity, particularly from the Nolans.

After each lesson, Katie shows Francie and Neeley what she has learned and makes them practice for thirty minutes each day. Over time, all three of them learn to play the piano. When Johnny hears about Maggie Tynmore's voice lessons, he offers to repair a broken sash cord in one of their windows in exchange for two voice lessons for Francie. However, Johnny doesn't know how to repair a sash cord. He takes the whole window frame out of the case and doesn't know what to do with the broken cord. As he tries to get the window back in, he breaks a pane of glass. The Tynmores have to call a window repairman and Katie must do two hours of cleaning to pay for it. The hope for Francie's voice lessons is abandoned forever.

Katie has found an ingenious way to get all three of them piano lessons without spending any additional time or money. She uses the children's instruction as an opportunity to review her lesson with Miss Tynmore. Johnny's plan to get Francie voice lessons unravels due to his lack of competence. He convinces himself that he has the ability to repair a window, despite lacking the skill, because he wants to be able to provide something for Francie.

CHAPTER 18

Francie eagerly awaits her first day of school. She is lonely and wants the companionship of other children. Before school, she has to get a smallpox vaccination. Some foreign parents refuse to permit their children to be vaccinated and those children are not permitted into school. Then, the law goes after them for keeping the children out of school. Francie is now seven and Neeley is six. On a Saturday in August, she instructs them to wash themselves and then go to the clinic at 11:00 AM. Katie cannot go with them because she has to work and Johnny is at Union Headquarters, waiting for another job. Neeley is terrified and begins wailing. Francie consoles him. Part of Katie's reason for not wanting to go is that she can't stand the idea of Neeley being hurt, not even by a pinprick.

Francie, despite her terrible experience with the teacher's pet, still looks forward to going school and finding the company that she can't get from Katie's nightly readings or her family. Due to the absence of their parents, Francie has to take on a sort of maternal role and comfort her brother. Katie's immense love for Neeley makes it difficult for her to see him wounded, so she leaves Francie with the task of taking him to the clinic.

Francie and Neeley spend the morning making mud pies and nearly forget about the time until their neighbor, Mrs. Gaddis, yells down that Katie asked her to remind them of when it was nearly 11:00. They go around the corner to the clinic and take their places on a bench. Mothers sit with their children. When it is Francie's turn, she goes into the examination room trembling. She has never seen a doctor or a nurse before. The sight of the "shiny cruel instruments" and "the smell of antiseptics" fills her "with tongue-tied fright."

The children's playful making of the mud pies contrasts with the severe and sterile environment of the clinic. The existence of the children's dirt in this environment, along with the absence of their mother, foreshadows a scene in which Francie will experience some surprise or harm. This is aided by the fact that she has never before met a doctor or nurse.

The nurse pulls up Francie's sleeve and swabs her arm. The doctor makes his way toward her, with the needle poised. He stares at her arm in disgust and calls her filthy. He refers to how the poor generally do not wash, though water is free and soap is cheap. The doctor is a Harvard man who is required to put in a few hours at a free clinic once a week. He plans to go into "a smart practice in Boston" after he completes his internship. The nurse is the daughter of poor Polish immigrants who worked in a sweatshop during the day and attended school at night. She agrees with the doctor, who goes on to talk about how such people should be sterilized.

The doctor's snobby attitude prevents him from adhering properly to his oath as a doctor—to do no harm. Though he treats Francie, he deeply wounds her self-esteem by saying that, because she is poor, she is unworthy of living. His tirade refers to the development of eugenics during the era, which sought not only to introduce birth control, but also to prevent or curb reproduction among certain populations.

When the needle goes into Francie's arm, she doesn't feel it. She is too hurt by the doctor's words. While the nurse ties a strip of gauze to her arm, she speaks up and says that Neeley is coming in next, and that they shouldn't be surprised to see that his arm will be as dirty as hers. She also says that they needn't tell him, for they have already told her. She turns, stumbles a little, and walks out of the room. The doctor registers mild surprise that she understood him, then sighs in resignation.

Francie resists the doctor through her speech, proving that she isn't what he thinks she is. Francie's speech in defense of herself contrasts with the nurse's complicit silence. The nurse is silent because she doesn't want to implicate herself in Francie's poverty, though she came from a similar upbringing.

That night, Francie comes down with a fever and gets an itch in the place where she was vaccinated. Katie warns her not to scratch it, then the site of the injection swells and turns both dark-green and yellowish. Her mother accuses her of scratching. Johnny comes home and assures Francie that she is fine and that, when he was vaccinated, it was "twice as swollen and red, white, and blue." He pours water into a basin and adds a few drops of carbolic acid. He washes the sore. The acid stings, but he assures her that the stinging means curing. He bandages her arm with his undershirt. He sends Francie to bed and, in the morning, the throbbing stops. In a few days, the arm is normal again.

Katie's lack of sympathy for Francie's infection contrasts with her inability to withstand the prospect of Neeley getting a shot. Johnny attends to Francie, though he does so with his home remedy—carbolic acid. The compound is highly toxic and should not be applied to the skin. Johnny, of course, doesn't know this and he'll use it again, as a palliative, after Francie's sexual assault.

Johnny smokes another cigar and then gets in bed next to Katie, who is already asleep. In one of her rare impulses of affection, she throws her arm across Johnny's chest. He gently removes it and edges as far away from her as he can, placing himself against the wall. He folds his hands under his head and stares into the darkness for the rest of the night.

Johnny's reaction to his wife suggests the distance that has grown between them. Though Katie is less patient with Johnny, it remains unclear, until this scene, if he's still in love with her. It seems that he no longer feels much affection for her.

CHAPTER 19

Francie expects great things from school, but she's disappointed when she has to share a seat and a desk with another girl. She's in school for half a day before she realizes that she'll never be the teacher's pet. That honor will go to one of the daughters of prosperous shopkeepers who sit in the front row. The teacher, Miss Briggs, is "gentle" when she speaks to them and "snarling" when speaking to "the great crowd of unwashed."

It's ironic that Francie wishes to be the teacher's pet, given her unpleasant experience with a little girl who inhabited that role. Now, she realizes that what separated her from the little girl who once spat upon her is class difference. Francie will never have the teacher's favor because she is poor and can't afford to buy her gifts.

Francie, thus, quickly learns about "the class system of a great Democracy." It would seem that all of the children would stick together to protect themselves against Miss Briggs's hatred, but this is not so. Instead, they ape the teacher's "snarling manner" when they address each other. There is always one child who is singled out for abuse. After Miss Briggs finishes with the child, the other poor children turn on him, too, repeating the teacher's torments. Unsurprisingly, they fawn upon those who get to sit in the front row. It seems that they imagine themselves nearer to the throne that way.

Like the nurse at the free clinic who sides with the doctor over sympathizing with Francie, the poor students turn on each other to find favor with their instructor and with the middle-class students whom they would like to be more like. The "throne" is really no more than the position of being respected. The image of Miss Briggs's "snarling manner" indicates someone who doesn't like children unless they can serve her interest; the poor ones cannot.

As for going to the restroom, the children are instructed to go before they leave home in the morning and then wait to go again at the lunch hour. However, the press of the crowd usually prevents a child from using the toilet. Francie notices that the children who sit in the front row are allowed to leave at any time.

Not only does Miss Briggs favor the middle-class children with respect, she goes further in her mistreatment of the poor children by torturing them with bladder pain and the possible humiliation of wetting themselves in front of the other students.

Aunt Sissy, who has not seen her niece and nephew in a long time and is lonesome for them, fixes the problem for Francie. Sissy sees them on a November day shortly after she is laid off. She first sees Neeley, who has his cap snatched off and trampled by a bigger boy. Neeley then goes to do the same to a smaller boy before Sissy grabs his arm. Neeley screams, twists loose, and runs away. When Sissy sees Francie, they embrace in the street. Sissy notices that Francie is trembling and cold. Francie is ashamed and whispers in her aunt's ear that she wet herself. Sissy immediately puts her at ease, saying it could happen to anyone. Francie explains that the teacher will not allow her to leave the room. Sissy promises that she will make it so that Francie can leave anytime she needs to.

Neeley's bullying behavior toward the smaller boy, which results only from his having been bullied, is an indication of how easily influenced he is and how quickly he adapts to what others are doing. Sissy grabs his arm, obviously, out of disapproval of his actions. On the other hand, she demonstrates sympathy toward Francie, who is being dealt with unfairly by her teacher. In her simplicity, Sissy has a strong sense of fairness and is sensitive to those who are treated poorly.

The next morning, ten minutes before class starts, Sissy is confronting Miss Briggs. She presents herself as Francie's mother and says that Francie has kidney trouble and could die if she isn't allowed to use the restroom. She then points to a cop in the street and identifies him as her husband. She says that if Miss Briggs doesn't let Francie use the restroom when she needs to, she'll have the cop "beat the hell" out of Miss Briggs. Neither Francie nor Katie ever learn about Sissy's school visit. Afterwards, Miss Briggs lets Francie use the restroom and no longer nags the child. She still doesn't believe what Sissy said, but she doesn't want to take any chances either. Miss Briggs doesn't like children, but she is "no fiend" either. She doesn't want a child to drop dead before her.

Sissy's lies are designed to make Miss Briggs feel guilty or somehow personally threatened by the consequences of not allowing Francie to go to the bathroom. Sissy knows that Miss Briggs doesn't care about Francie because she's poor and can't afford to buy her gifts. Briggs doesn't want a child to "drop dead" because of how it would make her look.

A few weeks later, Sissy asks one of her co-workers in the shop to write her a note for Katie. The note asks Katie "to let bygones be bygones" and to permit her to go to the house and see the children sometime. Mary Rommely tries to intercede between her daughters, but Katie will not elaborate on the problem. Still, she admits that she misses Sissy. Katie gets news of her sister through the Rommelys' insurance agent. Katie tells the agent that, the next time he sees Sissy, he should tell her not to be such a stranger. He relays the message and Sissy reenters the Nolans' lives.

Katie will not tell her mother about what drove her and Sissy apart because of what Katie perceives as the embarrassing nature of the story and also the possibility that Mary, in all of her holy purity, might be scandalized by the condoms that were in Sissy's possession. Sissy notably doesn't have a similar message sent to Evy, suggesting that she favors the Nolan children.

CHAPTER 20

The day Francie comes home from school and reports that she sat next to a girl who had lice marching through "the lanes of her hair," Katie goes into action. There is no room in her life for additional trouble or worry. So, she scrubs Francie's scalp with a cake of the coarse soap that she uses to scrub floors. The next morning, she dips a hair brush in kerosene oil and brushes Francie's hair vigorously. She then tightly braids Francie's hair. Francie smells up the whole classroom and the teacher sends home a note, forbidding Katie from putting kerosene in Francie's hair. Katie dismisses the note, declaring that it is a free country, and puts kerosene oil in Francie's hair every day.

Katie refuses to allow Francie to catch lice in her hair. Part of this is not wanting to deal with having to constantly wash and check Francie's hair and scalp for signs of the pests. Katie doesn't have time for this. Another part may be that poor children already have a reputation for being unclean, and Katie refuses to allow anyone to think that her children are unclean simply because they are poor.

When an epidemic of mumps breaks out, Katie makes Francie and Neeley go to school with buds of garlic sewn into flannel bags worn around their necks. Children avoid them and people huddle away from the Nolan kids in crowded trolley cars. All the same, Katie's remedy works! It is never clear if the garlic works because other children avoid Francie and Neeley due to the smell, or if the siblings have naturally strong constitutions. However, they never get sick in all their years at school. Francie becomes an outsider due to her stench, but she is accustomed to being alone and regarded as "different." She does not suffer.

Garlic is said to be an old home remedy for curing the mumps. Often, people consume it by putting it in soup, though it can also be applied to an affected area. It therefore doesn't make much sense that the children wear garlic around their necks like talismans. Katie may have misunderstood how to apply the remedy, or maybe it didn't matter to her as long as infected children kept away from Francie and Neeley.

CHAPTER 21

Francie likes school, despite "all the meanness, cruelty, and unhappiness." There are some bright moments, such as when Mr. Morton comes to teach music. The teachers adore him. When he arrives, Miss Briggs wears her best dress and is less mean. Sometimes, she curls her hair and wears perfume. He teaches them sophisticated pieces as simple songs.

Mr. Morton's presence brightens the grim and competitive atmosphere of the school. He also introduces the children to high culture without their being aware of it, due to his knack for teaching complex compositions in ways that children can understand.

Miss Bernstone is as admired as Mr. Morton, though not as well-loved. She teaches drawing. The teachers do not like her. They fawn over her when she speaks to them and glower at her behind her back. She is warm, effervescent, and "richly feminine." The other teachers envy her attractiveness and know that she doesn't sleep alone at night. She is adept with pieces of chalk and charcoal. On rainy days, she sketches "the poorest, meanest kid in the room." Yet, when she is finished, all that one sees of him is innocence "and the poignancy of a baby growing up too soon."

Miss Bernstone is disliked by the other teachers due to their internalized misogyny, which has instructed them to perceive her as a threat because they believe that she has access to men while they do not. They know nothing about Miss Bernstone's private life but make assumptions about her based on her looks. Miss Bernstone, on the other hand, seems able to see the best in others, while her colleagues envision the worst.

CHAPTER 22

Francie learns to read! Books become her immediate friends. She has one for every mood and vows to read one book per day for as long as she lives. She also learns sums and numbers by thinking of them as family members and friends. She takes the game along into algebra, where she thinks of the variables *x* and *y* as sweethearts who complicate family life. As a result, mathematics becomes "a warm and human thing to Francie."

The world opens up for Francie when she learns to read. She develops a personal relationship with books and this is followed by her ability to relate numbers to her life. This skill in personalizing education makes learning more fun and less tedious for her. In regard to math, this trick makes the numbers less abstract.

CHAPTER 23

Francie is out walking one Saturday and ends up in an unfamiliar part of Brooklyn. There are no tenements or shabby stores but old houses that have been around since Washington moved his troops across Long Island. She comes upon "a little old school" whose "old bricks glowed garnet in the late afternoon sun." There is no fence around the school and the yard across from it seems like "open country." Francie's heart turns over and she knows that she wants to go to this school, but she wonders how. Katie will not move just so that she can attend school.

Francie's discovery of this school is not without its class connotations. She doesn't want to go to the school because she imagines that the quality of people will be better—she isn't a snob—but, she is aware of the fact that she will be better treated in a school that exists in a more established community. Her romantic perception of the school doesn't exactly override her good sense: she knows that her family can't afford to move.

Francie waits up that night waiting for Johnny to arrive home. When he does, she whispers into his ear about the school and he says that they will see about it. He tells Francie that they cannot move, but there might be another way. He wakes up the next day around noon and the family sits for lunch. As Katie pours the coffee, Johnny announces that he and Francie will go for a walk a little later. By 4:00 PM, Johnny and Francie set out. On the way, they encounter a prostitute who offers Johnny her companionship and he politely refuses. When Francie asks him if she was "a bad lady," Johnny explains that she is not, only unlucky.

Francie appeals to her father because she rightfully understands that he will find a way for her to get into the school. His expression of sympathy for the prostitute and his explanation of her situation to Francie contrasts with Katie's perception, which Francie has internalized, that such women are inherently "bad." Johnny reveals a more sympathetic and complex view of humanity based on his understanding of his own frailties and vulnerability.

Johnny and Francie reach the school. He tells Francie that they will find a house and use that house's address to write a letter to Francie's current principal, saying that she is moving into the house. They find a one-story white house with white chrysanthemums growing in the yard. He explains that what they are doing is wrong, but is a wrong "to gain a greater good." He says that Francie must make up for the wrong by being twice as good. This means that she can never be bad in school, absent, or late. He then shows her a shortcut to the school through a park.

It is illegal in the U.S. to fake one's address to attend a school in another district. However, the action is morally just because Francie deserves to be in a better school. The white house and white flowers symbolize the purity of their intentions. In Japanese culture, white chrysanthemums are also symbols of death and are displayed at funerals. Smith may be subtly foreshadowing Johnny's death.

The different feeling in the new school largely comes from the janitor, Mr. Jenson. He occupies the furnace room and is a surrogate father to all of the children. He also has a friendship with the principal. The rumor is that Mr. Jenson went to college and knows more than the principal. He took the janitorial job because it pays more than being a schoolteacher. When a boy is bad, he's sent to Mr. Jenson for a talking to. Mr. Jenson never scolds but lectures about good citizenship and doing one's best for the common good. At graduation, the children always ask him to sign their autograph books. His signature is always the finest. In fact, Mr. Jenson's handwriting is so wonderful that he writes out all of the diplomas.

Mr. Jenson is an example of the complexity of class. He purportedly has the education to be far more than a janitor but chooses the humbler job out of economic necessity. He is a man who embraces most American values, except that which connects personal success to financial wealth. The children admire him for being kinder and gentler than many of the teachers and for being more accessible.

Mr. Morton and Miss Bernstone teach at Francie's new school, too. During their lessons, Mr. Jenson often squeezes himself into one of the back seats and then invites them down to the furnace room afterwards for coffee. Francie is happy in her new school. Each day that she passes the white house, she stares at it in gratitude. She picks up debris around the house and ensures that their garbage bag is hung on the fence. The people who live in the house regard her as "a quiet child who [has] a queer complex about tidiness."

Mr. Jenson's presence in Mr. Morton and Miss Bernstone's class demonstrates his appreciation for the arts, despite his being a manual worker. Again, this character shows that class doesn't always determine one's tastes or interests. The white house is a symbol of opportunity. Francie helps to maintain the house to express her gratitude for opportunity.

Francie walks forty-eight blocks each day to get to school, but she loves the walk. She leaves earlier than Neeley and comes back later. Katie refuses to let her carry a lunch, worried that she'll be "weaned away from her home and family." Thus, Francie must report home for a sandwich, which she eats on the way back to school.

Katie's sense of identity depends very much on her husband and children needing her. She worries, too, that Francie's presence in another, more privileged neighborhood will distance her from where she actually comes from.

CHAPTER 24

Francie counts the days according to the year's holidays. Election Day seems to be the greatest holiday of all because it belongs to the whole neighborhood. Johnny shows Francie the Oyster House on Scholes Street where the powerful members of City Hall meet and decide on who will be elected and who will be destroyed. Francie, like most children her age, doesn't understand politics but listens interestedly in the debates between her father and Katie. Johnny is a fervent Democrat, but Katie is both critical of the party's corruption and indifferent to politics. Johnny insists that Democrats fix people up with jobs, while Katie says that Tammany Hall gives to the people but takes double.

For Francie, who doesn't yet understand politics, Election Day is simply a day in which the community comes together and enjoys events. Johnny is a Democrat, due to the party's tendency to support unions. However, his belief that the party actually gives people jobs, reveals that he has a simplistic view of how politics works. Katie is indifferent to politics, perhaps with good reason, because she doesn't think that politicians do anything to improve the lives of the poor.

Though women cannot vote, local politicians know that women wield a great deal of influence over their husbands' choices. They also make a point to woo children, for these are future voters. Therefore, the Mattie Mahoney Association sponsors a boat excursion for children and their parents every summer. Francie is ten years old at the time and as excited as everyone else her age to go on a boat. Despite her contempt for politicians, Katie sees no reason not to take advantage of the good time.

The boat excursion is a promotional event (though, some might be inclined to see it as a form of bribery), to convince working-class people to vote for a Democratic ticket. The event woos children so that they will grow up to associate pleasant childhood memories, like the excursion, with the party's benevolence.

It is a hot, sweltering day and kids run up and down the deck of the boat, which sails along the Hudson River. It decks after noon at a wooded glen upstate. Each child spends a strip of ten tickets that they were given the week before for rides, food, and treats. Francie is tempted to gamble her tickets in a marble game for the possibility of winning fifty strips. However, Francie is a poor marble player and loses her tickets. Neeley has three left and Francie asks for one. Katie, instead, uses the occasion to lecture Francie about gambling. A policeman standing nearby gives Francie three tickets. He points to Katie and asks if she is Francie's mother. He notes how pretty Katie is. Francie confirms that she is. She also points out Johnny sitting beside her and waits for him to say something about how handsome her father is, but he says nothing.

Katie's lecture about gambling is a bit harsh but goes along with her insistence on parenting the children in a way that reinforces that they can only get ahead in life through hard work and by taking as few risks with money as possible. This is a lesson that she has learned both from living with Johnny and from Mary Rommely's stories about financial loss. Francie does not yet sense that the police officer is attracted to her mother, but she begins to suspect that his singular interest in Katie could pose a problem.

When Francie goes back to her family, Katie asks what the cop said to her. She repeats the conversation and Katie looks at her worn hands. She says that she works so hard that she sometimes forgets that she is a woman. Francie wonders why her mother is so ashamed of her hands and also notes that this is the closest thing to a complaint that she has ever heard from Katie. When Francie walks away, Katie asks a woman next to her who the man is. She says that his name is Sergeant Michael McShane. The woman is surprised that Katie doesn't recognize him; he works at her local precinct.

Katie is also attracted to McShane but is embarrassed by her appearance. When she says that she "forgets that she is a woman" it is an acknowledgment that she has become so focused on her role as a caretaker that she has forgotten her own desires—the desire to be attractive and to express sexual interest in someone again. Johnny's alcoholism would make sexual relations between him and Katie more difficult.

A beer keg is next set up. It is "free to all good Democrats." Mattie Mahoney's band then plays songs that champion what a great man Mahoney is. Late in the afternoon, Francie gets the idea to find him and thank him for giving her such a wonderful day. She searches but never finds him. A man tells her that he might not exist at all. It might simply be the name they give to whoever becomes the head of the local Democratic Party. On the way home, it is dusk. Neeley falls asleep in Katie's lap.

What the man tells Francie crushes her idea of meeting the benevolent man who she imagines made this day possible. However, the notion of Mattie Mahoney being a figure of the imagination is even more romantic and mysterious. It makes him seem like a character is one of the books Francie would read.

Katie asks Johnny if he knows about Sergeant McShane. Johnny says that he is nicknamed the Honest Cop. He also notes that it is possible that McShane could run for assemblyman. Johnny explains that his wife is dying of tuberculosis and does not have much longer to live. Katie insists that her type hangs on. Johnny is startled by her remark, but Katie insists that she should have taken her medicine when a decent man married her. Katie then hopes that she dies so that Sergeant McShane can marry again soon and have healthy children. Instinctively, Francie gets up and goes to her father. She takes his hand. Johnny pulls the child toward him and holds her tightly, marveling at how "the moon walks on the water."

Johnny is shocked by the callousness of Katie's remark until he realizes that Katie is developing romantic interest in McShane and envies his wife's marriage to a reliable and financially stable man. Johnny distracts himself from her words, which may be hurtful, by focusing on how the moonlight appears on the river. Francie, too, senses that Katie favors Sergeant McShane over her father. To express her loyalty to Johnny, she takes his hands. Instinctively, he pulls Francie toward him, needing her love and assurance.

Soon after the excursion and picnic, the Democratic organization prepares for Election Day by making shiny white buttons with Mattie Mahoney's face on them. They distribute the buttons to the neighborhood children. The children play games with the buttons. Francie sees Mattie's face everywhere but has yet to see the actual man. On Election Day, a man knocks on the door and hands Johnny a cigar, compliments of the Democratic Party. He also confirms that Johnny should be at the polls at 11:00 AM. Katie thinks that they want to keep tabs on who is going to the polls, and "God help" any man who isn't voting for Mattie. Johnny dismisses her suspicion and says that women don't know anything about politics.

Francie still holds out hope that Mattie Mahoney might be an actual person. The cigar is another promotional service (again, some might view these gifts as bribes to sway voters) to gain support for the Democrats. Katie thinks that the door-to-door gifts are a calculated effort not only to ensure Democratic votes but also to ensure some form of punishment for those who don't vote for a Democratic ticket. Johnny dismisses Katie, because he doesn't want to acknowledge corruption within his favored party.

On Election night, Francie and Neeley participate in the neighborhood bonfire, contributing the wood they have collected. By the end of the night, a Democratic president is elected, as well as a Democratic governor of New York, but all Francie knows is that Mattie Mahoney has kept his seat in office.

Francie has come to love Mattie Mahoney as much as she would love a fictional hero. Mahoney may appeal to her more as a figure of her imagination than as an actual person.

CHAPTER 25

Francie notices that her father is drinking more than usual. Francie dreads "the drinking periods" because Johnny is not the man she knows. He becomes very quiet and regards her as a stranger. When he stops drinking, he teaches his children things and works harder. He takes Francie and Neeley to wealthy Bushwick Avenue, for instance, and teaches them about the different parts of the automobiles that stream the boulevard. There are rumors, too, that the city's next mayor will come from Bushwick Avenue.

Johnny wavers between wanting to be a good father, knowing that he owes his children his time and sobriety, and wanting to drink to forget about being so unhappy with the way that his life has turned out. He regards Francie as a stranger when he drinks because he feels that he is living someone else's life; he has never adjusted to fatherhood.

CHAPTER 26

Children brought up in Brooklyn before the First World War remember Thanksgiving Day as a day when children wore costumes and penny masks and asked for candy. Francie wears "a yellow Chinaman [mask] with sleazy rope mandarin mustache." Neeley wears "a chalk-white death head with grinning black teeth." He combines this mask with one of Katie's discarded dresses, cut off at the ankle so that he can walk. Francie wears one of Katie's "yellow waists, a bright blue skirt and a red sash." When they get outside, the street is jammed with costumed children. Some shopkeepers lock their doors so as not to have to give the children anything other than a lecture about begging. Others, such as the green grocer, oblige by giving them "decaying apples and half-rotted apples." By noon, it is all over and Francie and Neeley go home to a Thanksgiving dinner of pot roast and homemade noodles. They listen to stories of how Johnny went around on Thanksgiving as a boy.

Despite the poverty of the neighborhood, holidays offer bright moments. Though Abraham Lincoln established Thanksgiving as the last Thursday of November in a proclamation issued in 1863, it is likely that some communities continued the tradition of celebrating Thanksgiving when they chose to. In Francie's neighborhood, Thanksgiving and Halloween occur on the same day. This might be a way for the community to conserve resources, for families can use the rotting produce and add them to Thanksgiving meals. Francie's "Chinaman" costume reminds us, too, of how common and acceptable it was at this time to wear non-white identities as costumes.

It's around Thanksgiving time that Francie tells her first "organized lie" and realizes that she wants to be a writer. In her class, four chosen girls recite a Thanksgiving poem and hold a symbol from the day. The fourth holds a four-cent pumpkin pie that is the size of a saucer. After the exercises, the teacher asks if anyone wants the pumpkin pie. Everyone eyes the pie hungrily. They're poor children but too proud to accept the charity. Francie's teacher orders the pie to be thrown away. Just then, Francie says that she will give it to a poor family she knows. Her teacher commends her for her Thanksgiving spirit. On the way home, Francie eats the pie.

Francie lies because she and the other poor children are too proud to accept charity. If she were to accept the pie for herself, the other children might have accused her of being a beggar. Francie can neither stand to see good food wasted nor can she subject herself to the disapproval of her peers. She tells a story to get what she wants without compromising herself.

On Monday morning, Francie's teacher asks her how the poor family liked the gift of the pie. Francie confirms that they liked it. Seeing that her teacher is interested in hearing more, Francie embellishes her lie. She describes how the little girls have "golden curls and big blue eyes" and she gives them names. She says that, if it weren't for the pie, the girls would have starved. The teacher notes how the pie was very small to save two lives.

Francie's teacher knows that the story is untrue, but she's interested in hearing how elaborate Francie can make her tale. Francie has a particular habit of creating families in her stories. Her tendency to do this may be a way to feel better about the unhappiness and dysfunction in her own household.

Francie finally admits that it is all a lie and that she ate the pie. Francie begs her teacher not to send a letter home. Her teacher assures her that she will not punish Francie for having an imagination. She then instructs her on the difference between a lie and a story. A lie is something that someone tells out of cowardice. A story is something you make up based on your sense of how things ought to be. She encourages Francie to tell things how they happen but to write things how she thinks they should have happened. Thus, at ten, Francie finds an outlet in writing. This practice helps Francie distinguish between truth and fiction. If not for writing, Francie may have grown up to be "a tremendous liar."

Francie is worried about her teacher sending a letter home because she doesn't want the school to find out that she faked her address to be able to enroll there. She worries about the implications of that lie while her teacher instructs her on the difference between a lie and a story. Francie's teacher perceives her tale about the poor family as a "story" because she suspects that Francie comes from a family that is not much different from the one she made up.

CHAPTER 27

Christmas is in the air. Mr. Morton starts to teach the children carols and the store windows fill with "dolls and sleds and other toys." In Francie's neighborhood, there is the cruel custom of "chucking trees" that remain unsold at midnight on Christmas Eve. The vendor throws each Christmas tree, starting with the biggest. If a boy does not fall down under the impact, he can keep the tree. On the Christmas Eve when Francie is ten and Neeley is nine, Katie consents to letting them have their first try in this ritual.

The tradition of chucking trees is a kind of initiation ritual in this neighborhood, where nothing comes to anyone easily. Children whose families can't afford Christmas trees, therefore, have to earn them by being willing to withstand abuse. The purpose of this, it seems, is to teach the children that they should never depend on generosity.

Francie has already picked out her tree and it is still there at midnight. At ten feet, it's the biggest tree in the neighborhood and too expensive. The man brings this tree forward first. The neighborhood bully, Punky Perkins, steps up to take a chance on it. The man dislikes Punky and offers someone else a chance instead. Francie steps forward. The tree man laughs derisively while others snicker and guffaw. He tells Francie that she's too little. She pulls Neeley forward and says that, together, they are not too little. Punky protests and the tree man tells him to shut up. He allows the siblings their chance.

The tree man laughs when Francie steps forward because the ritual is reserved for boys, to give them some indication of the difficulties that they'll suffer as men. However, when Francie offers to withstand the impact of the tree alongside her brother, her act suggests that there is no difference between the hardship that they are currently facing or that they will face as adults.

The onlookers make a wavering lane. At one end is the tree man and, at the other, Francie and Neeley stand waiting. The vendor agonizes over throwing the tree at the small children and wonders if he shouldn't just give it to them. Then, he surmises that they may as well get used to having to fight for the things they want. He throws the tree with all his might while cursing the lousy world. Francie watches the tree come toward her. There is "a mighty swishing sound" when it settles onto the ground. Everything around Francie looks "dark, green and prickly," and there is pain on the side of her head where the tree has struck her. She feels Neeley trembling.

The vendor doesn't want to throw the tree because Francie is a girl and because Neeley looks so small and vulnerable. The vendor rationalizes his act to himself by thinking that people are going to "throw hard things" at these children for the rest of their lives, so they may as well get used to it. He concludes that the world is "lousy" for forcing him to provide innocent, hopeful children with a lesson in disappointment.

When some of the older boys pull the tree away and find Francie and Neeley standing and holding hands. Blood trickles from scratches on Neeley's face. The siblings, however, are smiling because they have won the biggest tree in the neighborhood! Some of the boys holler, "Hooray!" A few adults applaud. The tree vendor screams out for them to "get the hell out" with their tree and calls them "bastards." Francie is not offended by this. Profanity is normal in Brooklyn among inarticulate people who use it for emotional expression. She knows that the man really means to say, "Goodbye—God bless you."

The crowd cheers because the siblings have not gotten injured and they've won the tree. Smith's explanation of how profanity is used in Williamsburg distinguishes between the upper-class's perception of profanity's use among the lower classes and the actual use of this language. Her explanation reveals how malleable and flexible language can be.

It's difficult to pull the tree home. When Francie and Neeley get to their building, they call Johnny to help them get the tree up the narrow stairs. Johnny is so excited by the tree that he begins singing "Holy Night." Neighbors gather on the landing, pleased at the sight of something so grand. To make Henny Gaddis smile, Johnny offers his sister, Flossie, the opportunity to be the angel at the top of the tree. Flossie might have normally made a joke about "the wind blowing her drawers off" if she were up so high. However, something about the tree, about all the smiling children on the landing, and "the rare good will of the neighbors" makes her ashamed of her unspoken reply. Instead, she modestly calls Johnny a "kidder."

The scene that Smith illustrates is one of community and warmth on the eve of Christmas. Though these people are poor and lead difficult lives, they occasionally express great affection for each other. There is something particularly pure and innocent about this moment between them. Flossie's thought about making a dirty joke fills her with shame because it taints the perceived purity and innocence of the moment, in which she and the others think briefly that anything is possible.

Katie stands alone at the top of the stairs, watching them and listening to the singing. Though this is a moment of joy for her children, she is thinking of how to get them out of a neighborhood where they must "make happiness out of filth and dirt." She knows that money would not exactly make her children better. She thinks of how the McGarrity children have money but are selfish and mean toward other children. She thinks of Miss Jackson, who has no money but knows many things and works at the Settlement House. That's when Katie realizes that education will rescue her children from "the grime and dirt."

Katie stands apart from all of this because she doesn't want to be swayed by it. The beauty of the tree and the communal spirit of Christmas do not allow her to forget that she's living in a tenement where she has to scrub floors for the family to survive. She is not a materialistic person, so she knows that money will not make them happier or better people. However, education improves people's lives by helping them understand what's going on around them.

Katie imagines how Francie will go to high school one day because she is smart. However, she thinks that Francie will grow away from her as a result of education. She knows that Francie does not love her in the way that Neeley does. She fears that Francie will be ashamed of her or try to make her different. Katie fears that she will be mean to Francie because she will know that her daughter is "above" her. She worries, too, that Francie knows how much Katie prefers Neeley. What Francie doesn't know is that Katie prefers him because she knows that Neeley needs her more. She recognizes that Neeley has music in him, but she insists that he will be educated and will become a doctor. Singing fine doesn't help; after all, it never helped Johnny, whom she still loves sometimes but finds worthless.

As much as Katie wants education for her children, she worries about it creating separating her from Francie. Though Katie knows that Francie is "smart," she has higher hopes for Neeley because he's a boy and she's determined to turn him into her idealized vision of Johnny. Thus, she wants to steer him as far away from a musical career as she can. Strangely, she doesn't worry about Neeley one day thinking that he's "above" his mother, which suggests that Katie may feel a sense of competitiveness with her daughter that she would never feel toward her son or any man.

That week, Francie tells another lie. Aunt Evy comes over with tickets to a Protestant celebration for the poor of all faiths. Initially, Katie demurs because the family is Catholic. Evy urges tolerance and Katie finally allows Francie and Neeley to go to the party. In the large auditorium, girls sit on one side and boys on the other. The Christmas play is "religious and dull." After some singing, a lady comes out onstage and announces a special surprise: a beautiful doll. The doll is a foot high and has real yellow hair and blue eyes that open and shut. The lady says that the doll is named Mary, after the little girl who is giving her away. Mary wants to give the doll to a poor little girl named Mary. There are plenty of Marys in the audience, but none want to admit to being poor. Francie raises her hand before the woman can hand the doll back to its donor.

The doll that is brought out onstage resembles the little girl who Francie made up in her Thanksgiving story. Her life-like qualities make Francie feel like she could have a companion in the doll who, unlike real children, would not make fun of her for the way she speaks or judge her for having an alcoholic father. Though there are certainly other little girls in the audience who covet the doll, their aversion to charity prevents them from raising their hands to claim it. However, Francie's desire for companionship and for the ownership of something beautiful overrides her pride.

The woman invites Francie onstage. Francie delivers her full name as Mary Frances Nolan. The beautiful little girl who is giving away the doll places it in Francie's arms. She then extends her hand for Francie to shake. As Francie walks back to her seat, the others lean toward her and hiss, "Beggar." She thinks that maybe she should not have gone up to get the doll but written a story about it instead. Still, having the doll is better than imagining having it. When everyone stands to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner," Francie sits with her face pressed to the doll's. She holds one of the doll's hands and thinks that she feels it twitch. She almost believes the doll is real.

The other children have contempt for Francie for deigning to admit that she wanted the doll so badly that she would take a handout. The problem is that Mary, the little girl giving away the doll, comes from a class of people that would normally denigrate Francie and other poor children. Though she's kind, the children in the audience wouldn't think to separate her from the middle-class children who gain the favor of their teachers or who think it okay to spit upon them.

Francie tells Katie that the doll was a prize. She knows that her mother hates charity and would throw it away if she knew the truth of how Francie got it. Neeley doesn't tell. That afternoon, she writes a story about a little girl who wants a doll so badly that she gives over her immortal soul to Purgatory for eternity. This makes her feel no better; neither does the possibility of doing penance in confession. Then, she thinks that she can make the lie a truth. When confirmed, she will take the name Mary! After their nightly readings of a page from the Bible and Shakespeare, Francie brings up the proposal to her mother, who refuses. When Francie asks why, Katie tells her that her first name is already Mary, after her grandmother. Francie takes the doll to bed with her. It will be her first and last doll.

Katie, like the poor children in the audience, also has too much pride to allow Francie to keep a doll that she obtained through charity. Francie's story helps her deal with the moral complexity of her taking the doll. She has told another lie to get it—this time, believing that she has falsified her identity. She imagines that the lies will compromise her soul. When her mother confirms that she was already named after her grandmother at birth—a woman who epitomizes goodness to Francie—Francie is pleased to learn of the happy coincidence.

CHAPTER 28

The future always seems close to Katie and other adults, while it is always far away to a child. Between Francie's eleventh and twelfth birthday, the future seems to come along faster. The death of Henny Gaddis has something to with it. Neeley also grows to be a foot taller. Maudie Donovan moves away and, when she returns to visit after three months, Francie sees that she has developed in a womanly way. Francie stops watching Mr. Tomony come home on Saturday nights because she now finds it silly that he has so much money but won't live in Manhattan. Then, she realizes that nothing around her has really changed; *she* is changing.

Francie is experiencing the future more quickly because she is growing up. Part of growing up is having more of a concept of time. Another aspect of it is losing the romantic, idealized vision of a child in favor of a clearer-eyed view of the world. Some would say that Francie is becoming more realistic, but her attitude toward Mr. Tomony seems jaded and judgmental, reflecting some of the more unfortunate tendencies of adults.

Francie talks to her father about it. Johnny makes her stick out her tongue and then diagnoses her with "a bad case" of growing up. Growing up spoils Francie's enjoyment of the games Katie and the children would play when money ran out to buy food, such as pretending that they were stranded explorers in the North Pole. Francie also notices how tired Katie looks. Finally, growing up makes Francie less satisfied with the theater. She starts going to plays and thinking of how to improve the endings. She finds it easy to write dialogue and quickly decides that, when she grows up, she will write plays.

Growing up also makes it harder for Francie to endure poverty; she finds it more difficult to happily pretend that things aren't as hard for her family as they actually are. Even the theatrical world is less satisfying. The upside to this is that, instead of contenting herself with things as they are presented to her, she thinks of ways in which she can make them better. Realizing that she can create her own outcomes is her first step toward adulthood.

CHAPTER 29

In the late summer of that year, Johnny Nolan decides that his children must see the ocean. He plans to take them to Canarsie, and he also gets the idea of taking along Little Tilly, whom he has never met. Tilly's brother is Gussie, a "tough little hellion" with "an overdeveloped underlip." His mother tries to wean him off of her breast when he is nine months, but the boy insists on continuing to suckle. He deprives Tilly of milk after he is born and suckles until he is three. The neighbors find out about it and gossip. Gussie's father refuses to sleep with is mother, saying that she breeds monsters. One day, his mother gets a can of stove blackening and paints her breast with the polish. With lipstick, she draws a wide, angry mouth with sharp teeth near the nipple. She offers her breast to Gussie, who comes over, crosses his feet, plants an elbow on her knee, and waits.

Johnny wants the children to see the ocean because, for poor children in Brooklyn, the beach is often inaccessible. Despite it being very close, their poverty makes it difficult for them to afford the trip and their parents don't usually have the time to take them. In the context of this time, Gussie's breastfeeding until the age of three is seen as unusual; now, it would be viewed with less judgment, based on what we know about the possible benefits of suckling toddlers. Smith, however, characterizes Gussie as a little man whose attachment to his mother is possessive and potentially perverse.

Gussie's mother rips open her dress and thrusts her grotesquely made-up breast at him. For a moment, Gussie is paralyzed with fear, then he runs away screaming. He hides under the bed and stays there for twenty-four hours. He drinks black coffee instead and shudders every time his eyes go to his mother's bosom. Gussie's mother reports her success to the neighborhood. Johnny, too, hears the story and feels contempt for Gussie for cheating Tilly out of something important. He thinks that she might grow up "thwarted." He sends Francie to ask if Tilly can go to Canarsie, too, and her mother happily consents.

Gussie's mother thinks that her trick was successful because Gussie no longer demands to be suckled. However, she's also traumatized him and possibly made it so that he can't look again upon a woman's breasts without envisioning something monstrous. When Johnny says that Tilly may grow up "thwarted," he's indicating that Gussie has cheated the girl out of establishing a solid bond with their mother.

The next Sunday, the three children set out for Canarsie. Francie is eleven, Neeley is ten, and Tilly is three years old. Johnny wears a tuxedo, a derby hat, and a fresh collar and dicky. Little Tilly's mother, in honor of the occasion, dresses her in a "cheap but fancy lace dress trimmed with dark pink ribbon." When they get off the trolley at Canarsie, they go to a tiny shack at a wharf. Johnny negotiates with the proprietor for a fishing pole and a rusty can full of worms. The friendly man unties the rope from one of the better rowboats, puts the rope in Johnny's hand, wishes him luck, and goes back into his shack.

Smith focuses on how well-dressed Johnny and Tilly are to emphasize that, though these people are poor, they take great pride in their appearances. Johnny also refuses to allow poverty to prevent a group of children from seeing the sea and being able to enjoy a Sunday at the beach, just like children of higher classes.

Johnny puts the fishing gear in the boat and helps the children in. While trying to show them the right way to get into the boat, he falls into the water. He is up to his neck in water but "his small waxed mustache and derby hat were in the clear." Johnny warns them not to laugh. Francie doesn't, but her desire to makes her ribs hurt. Neeley is afraid to look at her, afraid that he will laugh. Johnny climbs in. He strips off his dicky and paper collar, which have become "a sodden mess," and throws them into the water. He rows out to sea then announces that he will "drop anchor." The children are disappointed to learn that "the romantic phrase" simply means that one will throw a lump of iron attached to a rope overboard.

Just as when he tried to fix the Tynmores' window, Johnny overestimates his abilities and makes a fool of himself. This time, he offers the children some comic relief; though, it seems that he hates to look the fool, especially when he makes a mess of his clothes. It's unclear what the children thought "drop anchor" meant. Children, however, have a gift for making things more extraordinary than they actually are through the power of imagination, particularly things that they don't yet understand.

Horrified, Francie, Neeley, and Tilly watch Johnny impale an earthworm on a hook. The sun grows bright and hot. After what seems like hours, and to the children's "intense relief and happiness," Johnny announces that it's time to eat. They return to shore. Johnny ties up the boat and tells the kids to wait in the boat while he gets lunch. He returns with hot dogs, huckleberry pie, and strawberry pop. They eat and continue to sit in the rocking boat, while looking at "slimy green water" that smells of decaying fish. Johnny had a few drinks onshore and now feels bad about yelling at the kids. He tells them that they can laugh now, if they want. However, the time for that has passed.

It seems like hours have passed because the children are bored with sitting in the boat and watching Johnny fish. The break for lunch also breaks up the monotony. Johnny's mood has lifted as a result of having a few drinks, but it's also made him unaware of the children becoming increasingly seasick. They're no longer amused by the memory of Johnny having fallen in the water because they don't feel well and they would probably prefer to go back home where there's more to do.

After lunch, Johnny rows Francie, Neeley, and Tilly back out to sea. He sings as he rows. Eventually, his hands get so blistered that he no longer feels like rowing. Dramatically, he announces that he is going to row back to shore. The children are getting seasick. At the wharf, he leaps onto the dock, and the children follow his example. Tilly, however, falls into the water. Johnny fishes her out. Her dress is ruined, but she says nothing. Tilly hasn't said anything all day. Johnny picks her up and soothes her with a lullaby, but Tilly doesn't understand anything about the whole day. She doesn't know why she was taken onto a boat or why Johnny is making such a fuss over her, but she remains quiet.

For Johnny, the day remains idyllic. Johnny's lack of awareness about how the children are feeling suggests a kind of self-absorption that makes him oblivious. He's so intent on realizing his romantic vision of having a day at the sea with the three children that he's unable to see that the children aren't really enjoying themselves. Tilly's silence comes from being unable to understand why Johnny was allowed to take her to Canarsie and not yet having the language to communicate her confusion.

Johnny says that it's important that he bring home fish, even if they're not fish that he caught himself. His children know that he wants Katie to think that he caught fish. He says that he isn't asking them to lie, but just "not to be too fussy about the truth." Francie and Neeley understand. The four of them board a trolley. They look strange—Johnny with his "green wrinkled salt-stiff pants" and an undershirt with big holes, Little Tilly "swallowed up in his coat" with saltwater dripping from her, and Francie and Neeley with "brick red faces," sitting very rigidly and trying not to be sick. People stare at them curiously. Johnny pretends to study an Ex-Lax ad over their heads.

Johnny wants Katie to see him as a provider. If he brings the children home, not only happy after a day at the beach but also with a bunch of fish for the family to feast on, it'll prove to her that he's a better father than she thinks he is. By not looking at the mess that he has made with the children, Johnny can hold on to his romantic vision of the day and convince himself that, for once, he was able to provide the children with something that Katie couldn't give them.

Johnny sits with the fish in his lap. More people get on the trolley and it gets crowded, but no one will sit next to Johnny, Francie, Neeley, or Little Tilly. Finally, the fish falls out of "the sodden newspaper" and to the floor. One look into the fish's "glazed eye" is enough for Tilly and she vomits. As if it were a cue, Francie and Neeley also throw up. Johnny takes Tilly home, prepared to explain everything, but her mother gives him no chance; she screams when she sees Tilly. She snatches Johnny's coat off of the girl and screams at Johnny, calling him Jack-the-Ripper. Johnny finally edges a word in and mentions how Little Tilly doesn't speak. Little Tilly's mother blames Johnny. He asks her if she can make Tilly say something. She shakes Tilly, commanding her to speak. The girl opens her mouth, smiles happily, and says, "T'anks."

No one sits next to Johnny or the children because they look frightful and the children look as though they may vomit at any moment. Tilly's mother overreacts at the sight of her daughter and finds a convenient scapegoat in Johnny for avoiding her own missteps in the raising of Tilly. After getting Tilly back, dripping wet and smelling of vomit, Tilly's mother suddenly feels like a more successful parent. Though Tilly hasn't understood much of what happened that day, she seems happier. This is irrelevant, however, to her mother.

When Johnny arrives home, Katie gives him a tongue lashing and says that he isn't fit to have children. Katie cries when she sees the ruin of Johnny's only suit, which will cost a dollar to clean and will never return to its original state. Francie and Neeley are suffering from fever, chills, and sunburn. However, they go to bed laughing hysterically at the remembrance of their father standing up to his neck in sea water.

Katie is determined to see only the negative result of Johnny's trip to the sea with the children. She thinks of how she'll have to work more to buy him a new suit and how she will have to tend to sick children for the next day. Like Tilly's mother, she holds to this negative vision and refuses to ask the children how they felt about the day.

Johnny sits at the window wondering how the day could have gone so wrong. He thinks about the songs he has sung about the sea. He hoped that the children would walk away from the experience "exhilarated and with a deep and abiding love for the sea." He thinks that he should've returned with plenty of fish for his family. He wishes things could've turned out the way they did in songs. Instead, he has blistered hands, a spoiled suit, sunburn, rotting fish, and a feeling of nausea. He wonders why Little Tilly's mother couldn't understand the intention and overlook the result. He can't figure any of it out. All he knows is that the songs of the sea have betrayed him.

Smith uses this scene to illustrate the difference between Johnny's vision of the world and that of the other adults around him. He possesses a romantic sensibility that Katie and Tilly's mother don't have. This sensibility helps him see the best, even in dire situations. However, his romantic vision also blinds him to the possible consequences of doing things only with pleasure in mind.

CHAPTER 30

In the summer when she is thirteen, Francie writes in her diary, "Today, I am a woman." That summer Saturday should have been the happiest of Francie's life so far. She sees her name in print. The best composition from each class grade is published in the school magazine and Francie's, entitled "Winter Time," is chosen as the best seventh-grade work. School closed for summer the day before, however, and Francie is worried that she won't get a copy of the magazine. However, Mr. Jenson tells her that he will be working on Saturday and that if she brings a dime, which is the cost of the magazine, he will give her a copy. By the early afternoon, Francie stands in front of her door with a copy of the magazine and the pages turned to her story. She hopes someone comes along so that she can show it to them.

Francie's declaration of womanhood ironically precedes the onset of her first period, as well as the day when she will come to understand why her neighbor Joanna is ostracized by the other women in the neighborhood. Francie eventually stops writing in her diary about womanhood when she realizes that she really has nothing to say on the subject. On the other hand, she's proud of the composition that she's written. Her fondness for writing about nature coincides with her growing desire to experience a world beyond Brooklyn.

Francie shows it to her mother, but Katie says that she has no time to read it and Johnny is at Union Headquarters. Francie continues to look at her name in print. Her excitement never subsides. A few doors away, she sees a girl named Joanna come out of her house. The housewives who are doing their Saturday shopping stop gossiping and gasp at the sight of the girl. Her baby is illegitimate and everyone knows it. These "good women" feel that Joanna has no right to bring her baby out in public but ought to hide it "in some dark place."

Francie is too excited to be hurt by her parents' inability or unwillingness to make time for what's so important to her. Meanwhile, the neighborhood women's reactions to Joanna briefly force Francie to stop thinking about herself as she observes and studies their condemnation. The notion that Joanna should hide her baby in a dark place suggests that the child has no right to exist either because of her mother.

Francie has heard her parents talking about Joanna. The baby is beautiful and better-kept than the children of the women who shun Joanna. Joanna works in a factory while her mother looks after the baby. Her mother is too ashamed to take the baby out, however, so it only gets fresh air on the weekends. The child looks just like Joanna. Johnny compares the baby girl's skin to a magnolia petal, her hair to a raven's wing, and her eyes to forest pools. Interestingly, Johnny has never seen any of these things.

In his ability to find sympathy with those who face social condemnation, Johnny sees extraordinary beauty in Joanna's baby. It is ironic to Francie that the women who hold themselves up as better mothers care less for their children than Joanna does for hers. Francie doesn't realize that these women have children out of obligation, not desire—unlike Joanna.

Katie insists that the child's looks will be a curse to her, just as they are a curse to her mother. Katie talks about how Joanna's brother is in Sing Sing and surmises that there must be "bad blood" throughout the line. However, she insists that none of this is her business. She will not join in spitting on Joanna, but she will not praise her either. She turns to Francie and says that Joanna should be a lesson to her.

Katie is judging Joanna, though she pretends not to. She sees Joanna's actions as evidence of bad character and thinks that a woman's good looks are "a curse" because sexual desirability, in Katie's mind leads to future troubles. She may be thinking of her own life with Johnny, in this regard.

While watching Joanna that Saturday afternoon, Francie wonders why the girl should be "a lesson." Joanna is seventeen, friendly, and proud of her baby. One day, Joanna smiles at Francie, as she does at everyone else, but Francie doesn't smile back. Francie notices how Joanna maddens the local women by touching her baby's cheek and smiling lovingly at her. Many of these women didn't enjoy raising children and they did not like sleeping with their husbands. For them, the act of love was one of brutality on both sides. Joanna's tenderness and happiness suggests that this was not so between her and the child's father.

Francie doesn't yet understand Katie's subtle message on how sex makes women vulnerable. When Francie looks at how happy Joanna is with her baby, in contrast to the miserable women who condemn her, it seems that the problem is less about sex and more about those who have the courage to make their own choices and those who don't. The women resent Joanna for having the audacity to do as she pleased.

Joanna recognizes their hate, but she doesn't let it bother her. A "stringy woman" asks Joanna if she isn't ashamed of herself. Joanna replies, "What for?" The woman becomes furious and says that Joanna has no right to be outside and calls her a whore. A man passing by touches Joanna's arm and suggests that she go home; she can't win with these "battle-axes." Joanna jerks her arm away and declares the women jealous because men like her. She then says that the stringy woman's husband probably spits on her after they finish having sex. This further outrages the stringy woman who calls Joanna a "bitch" and throws a stone at her. The other women follow suit. Some of the stones hit Joanna, but a sharp pointed one hits the baby on the forehead. A thin trickle of blood runs down her face. The women drop their stones and suddenly feel ashamed. The baby whimpers, as though it has no right to cry aloud and Joanna carries her baby into the house, crying.

Joanna ignores the women because she doesn't believe that she should be ashamed of herself. She slept with a young man whom she loved and had a child with him. The absence of a marriage between her own parents has also shown her that it's possible for a woman to raise a child on her own. Furthermore, Joanna has no sense of guilt about sex and, in her comment about men liking her, she admits to enjoying it. For the other women, sex is not a thing to enjoy but an obligation that they endure so that they can be married. Having nothing other than marriage and motherhood to give their lives value, they resent anyone who suggests that these institutions don't matter.

Francie gets her lesson from Joanna, but it's not the one that Katie intended. Often, on her way home at night from the library, Francie would see Joanna with the boy whom she loved. She saw the boy stroke Joanna's hair tenderly. She saw how Joanna put her hand up to his cheek. She also knows how one of the stone-throwers had a baby three months after she was married. The woman's father forced the groom to the altar. On that day, the groom had black shadows under his eyes and looked very sad. Joanna has no father, no one to get the boy to the altar. Francie realizes that that was Joanna's crime—that she hadn't found a way for the boy to marry her.

Francie, in this instance, draws a distinction between love and marriage. Marriage, according to what Francie has witnessed, makes the difference between being a socially acceptable and honorable woman and a disrespectable one. In the view of the women of the neighborhood, a woman who allows men to have sex with them without their being married presents a threat to their own marriages and the possibility of their daughters being married.

The waves of hurt she feels over Joanna and the baby subside when Francie realizes that something strange is going on with her. She thinks that her heart has broken inside her over Joanna's baby and that the blood is now flowing out of her body. She goes upstairs to the apartment and looks at herself in the mirror. She has dark shadows under her eyes and her head aches. When her mother arrives home, Katie realizes that Francie has gotten her first period.

Francie naively thinks that the blood is coming from empathizing too much with Joanna. In a way, she's right. By starting her period at the moment that she witnesses Joanna's condemnation, she gets a glimpse of how she is now vulnerable to the same fate as Joanna if she, too, falls in love with a man who won't marry her.

Katie warns Francie to be "a good girl" because she can have a baby now. She says that Francie mustn't allow boys to kiss her. Francie wonders if a woman can get pregnant from a kiss. Katie tells her that it doesn't happen that way, but it starts with a kiss. She adds, "Remember Joanna." Francie thinks back to Joanna in the street with the boy. She knows that Katie doesn't know about the street scene. Francie marvels at her mother's powers of insight and looks at her with new respect.

By "good girl," Katie means that Francie is not to have sex with a man until she's married. Afraid to explain how babies are actually made, Katie uses a kiss as an overall reference for sex. Francie marvels at her mother's seeming ability to read her thoughts because she doesn't yet realize that Katie knows things about men and sex that Francie has yet to discover.

Francie repeatedly hears the message "Remember Joanna." As prompted, Francie never forgets her and hates the women who stoned her that summer Saturday. Francie thereby develops a general hatred and mistrust for women. The passing man had been the only one who spoke to Joanna with any kindness in his voice. Most women have one thing in common: the pain of enduring childbirth. However, they only stick together to trample on and gossip about other women. Francie perceives it as the only loyalty they have. Francie opens the copybook that she uses for a diary and writes that she will never have a woman as a friend and will never trust a woman, except for Katie and "sometimes Aunt Evy and Aunt Sissy."

Francie doesn't understand why the neighborhood women resent Joanna; she only recognizes their cruelty. Francie doesn't realize that Joanna represents their fears about being unable to keep men in their lives by maintaining some control over sex and childrearing. This struggle to maintain control over those realms makes up for their lack of power over anything else. Women like Joanna disrupt that control. Neither they nor Francie understand the misogyny that traps all women and girls.

CHAPTER 31

In the year that Francie turns thirteen, war breaks out in Europe and Uncle Willie Flittman's horse, Drummer, falls in love with Aunt Evy. Drummer drives Uncle Willie's milk wagon. The horse doesn't like Uncle Willie. He refuses to cooperate with him and sometimes pees on him. In revenge for the latter, Willie washes the horse in the cold of winter, despite protests from Evy. One day, while Willie leans under the horse's belly to wash him, Drummer tenses up. Willie thinks that the horse is going to pee on him again and punches him. The horse then lifts a leg and kicks Willie in the head, making Willie unconscious.

Though it will become clearer later in the novel, when Willie leaves his family to pursue music, he resents Drummer because the horse represents Willie's feeling of being trapped in a life that he doesn't want. His behavior toward Drummer is cruel because this is the only means, it seems, by which Willie can exact his revenge on a world that won't respect him or let him live according to his own wishes.

As a result of his concussion, Uncle Willie cannot make his milk deliveries. Aunt Evy has never before driven a horse, but the milk must be delivered, so she gives it a try. She puts on one of her husband's overcoats, wraps a shawl around her head, and sits in the driver's seat. She orders Drummer to "git for home." The horse swings his head back, gives her a loving look, and trots to the stable. When he reaches intersections, he stops and waits for instructions to move on. At the stable, other drivers, washing their wagons, are surprised to see a lady driver. Uncle Willie's boss tells Evy that he isn't surprised that the horse kicked Willie, given their relationship. The man figures he'll have to replace Willie.

At the time, women weren't normally employed outside of textile mills and driving a horse wagon was solely a man's work. For this reason, it doesn't occur to Willie's boss that he should keep Evy as a driver, though she maintains a good relationship with Drummer and has no difficulty with making the milk deliveries.

Not wanting her husband to lose his job, Evy offers to take over his route while Willie recovers. She argues that, since the milk is delivered in the dark, no one will ever know that a woman is driving the wagon. The boss initially laughs at her request but eventually agrees. He tells her to take along a stable dog for protection against milk thieves. Evy is to report at the stables at 2:00 AM. Aunt Evy becomes the first milkwoman on the route.

Evy unintentionally makes history. She isn't interested in proving to Willie's boss that she's as capable as a man of performing the same job. For her, it's simply a matter of maintaining her household income, which her family cannot afford to lose.

Aunt Evy does well at the job. The other drivers like her and even say that she is a better worker than Uncle Willie. Like Willie, Evy brings Drummer to the house at dinner time. She takes his oats and warms them because she doesn't think that cold oats would be appetizing. She also gives Drummer half an apple and a lump of sugar. She washes him at the stable because she thinks it is too cold in the street. When Evy washes Drummer's chest, the horse rests "his tremendous head on her small shoulder."

When the other milk wagon drivers see how well Evy makes the deliveries and witness her friendly relationship with Drummer, they are able to look past her gender and see her simply as a competent worker. Unlike Willie, she's kind to the horse and the horse reciprocates, feeling that he's safe with Evy.

When Uncle Willie recovers and goes back to work, Drummer refuses to leave the stable with Willie or any other driver. The boss thinks about selling Drummer until he gets the idea of assigning him to an effeminate male driver with a lisp. Drummer is satisfied with this change and goes back out on the milk route. Yet, every day at noon, Drummer turns onto the street where Evy lives and stands in front of her door. Drummer will not go back to the stables until Evy comes out, gives him an apple or a lump of sugar, strokes his nose and calls him a good boy.

The description of the "effeminate male driver with a lisp" may be Smith's way of describing a homosexual man without identifying him as such directly, given how such things were neither discussed at the time that the book takes place nor in Smith's own time. The suggestion of the horse being "in love" with Evy isn't literal; though, it is meant to demonstrate that animals have an awareness of kindness and cruelty, just as people do.

CHAPTER 32

Francie starts a diary on December 15th, which is her thirteenth birthday. The first entry is about what the new year will bring. In January, she talks about the pretty carved box from Austria that Grandma Mary Rommely shows her and the family's ensuing discussion about whether it's better to be cremated or buried. Johnny also gets sick that month. By March, Neeley has taken pussy willows from a park to give to a girl he likes, though Katie insists that he is too young to like girls.

Francie's diary entries capture the flow of her daily life, which are replete with new beginnings and things coming to an end. Mary Rommely is planning for her funeral arrangements, while Neeley is approaching adolescence and, thus, discovering his attraction to girls. In her desire to hold on to him, Katie resists this sign in his growing up.

By the beginning of April, Johnny hasn't worked for three weeks. He is sick repeatedly for the next couple of months. Meanwhile, Sissy announces that she's pregnant, though she shows no signs. Neeley gets a paper route in late May and, around the same time, Francie sells junk to Carney. Instead of pinching her cheek, he pinches something else. Francie gathers that she's "getting too big to sell junk."

As Neeley approaches his teens, he takes on the paper route because he wants the responsibility of supporting his family. Francie, meanwhile, senses that her physical development is to blame for Carney's behavior. She doesn't yet realize that's he's the one who's inappropriate.

In June, Francie gets an A on a composition entitled "My Ambition," in which she writes about wanting to be a playwright. Johnny continues to get sick. When Katie finds and reads Francie's diary, she makes Francie cross out every entry in which she writes "drunk" in favor of writing "sick." Francie hopes that her mother will respect her privacy in the future. Meanwhile, Miss Tynmore continues to teach the family compositions and Neeley can soon play Alexander's Ragtime Band without notes. He also announces that he has a girlfriend, though Katie still insists that he is too young.

Francie's compositions are ways of distracting herself from the unpleasant realities in her world. She focuses on pleasant things, such as the changes of the seasons and her hopes for the future. She knows that her educations in writing and music will offer a path out of her current situation. Neeley, meanwhile, continues to try to assert his independence, despite Katie's resistance to his growing up.

Later in June, Uncle Willie gets a new horse, Bessie, who does worse than wet on him. In July, Sergeant McShane brings Johnny home when he is "sick." The Nolans spend the first week of July playing "North Pole." By late July, all of the money from the tin-can bank is gone. Francie gets a summer job washing dishes in Hendler's Restaurant and Katie does some washing for Mae McGarrity. Also, Flossie Gaddis and Frank get married.

Uncle Willie remains miserable in his job as a wagon driver and the family suffers more poverty than usual when they run out of savings. Their game of "North Pole" occupies their imaginations but the game is also an exercise in endurance.

By mid-August, Johnny has another job and works steadily for three weeks. The family has "wonderful suppers," then Johnny is "sick" again and out of work. Francie is fired from Hendler's for being unreliable. In September, Francie enters her last year of school before high school. Miss Garnder says that, if Francie continues to get A's in composition, Miss Garnder will let her write a play for graduation. By late September, Francie asks her mother if she can have her hair cut. Francie also looks at her nude body and sees that she is changing into a woman. By November, she confesses to her diary that she is curious about sex.

Francie, at the urging of her mother, changes "drunk" to "sick" in her diary. Katie doesn't want Francie to acknowledge her father's alcoholism. This may be some effort to avoid the possibility that Francie and Neeley will begin to think ill of their father. Thus, it's better for them to think that he has an illness that is out of his control, which is actually the case when one is an alcoholic.

CHAPTER 33

When Francie tells her mother about her sex curiosity, Katie tells her, "simply and plainly," all that she knows. As a result, Francie never learns things in "a distorted way." While normal sex is never discussed, criminal sex is "an open book." The prowling sex fiend is the fear of all parents and there is one on the loose in the year that Francie is to turn fourteen. He kills a seven-year-old girl. Fear sweeps the neighborhood. Children are kept behind locked doors. The police question the girl's brother, who is so nervous when he answers, that they arrest him on suspicion. Sergeant McShane, however, only does this to throw off the killer, awaiting him to strike again. This time, the police will be waiting for him.

Though Katie doesn't want Francie to have sex, she also doesn't want her to be misinformed by learning about it from other children or, worse, from sexual predators. The discussion of "criminal sex" and the avoidance of discussing "normal sex," teaches children that sexuality is a thing to fear and avoid, which is the feeling that their parents intend to instill. However, there's also an attitude of shame toward assault victims that prevents people from reporting predators.

Johnny goes to his friend, Burt, who works as a night watchman at the corner bank and asks to borrow his gun. Johnny asks for this favor due to his willingness to watch the bank while Burt goes home to check on his young wife, whom he constantly suspects of infidelity. Initially, Burt protests, saying that Johnny's request violates the Sullivan Law—Johnny has no permit. Johnny reminds him that it is also illegal for him to be guarding the bank while Burt goes home. Burt agrees to lend it and teaches Johnny how to use it by pointing at him. Johnny takes the gun and points it to Burt who tells Johnny that the gun is loaded and he should be careful. Johnny notes how they may have accidentally killed each other.

Burt's obsession with his young wife's sexuality and the possibility of her cheating reflects the neighborhood's fears around normal sex. Burt has chosen a young wife, probably thinking that she would be easier to control, but he doesn't trust her. His unwillingness to marry a woman closer to his own age reflects a tendency among many men to obsess over younger women and girls. Burt's obsession with youth parallels that of Carney, though it causes him more anxiety.

When Johnny takes the gun home, he tells Francie and Neeley not to touch it. Francie thinks that the revolver looks "like a grotesque beckoning finger." Johnny keeps the gun under his pillow for a month and never touches it. One afternoon, Katie is cleaning in the halls of a house that is not her own. She wonders if she should wait in the hallway at home for Francie to come home from school. She looks up and down the street and grows uneasy when she doesn't see Francie. She goes back home for a cup of coffee and then heads back to work. Francie gets home at her usual time and begins to climb the stairs when she sees a man step from a small recess from beneath the stairs, leading to the cellar. The man comes toward her with his lower garments opened. Francie sees his penis and thinks of how "wormy white" it looks.

Francie's vision of the gun foreshadows the assault that will require her mother to use it to protect Francie. Smith builds suspense in the scene by having the child molester emerge from beneath the stairs, like a household pest or a character from a supernatural pulp story that Francie might read. When the predator comes toward her, he gives Francie her first look at a penis. Francie's description reflects her revulsion. The description also coincides somewhat with the earlier description of the gun. Guns, too, are often regarded as phallic symbols.

At this moment, Katie is coming down the stairs quietly. She sees a man coming at Francie, who is frozen to the banister. Katie makes no sound and no one sees her. She goes back up the stairs and gets the gun from under the pillow. She puts the gun under her apron and holds it with both hands to keep it steady. She runs back down the stairs. At this point, the child molester grabs Francie and claps a hand over her mouth. Francie hears a sound. She looks up and sees her mother running down the stairs. There is then a loud explosion and the smell of the cloth that has burned through Katie's apron. The child molester holds his stomach and falls backward. Women scream and doors bang open.

In keeping with the idea of guns as phallic symbols or emblems of power and agency, Katie's act of placing the gun under her apron corresponds with the child molester's exposure of his penis. It isn't clear why Katie conceals the gun, given that there's no one else around when she shoots. Smith seems to want to draw a contrast between what people conceal from view in order to protect others. Katie has done her best to protect from sexual vulnerability, but the child molester's exposure makes that impossible.

Katie grabs Francie's hand to pull her upstairs but Francie remains frozen. Katie hits her wrist with the butt of the gun, releasing her fingers, and pulls Francie upstairs. Neighbors ask what's wrong and Katie assures them that everything is fine now. Francie keeps stumbling and falling to her knees, requiring Katie to drag her down the hall. When they get to their apartment, Katie puts the chain bolt on the door and sets the gun down. She then asks if the man hurt Francie. Francie indicates that his penis touched her leg. She says that she can still feel it and wants her leg cut off. People pound on their door, but Katie ignores them. She gives Francie a cup of scalding coffee and paces while she thinks of what to do next.

Francie is traumatized and can't move as a result. When Katie asks if the man "hurt" Francie, "hurt" serves as a euphemism for rape. For Francie, the hurt isn't physical (the narrative tells us that Katie sees nothing when she looks at the spot that Francie points to on her leg), it's psychological. The feeling on her leg is symbolic of the lingering memory of sexual assault. Katie gives Francie a "scalding" cup of coffee as though to replace one sensation with another.

Neeley is in the street when he hears the shot. He goes home and hears people mentioning Francie's name. He goes to his door and pounds on it, demanding to be let in. When he sees Francie lying on the couch, he starts bawling. Katie tells him to stop and go to get his father. Neeley finds Johnny at McGarrity's. When he hears Neeley's story, he drops his glass and runs out with him. When he gets home, Johnny goes to Francie and picks her up in his arms, despite how big she is. When she continues to complain about her leg, he agrees to "fix" it with carbolic acid. Francie welcomes the burning, which she thinks has cleansed her of the man's evil.

While Katie possesses the inner strength, or "invisible steel," to protect Francie from the child molester from the child molester, she lacks Johnny's ability to nurture Francie in a way to help her feel better. Their responses to Francie's attack reveal how Katie and Johnny exhibit parental roles that don't generally correspond to their genders.

The police knock at the door. Katie lets them in, along with an intern who performs an examination. After confirming that Francie was not raped, he sees the marks on her wrist and leg and Katie explains the causes. The intern marvels at how Francie's parents did more damage to her than the child molester. He smooths down Francie's dress, pats her cheek, and gives her a shot to put her to sleep. He tells her that, when she wakes up, she's to remember everything as a bad dream. Francie immediately falls asleep.

It's important that the doctor performs the physical examination without asking Francie what happened to her. One could read this as another form of violation. The intern is right to say that neither of Francie's parents knows how to handle her abuse, but he doesn't help matters by encouraging her to pretend it didn't happen at all.

The cop turns to Johnny and asks him where he keeps the gun. He tells him about the hiding place under the pillow. When Katie goes to get it, she forgets that she threw it into the washtub. She gets it out. The cop asks if Johnny has a permit and Johnny says he doesn't. Johnny says that he found it in the gutter. The cop doesn't believe the story but agrees to commit it to the record. The ambulance driver hollers from the hall that he is back from the hospital and asks if the doctor is ready to leave. Katie asks if she killed the child molester. The doctor says that she didn't, but he'll soon be back on his feet so that he can walk to the electric chair. Katie is sorry that she didn't kill him. The cop then says that he got a statement from the child molester before he passed out, confessing to the murder of the seven-year-old girl.

The cop agrees to go along with Johnny's story as a favor to the family for catching a wanted murderer and child molester. Katie's regret over not killing the child molester contrasts with her Catholic faith, and it also reveals her fierce sense of protectiveness over her children. It doesn't matter to her that he'll eventually face the death penalty; she wanted the satisfaction of destroying someone who attempted to destroy Francie. The positive outcome of her not killing him is that the case regarding the seven-year-old girl is solved.

When Francie wakes up the next morning, Johnny is there to tell her it was all a dream. As time passes, it seems to have been just that. The hearing in court seems like she is playing a part in "an unreal play" with only a few lines. Katie testifies about what happened and is not arrested for shooting the child molester. In fact, the judge shakes hands with her. Eventually, the whole affair fades into the background. Johnny is fined five dollars for firing a gun without a permit and Burt's wife eventually leaves him for an Italian man closer to her own age.

The tactic of telling Francie that her sexual assault was a dream is an attempt to suppress the memory to the point that it'll simply go away. In Francie's case, she's able to separate herself from what happened to her, as though it were all make-believe; and this becomes her method of coping with her trauma. The family never discusses the incident again.

Sergeant McShane comes around some days later, looking for Katie. He hands her an envelope of money from a collection that was taken up at the police station to thank her for catching the child molester. Katie refuses the money. Quietly, she wonders if McShane will ever have the happiness he deserves. Meanwhile, he thinks of how Johnny won't last much longer, with the way he drinks. He thinks of how Katie will one day be his wife. He's waited long enough for happiness, due to his wife Molly's illness. He wouldn't mind waiting a bit longer.

Both Katie and Sergeant McShane hold on to the dream of better futures for themselves. Katie, even in her own mind, feels too guilty to admit to herself directly that she would prefer to be McShane's wife. Her religious faith would equate this with adultery. Furthermore, she thinks that her constant willingness to endure personal sacrifice gives her life meaning.

CHAPTER 34

Francie hears Aunt Sissy tell Katie that she is going to *get* a baby. Sissy wants to adopt a child, but Steve, her third "John," will not raise "another man's bastard." Sissy finds out that a beautiful sixteen-year-old girl in Maspeth has gotten pregnant by a married man. Her name is Lucia. When Sissy hears that her father is starving her to punish her, Sissy goes to their house. She carries a badge and demands to be let in. The mother opens the door, worried that Sissy is from immigration. However, the woman cannot read and does not see that the badge says "Chicken Inspector." Sissy takes charge and threatens to take the mother to jail if she doesn't treat Lucia better. The three of them talk all day, mostly through hand signals. By the end of their conversation, it is understood that Sissy will take the baby after it is born. The mother is grateful and, from that day on, Sissy becomes an adored member of the family.

Lucia's story mirrors that of Joanna, with the difference being that Lucia's father is deeply ashamed of her and treats her like a criminal in her own household—imprisoning her in her bedroom and feeding her only bread and water—to atone for what he perceives as his daughter's sin. Sissy comes up with an ingenious way to get into the family home, and she ingratiates herself with them by providing them with some assurance that Lucia will not have to keep the baby and, therefore, will not endure a fate like that of Joanna.

Sissy takes good care of Lucia, taking her outside and feeding her while Lucia's father is at work. The family learns a bit of English from Sissy and she learns a bit of Italian from them. Sissy then announces to friends and family that she will have another baby and tells everyone that she is pregnant. She becomes so convinced herself that she starts simulating morning sickness. No one believes, however, that Sissy is pregnant. Then, Lucia gives birth just an hour after her father leaves for work. Sissy is happy to have a beautiful baby girl. She tells Lucia that she will have to nurse the baby for ten days, then Sissy will take it.

Sissy's wish to fake pregnancy is both a way to avoid exposing the fact of Lucia's pregnancy to the community, which is a source of shame to her family, and it's a way to live out her dream of giving birth to a healthy child. Though she knows that she's not pregnant, if she can convince others that she is by presenting them with a healthy baby at the end of her "term," then, in her mind, the story remains valid.

When Lucia's father comes home and finds her with a healthy baby sleeping at her side, he's amazed. Lucia and her mother say that the diet of bread and water formed the perfect baby. He thinks a miracle has occurred. He tries to be nice to Lucia, but the family will not permit him to show any kindness to his daughter, due to his earlier cruelty.

The family refuses the father's kindness because they know that it's only the result of his belief that God is protecting Lucia, which implies that God may punish him for being so cruel to his daughter.

When Steve comes home that night, he asks Sissy, jokingly, if she has had her baby. She announces that she has. When she refuses to admit otherwise, he gives up. Ten days later, Sissy comes home with a baby. The Italian family returns to Italy. Everyone knows that Sissy did not really have a baby, but she remains committed to her story. Sissy christens the child Sarah, but everyone calls her "Little Sissy."

While the Italian family returns to Italy, due to their inability to make a better life for themselves in the U.S., Sissy completes the construction of the domestic life that she's always wanted by having a child. The collapse of the Italian family's dream results in the completion of Sissy's.

Katie is the only person whom Sissy tells the truth about Sarah. As a result, Francie finds out, too. Katie also tells Johnny, who then uses it as an opportunity to question his own paternity until he sees how Francie has his eyes and Neeley is his mirror image. When Johnny announces that he is going out, Katie pulls his head down and whispers something in his hear. Johnny registers surprise. She then asks him not to come home drunk. Johnny promises he won't. He then kisses her and goes out.

For a moment, the news of Sissy's child brings Katie and Johnny closer. His joke about possibly not being the father of Francie and Neeley may also reveal the truth of Johnny not entirely feeling like a father. When Katie whispers to him that she's pregnant again, the announcement reinforces the role and further enmeshes Johnny in it, despite his lack of suitability.

Johnny returns late, singing "Molly Malone" at the door, as is his routine. He expects Katie to open the door before he finishes the song, in keeping with their game, but Francie opens the door instead. He sits in a chair by the window. When Francie asks if he is "sick," Johnny confirms that he isn't drunk. He then tells her to go back to bed. Francie goes to bed and buries her face in the pillow. She weeps, though she doesn't know why.

Katie doesn't open the door because she suspects Johnny is returning home drunk. She likely suspects this because when he returns home late singing this song, he's usually drunk. Francie cannot explain why she is weeping, but she can intuit the eventual end of her parents' marriage.

CHAPTER 35

Christmas is a week away. Francie's fourteenth birthday has passed. Johnny hasn't spoken to the family in more than two weeks. Yesterday, he came in during supper, looked at them as though to say something, then went into the bedroom. He comes and goes at odd hours. When he's home, he lies on the bed, fully clothed, with his eyes shut. Katie goes "white and quiet," as though she's "carrying a tragedy within herself." She takes on an extra job in the week before Christmas, selling coffee and sandwiches to shopgirls at Gorling's Department Store.

Katie's pregnancy drives Johnny further into drink. His inability to accept that Katie is expecting another child creates a sense of foreboding in the household. Smith equates Katie's pregnancy with a "tragedy" to prepare the reader for the fact that the arrival of the baby will also coincide with a great loss in the family. Still, Katie carries on, even taking a second job.

Katie goes home that night with a bundle of wood blocks, condensed milk, and three bananas. She tells Francie and Neeley that they'll have oatmeal again for dinner. With the bananas it's not so bad. Then, Francie asks Katie to play something on the piano so that it will feel like they are in a restaurant. The children are "almost happy." The kitchen is warm, they are fed, and their mother's piano playing makes them feel "safe and comfortable." While they're talking, someone pounds on the door. Francie knows it's Johnny. They then hear his voice, demanding to be let in.

The three of them make the best out of an unsavory situation. Francie initially registers disgust with having oatmeal for dinner, but she and Neeley focus instead on the savory bananas they can eat with it. To forget about the misery that Johnny is creating in their lives, the children encourage Katie to play the piano. This scene reflects their ability to persevere through a dire situation by focusing on the best things, no matter how small.

Johnny lunges inside. His tuxedo is dirty and his children have never seen it look so. It looks as though he's been lying in the gutter. His cold, red hands are trembling and his derby hat is bashed in. He says that he isn't drunk. He also says that he's been thrown out of the Waiter's Union. He says that they call him "a drunk and a bum" and that people laugh at him when he sings. Johnny sobs as though he can't stop and Francie edges the door, wanting to run to the bedroom and hide her head under the pillow. Katie orders her to stay. She then says that she will stay with Johnny for a while and that the children should go back to whatever they were doing, such as talking. Neeley asks Francie if she wants to talk about olden times; she says "no."

Not since Johnny came home with delirium tremens have the children seen him in such a dire state. The difference is that now they're old enough to understand what's wrong with him. Johnny's dismissal from the Waiter's Union is, for him, the ultimate failure. Knowing that he isn't much of a father or a provider, he was always able to hold on to his union membership as an indication that he belonged somewhere, despite his inability to succeed in any other aspect of his life or to fit into any other social model.

CHAPTER 36

Johnny Nolan dies three days later. He goes to bed the night he returns home and Katie sits beside him until he goes to sleep. Then, she sleeps with Francie so as not to disturb him. Sometime during the night, he gets up and goes out. He does not return the next day and they go to look for him. On the second night, Sergeant McShane takes Katie to the Catholic Hospital and tells her, as gently as he can, that Johnny was found unconscious early that morning, huddled in a doorway. He takes her to the hospital, where Johnny is lying in a bed, breathing harshly and in a coma. Katie stays with him until he dies. She decides not to tell the children until the morning so that they can have "one more night of griefless sleep."

Johnny's prediction that his life would lead to tragedy comes true. He gets up and goes out in the middle of the night, probably to get drunk. Though the family has grown accustomed to his disappearances and his long silences, they become suspicious in this instance, due to his increasingly depressive behavior. Though Sergeant McShane rightly expected Johnny to die of alcoholism, he remains gentle and sympathetic toward the loss that Katie and the children will suffer.

At dawn, Francie wakes up. When Katie notices, she tells her to get up and get dressed right away. Then, she shakes Neeley awake and goes out into the kitchen. The children come before Katie, who is sitting by the window. She announces that Johnny is dead. Francie stands there, numb. Katie says that they are not to cry because he is "out of it now" and maybe luckier than they are.

Francie's numbness may come from her shock and disbelief in response to the news about her father. Though his behavior pointed to an imminent demise, Francie loved him too much to accept this reality. By saying that he's "out of it now," Katie indicates that Johnny is free from suffering.

Katie next handles Johnny's burial with a greedy undertaker, but she doesn't protest the way in which he does his business. She also arranges that it will be nowhere on the record that Johnny was a drunk. The cause of death is listed only as pneumonia, despite the complications of acute alcoholism. She then uses twenty-five dollars to buy mourning clothes for her and the children. The undertaker then comes back and demands twenty dollars for the deed to the plot to get the grave opened. Katie is annoyed, but she gets eighteen dollars out of the tin can bank. She borrows the remainder from Sissy. Katie reads the deed carefully, remembering the story Mary Rommely once told her of how she had been cheated out of land. When the undertaker insists that he would not want to cheat her, Katie is unconvinced. When she is satisfied with the paperwork, she hands over the money.

Katie doesn't want Johnny's death record to reveal his alcoholism because she doesn't want to admit to his problem publicly. Though the community knew very well that Johnny had a drinking problem, for Katie, it's a point of pride to keep the matter private. Katie doesn't trust the undertaker because she knows that he's trying to take advantage of her assumed grief. Contrary to expectation, Katie handles the funerary duties calmly and maintains a sharp business sense, not wanting to suffer the embarrassment that her mother endured when she was cheated out of money.

Jim McGarrity, the saloon keeper, sends over a wreath of artificial laurel leaves. Aunt Evy tells Katie to throw them out, but she refuses to blame McGarrity for Johnny's death. Though Johnny had an outstanding debt of thirty-eight dollars at the bar, McGarrity says nothing about it and closes the debt.

Evy thinks that McGarrity is partly to blame for Johnny's death. Her attitude resembles that of many women at the time who advocated for temperance, believing that saloons profited off of the poverty and hopelessness of many men.

At the mass, Francie kneels on one side of Katie and Neeley on the other. When the priest steps down and sprays holy water at the four corners of the coffin, a woman starts sobbing wildly. Katie turns around to see what woman would dare to weep for Johnny. When she sees that it is Hildy O'Dair, she softens. She notices that Hildy looks old for her age, though she is only a year older. She knows that Hildy loved Johnny and that she should cry for him, especially since Katie can't cry.

Initially, Katie is outraged to hear a woman who isn't Johnny's mother weeping for him. Katie reveals herself to be a jealous type. However, when she sees that it's Hildy, she must agree that Johnny's previous girlfriend has as much right, if not more, to weep for Johnny. Perhaps Katie can't cry because she was expecting Johnny's demise.

Katie, Ruthie Nolan, Francie, and Neeley ride out to the cemetery in the first coach behind the hearse. The children sit with their backs to the hearse, which suits Francie because she doesn't have to see or think about the coffin inside and Johnny's dead body. After the burial, the coaches go in different directions. Ruthie goes off with some mourners who live near her. She does not speak to Katie or the children at all that day. Katie has the coach stop at the barber shop and sends Francie in to get Johnny's cup. The barber takes a mug from a row off the shelf. Johnny's is white and says "John Nolan" in "gold and fancy block letters." When Francie returns to the coach, Katie says that Francie will keep the cup as a memento. Neeley will get Johnny's signet ring.

The cup and the ring are the only heirlooms that Johnny can provide his children. The prominent gold lettering on the cup is reminiscent of Johnny's grand image of himself. The reader can deduce that Ruthie doesn't speak to Katie because she partially blames Katie for Johnny's death. Earlier in the narrative, it is explained that Ruthie resented Katie for marrying him, due to her wish to keep Johnny close to her after her other sons died. She probably quietly believes that Katie did a poor job of looking after Johnny and is partially responsible for the loss of her last son.

CHAPTER 37

Katie stays in bed the day after the funeral, and Francie and Neeley wander around bewildered. They walk up Graham Avenue towards Broadway. Christmas passes unnoticed because Johnny died on Christmas day. Neeley's birthday also gets lost somewhere in the last few days. Francie wonders why Johnny had to die. Neeley thinks that maybe God wanted to punish him. This makes Francie angry. She wonders why God would make Johnny the way he was, and then dare him to try to do anything about it. She wonders why God never helps people like them. Finally, Francie says that, though she would never tell anyone but Neeley, she doesn't believe in God.

Francie wishes for an answer or some explanation for Johnny's death. Neeley offers the only practical answer that he can give—that Johnny's death was a matter of divine will. However, Neeley's depiction of God's will as wrathful and vengeful angers Francie. In her mind, it seems that God set her father up to fail and then delighted in watching his descent. This conceptualization of God seems cruel and contemptuous of humanity, which is why Francie no longer believes.

When Katie lets Francie and Neeley in the apartment, she notices that their faces look tired but peaceful. She figures they have overcome their grief. She surprises them with hot chocolate. She then tells Neeley that she is giving him the bedroom and that she and Francie will share what Katie identifies as Francie's room. Still, Francie wishes that she had her own room. Knowing Francie's thought, Katie says that, when it gets warm again, Francie can have the front room. They'll put a cot in there and cover it during the day so that it will seem like a nice sitting room.

Katie looks for ways to help the children settle into a life without Johnny. Neeley is getting too old to share a room with Francie. Francie may understand Katie's reasoning but still envies Neeley's ability to have his own room. Both of the children need their own personal space. Katie tries to provide Francie with her own, too, despite the limitations of their apartment. The sitting room is a nice compromise because it could also be a reading space.

Katie says that the Nolans will resume their evening readings. She first goes to the Bible and skips to the part about the birth of baby Jesus. She feels her unborn child move inside of her. Katie, Francie, and Neeley take turns reading from the book. As they read about the birth of Christ, they think of Johnny dying. When the children go to bed, Katie goes against character by holding the children close to her and declaring herself their mother and father.

Katie is eager to reestablish normalcy in the children's lives. Her announcement that she will now fulfill the roles of both parents means that the children will have to depend on her for all of their parental needs. This change doesn't make Katie any more nurturing or flexible than she was before. Johnny's absence will still be felt.

CHAPTER 38

Just before Christmas vacation ends, Francie tells Katie that she isn't going back to school. Francie says that, because she is fourteen she can now get her working papers, she should help bring in income. Her mother insists that she stay in school and graduate. She also insists that both Francie and Neeley go to high school in the fall. She tells Francie that the family will manage on her income.

Francie feels that, now that Johnny is gone and she's old enough to get a job, that she has an obligation to help support the family. She is eager to help her family eke out of poverty, while Katie insists that the best way to do this is for her to obtain an education.

When Katie consults with Sissy and Evy, Evy insists that Katie pull Francie out of school so that she can get her working papers. They both leave her a bit of money before departing. Katie does not want to take Francie out of school, knowing how difficult it would be for her to go back and graduate. One day, she gets lucky when she decides to pay a visit to McGarrity's to thank him for the wreath. Jim McGarrity misses Johnny, particularly his storytelling. Later, he visits the Nolan apartment and offers to employ Francie as a dishwasher and bedmaker and says that Neeley can help him prepare the free lunch by peeling boiled eggs and cutting hunks of cheese. They would work only for an hour after school and half a day on Saturday. He'll pay each child two dollars per week.

It's important to Katie that Francie graduate from high school so that she'll never be relegated to menial jobs, like her mother. Evy doesn't understand Katie's dream and is only concerned about the present fact that the family lacks money and Katie is too close to delivering a baby to continue working. McGarrity's offer seems like a godsend, though Katie doesn't know that he's mainly offering the children jobs as a way to hold on to his memory of Johnny. If she knew the truth, that he was looking to use her children for companionship, she probably would have refused.

Katie is ecstatic to hear the offer. However, she lets the children decide and they agree. McGarrity then offers to pay the first week's salary in advance, but Katie refuses the money. She thanks him, however, for his intentions and her gratitude launches him into a long talk about his boyhood in Ireland and his memories of Johnny. McGarrity talks for two hours without stopping. As he talks, he feels his lost manhood, spoiled by his unhappy marriage, stirring within him. It isn't so much because Katie is an attractive woman, but because he feels a sense of release through talking. Before leaving, he asks Katie if he can come up to the apartment sometime, just to talk. Katie kindly refuses. McGarrity sighs and leaves.

Katie's demonstration of gratitude puts McGarrity at ease and makes him feel that Katie would be open to befriending him or, in her gratitude, would at least be willing to listen to him. For McGarrity, his sense of self-worth comes from being listened to and respected. Mae and his children ignore him and are only interested in him because of what he can provide financially. Katie senses that McGarrity is lonely for companionship, though she may think that his intentions are sexual.

Francie is glad for the job at McGarrity's; it keeps her from missing Johnny. After school, Francie and Neeley go to church for "instruction," since they will be confirmed in the spring. The work at McGarrity's is easy. McGarrity waits until the children have been working with him for a few days before he approaches them for conversation. He starts with Neeley, who looks so much like his father, but he doesn't get very far. The next day, he goes upstairs to one of the rooms he rents out. Francie is sweeping. He sits down and she begins sweeping to the door. He realizes that she thinks that he may do something inappropriate. Francie then realizes that Jim McGarrity only wanted to talk, but she has nothing to say to him.

The "instruction" that Francie and Neeley receive is catechism. McGarrity's disappointment with Neeley results from the fact that, in terms of personality, the boy is more reserved like his mother. McGarrity is so intent on reviving Johnny through his children that he neglects the possibility that they may have their own distinct modes of being. Francie has lingering memories of her sexual assault and is afraid to be left alone with an older man.

Mae McGarrity goes up and offers Francie something to eat. Francie lies and says that she isn't hungry. Mrs. McGarrity insists that she come down anyway, to be sociable. Mrs. McGarrity gets a mound of rosy Jell-O and whipped cream. She cuts it in half for them to share. It is Francie's first time having Jell-O and she loves it. Francie realizes that the McGarritys are "all right," just not to each other.

Though the McGarritys have more money than the Nolans, Francie realizes that this doesn't make their lives particularly better. Though she is young, Francie can sense that they have a bad marriage and that they each seek company from others due to their particular form of loneliness.

During a private conversation with her husband, Mae tells Jim that it won't work out with Neeley and Francie. They look into each other's eyes while they speak. She tells him to wait a couple of weeks after Katie's child is born before letting the children go. Jim marvels at how his wife knew what he was thinking. When she leaves the room, he goes after her, wanting to hold on to that understanding between them. Then, he sees her flirting with a "husky teamster," whose arm is around her waist. When the teamster sees Jim, she "sheepishly" removes his arm. Jim goes behind the bar and looks into Mae's eyes again; they have no understanding in them.

Mae convinces Jim that they have to let Francie and Neeley go after Katie's third child is born. She knows that Jim is using the children to try to replace his friendship with their father. The conversation is positive for Jim. Despite his willingness to let go of the children, he senses that he can possibly reconcile with his wife. This sense of a renewed understanding between them is spoiled when he sees Mae with another man, realizing that nothing has changed between them.

On the way home from Aunt Sissy's house one afternoon, Francie tells Katie how Aunt Sissy doesn't wear her strong, sweet perfume anymore. Katie notes that she no longer has to because she has her baby and her man. Francie gets the idea that wearing perfume must have something to do with having a baby. Francie is beginning to get a headache and wonders if it's the result of her confusion about life. Katie reads her thought and tells her, aloud, not be silly. Aunt Sissy's kitchen was too hot and that's the reason why Katie is getting a headache, too. The coincidence causes Francie to laugh for the first time since her father died and her mother smiles at her.

Francie observes changes in her aunt. Sissy was a rather promiscuous woman Sissy and is now a domestically-oriented married woman. Francie doesn't quite make the connection between Sissy's wearing of perfume and the art of seduction. It feels as though there is a great deal to know about being a woman, but Katie puts Francie at ease by saying that she's also getting a headache, which implies that she, too, identifies with Francie's confusion.

CHAPTER 39

Francie and Neeley are confirmed in May. With confirmation over, Francie has time to work on her novel. She is writing to prove to Miss Garnder, the new English teacher, that she *does* know something about beauty. Since Johnny's death, Francie stops writing stories about birds and trees and writes about her father. Three of her stories get a "C" instead of her usual "A." Miss Garnder explains to her one day after school that drunkenness is "neither truth nor beauty," but a vice and not something to write about. Hunger, too, is not beautiful and is also unnecessary, Miss Garnder says, due to all of the charities. Miss Garnder notes that she is not a snob because her family also struggled with money and sometimes could not afford a maid. Still, she insists that she would be rather dull if all she wrote about was hunger and poverty.

Francie decides to stop writing compositions about simple and pleasant subjects, like the change of the seasons and her future dreams, in favor of communicating something about her life and all that she's endured over the years. To Francie, these stories are as valid as those about the beautiful things that she loves. When Miss Gardner gives her a bad grade because Francie has supposedly abandoned beauty in favor of writing about vice, it amounts to an unwillingness to accept the validity of Francie's experiences. Miss Gardner also reinforces the notion that people are at fault for their suffering.

Miss Garnder goes on to say that the school cannot put on Francie's play for the same reason why she is getting C's in composition. She instructs Francie to stop writing "sordid" stories. When Francie asks what the word means, Miss Garnder directs her to a dictionary. When Francie reads the definition, she is outraged that Miss Garnder would apply the word to her family, and especially to her impeccably neat father. She turns in fury toward Miss Garnder and tells her never to use that word about "us." Miss Garnder is confused and shocked by Francie's impertinence. Francie apologizes. Miss Garnder accepts that Francie may not like her anymore but believes that she told Francie the truth and that, one day, Francie will thank her for it. Francie wishes adults would stop saying that. Miss Garnder instructs Francie to burn the stories.

Miss Garnder won't allow Francie to put on her play because that piece also explores what Miss Garnder would consider a "sordid" subject. Francie is offended by the word when she discovers what it means. She regards it as an insult to be associated with dirt when she thinks about how hard Katie worked to keep her and Neeley from getting sick or infested with lice, how she makes her living from maintaining a clean tenement, and how Johnny always made a point to wear a clean undershirt and dickey and went to the barber several times per week. Miss Garnder is mischaracterizing her family.

Francie starts a novel that day about a girl named Sherry Nola, who is brought up in luxury. Francie thinks that, when it's finished, she'll ask Steve, or "Aunt Sissy's John," to publish it. Then, she'll present the book to Miss Garnder who will find the book wonderful and be sorry for how she spoke to Francie. Francie writes about her character discussing dinner with her maid. Francie realizes from this that she is hungry. She is annoyed, however, that she is writing about hunger in "a roundabout silly way." She tears up her novel and then burns all of the compositions for which she earned A's. She surmises that she got good grades on them because she was a good liar.

Francie wants to write a book about a little girl who lives in luxury because she wants Miss Garnder to see that she knows about a lot of things. However, in the process of writing, Francie discovers that she can't forget about her own experiences. She ends up writing in a way that is inauthentic. Similarly, all of her compositions for English class were inauthentic because she was trying to distract herself from the facts about her own life.

Francie then thinks about how much she misses Johnny and how she knows that Katie loves Neeley more than her. She worries suddenly about Katie dying and no one being there to love and care for her. She calls out for her mother who is on the third floor, cleaning. Francie offers to finish the hall, but Katie refuses. She doesn't want Francie's hands to look as worn as her own. Francie offers instead to sit on the stairs and watch her. Katie asks if Francie doesn't have any girl friends to play with. Francie says that she doesn't like women. Katie says that she doesn't like them either and that they are alike in this way. She then asks Francie to help her at home, requesting that Francie to stay close to her and saying that she'll be counting on her to help when the baby comes. Francie realizes that maybe her mother doesn't love her as much as Neeley, but Katie needs her.

Despite feeling insufficiently loved by her mother, Francie also fears the possibility of losing her. Her offer to help Katie scrub the floor is Francie's excuse to spend time with her mother. Katie, on the other hand, doesn't want Francie performing her work; she scrubs floors so that Francie doesn't have to. The only topic over which mother and daughter can bond is their mutual dislike of other women. This tendency to dislike and undervalue women also partly explains their difficulty in forming a closer bond. Francie finds it easier to resent her mother and Katie, though she needs Francie, she values her son more because he's male.

CHAPTER 40

Katie goes into labor. Katie asks Francie constantly for the time and says that, when Neeley arrives at 7:30 PM, he is to go over to Aunt Evy's, because she lives closer than Aunt Sissy. Katie doesn't think that men should be around during deliveries. Katie thinks of how some women, who wouldn't let their men see them in curlers or without their curlers, force them to watch the babies arrive. She thinks that, when men see the agony that is produced out of their being together, it compels them to cheat. The prospect of lovemaking with their wives is less appealing.

Katie doesn't want Neeley to be traumatized by the sounds and possible sight of her birth. She thinks, like many women of the time, that some things ought to be kept a mystery from men. If they knew about the agony women experienced as a result of sex, and the way in which their vaginas expand during childbirth, they would find the prospect of being with the same woman less appealing.

Katie instructs Francie to wrap up Neeley's things, which he will need overnight. She then asks Francie to wring cold water out of a cloth for wiping her face. To take her mind off of the pain, Katie asks Francie to read her one of her "A" compositions. Francie says that she burned them all and insists that they weren't particularly good. Katie feels guilty about never making more time for Francie. She then asks Francie to read something from Shakespeare.

Katie feels guilt about not paying more attention to Francie, especially since she's depending so much on her daughter's support now. She asks Francie to read her Shakespeare to distract her from her labor pains. In this brief instance, their roles reverse—Francie is the nurturer, using what Katie has taught her to look after her during her labor.

Evy arrives at 8:30 PM and says that Sissy will be along in half an hour. Evy asks Francie if Katie has prepared baby clothes. When Francie shows them to her, Evy realizes that Katie is expecting a boy because the clothes are blue. Sissy arrives and announces that it's time to get a midwife. When Katie says there's no money for one, Sissy insists that they can deliver the baby themselves. They shut the bedroom door. Francie waits outside and starts falling asleep. Aunt Evy comes out, gives her fifty cents, and orders her to buy sweet butter, soda crackers, and navel oranges.

The women demonstrate their ability to depend on and support one another during Katie's childbirth. In regard to baby colors, blue did not come to be associated more with boys until around the beginning of the First World War, which is when the novel is set. Previously, blue was a color associated with girls, due to the perception that it was a daintier color.

The neighbors listen to Katie's cries of pain. The "apelike teamster" complains and says that he hopes Katie's cries won't keep him awake. His young bride typically weeps and unbuttons her dress. Flossie Gaddis wonders aloud to her mother about men having all the fun and women all the pain. Mrs. Gaddis thinks of her dead son and looks at her daughter's withered arm. The Tymore sisters lie in their "virginal bed" and hold hands while listening. Lizzie wonders if it is better to suffer such moments of unhappiness. Katie, it seems, knows that she is living. When Francie gets back, she finds out that Katie has delivered the baby. She realizes that Aunt Evy sent her out because she did not want Francie to witness it. Katie delivers a girl who will have "curling black hair" and whom they name Annie Laurie, though they will call her Laurie.

Everyone in the tenement has separate reactions to Katie's primordial screams of pain. The young bride who is forced to sleep with a husband she doesn't want, cries because she imagines that she, too, will soon experience such pain. Mrs. Gaddis wonders if women really do suffer more and thinks of how the children she has born have also suffered. The Tynmore sisters have never had sex and their most intimate bond is the one that they have with each other. Their poverty forces them to share a bed. They listen to Katie and wonder if they have missed out on some essential experience.

CHAPTER 41

Jim McGarrity doesn't fire Francie and Neeley as planned because his business is booming in the spring of 1916. His customers gather there to discuss all of the great changes in the country, such as the prospects of Prohibition and women voting. Airplanes seem to be a fad, young people are dance-crazy, German-Americans are changing their names to something Anglicized. Francie listens carefully, feeling that the world has changed between the day Laurie was born and graduation day.

Francie connects the world's changes to both the birth of her little sister and her graduation from primary school. Both signal the arrival of something new, particularly a change in women's roles in the country. The dance-craziness to which McGarrity's customers refer is related to the advent of jazz, which will play a big role in women's sexual liberation.

CHAPTER 42

On the last night in June 1916, Francie graduates. When she watches the graduation play, her eyes burn "with unshed tears." She thinks that her play would've been better. When Francie picks up her report card, she sees four "A's" and one "C minus." The latter is her English grade. Francie suddenly hates the school and its teachers, especially Miss Garnder. She returns to the classroom with the other girls, who are expecting bouquets of flowers on their desks. Francie knows that hers will be without flowers, but she's surprised when she sees red roses on her desk, with a note from Johnny, who's been dead for six months. Aunt Sissy tells her that, a year ago, Johnny gave her two dollars and the card, all written out, asking Sissy to send the flowers on Francie's graduation day, in case he forgot. Francie cries.

Francie's eyes "burn" when she watches the play because she knows that Miss Garnder's reason for refusing to stage it was unjust. She also feels that her composition grade is unfair. If nothing else, Francie's experience with Miss Garnder provides her with her first lesson on the ways in which people can thoroughly misunderstand others. The lesson is helpful for Francie to learn, given that she wants to be a writer and must be prepared for others to dislike her work and misunderstand her intentions. The surprise bouquet reminds her of the only person who loved her unconditionally—her father.

Aunt Sissy takes Francie into the girls' restroom and instructs her to cry loud and hard to get all of her feelings out. When Francie comes out, she feels better. She says goodbye to teachers and other students, whom she realizes liked her much more than she thought. Francie goes to Miss Garnder's room. The teacher looks eagerly toward Francie and asks why Francie stopped handing work in. Francie doesn't reply but holds her hand out for Miss Garnder to shake and says "goodbye." Miss Garnder insists that Francie will see that she was right. Francie no longer hates Miss Garnder but feels sorry for her. Mr. Jenson shakes hands with everyone and says "goodbye." To Francie, he instructs her to be good, work hard, and be a credit to her school. She promises that she will.

Francie needs to cry because she's spent months suppressing her grief about her father's death so that she would be strong enough to help Katie at home. After she cries, she releases feelings of both sadness and anger and feels less hostile than she did moments ago. She becomes sympathetic toward Miss Garnder, whom she realizes doesn't understand much about the world but is fixated on a need to be right and to convince others that her point of view about the world is the only proper one. The experience reveals that teachers are as flawed and complicated as anyone else.

At home, Francie and Neeley's diplomas are admired. Francie's is especially admired, due to Mr. Jenson's fine handwriting. Neeley turns in a report card of two B's and C's in his other subjects. Katie registers surprise at Francie's "C" in English composition. Francie says that she doesn't want to talk about it, but Katie doesn't let the subject rest until Sissy orders her to. They all go out for ice cream.

Though Francie outperforms her brother in school, Katie is harsher on Francie for the blemish on her school record. Sissy orders Katie to stop talking about it because she recognizes that Katie is using the grade as an opportunity judge when it's a day for her to express pride in her daughter.

When it's time to pay, Katie lets the waiter keep twenty cents in change. Evy protests, but Katie insists they are celebrating. When Albie Seedmore, the son of a prosperous grocer, asks Francie out for a movie, Francie agrees after getting her mother's nodded consent. Aunt Evy prompts Francie to make a wish on the occasion of her first date. Francie wishes that she can always wear a white dress, hold red roses, and throw money around.

For once, Katie abandons her tight-fisted tendency with money to celebrate the prospect of a better future, as a result of Francie's graduating from primary school. For Francie, her graduation day makes her feel exceptionally important, as though she's living up to her father's nickname—prima donna.

CHAPTER 43

Francie gets a job as a "stemmer"—that is, she attaches stems to fake roses. She gets a rhythm to her work and moves along easily. The other workers are initially hostile to Francie but warm up when she can't suppress the desire to laugh at the effeminate voice of her co-worker, Mark. After that, they become friends. Neeley gets a job working as an errand boy in a downtown New York brokerage house. Steve got him the job through a friend who works there. On their way home after collecting their pay, they pass Carney's and Cheap Charlie's. Francie asks Neeley if he remembers when they collected junk. He says that was a long time ago, though it has only been two weeks since they last turned in junk for cash.

Francie gets her first job to support the family. Francie is initially an outcast at work because she is reluctant to socialize, which makes her seem stuck-up. Unfortunately, her ability to fit in with the others comes at the expense and further ostracism of another employee. Their new jobs makes Neeley very eager to put even the recent past behind them. He wants to imagine a future in which he can be as rich as the stock brokers for whom he works.

Neeley presents a pound package of peanut brittle to Katie for her and Francie to share. He also gives Katie eighty cents that he made from tips. She allows Neeley to keep his tips as spending money. She then gives Francie fifty cents, which she says will be Francie's weekly allowance. The children overwhelm her with thanks. Katie feels that she is going to cry and goes to the bedroom. Neeley thinks she may be upset. Francie tells him that Katie just didn't want them to see her cry.

Katie cries because she is happy that the family's financial situation is improving. Not only are they able to feed themselves, but the children are able to keep a little money for the things they would like to buy themselves. Despite Johnny's absence—and maybe even because of it—the family is able to progress and escape from the poverty they thought would always entrap them.

CHAPTER 44

Francie works as a stemmer for two weeks until she is laid off. She sees an ad in the newspaper for a file clerk at the Model Press Clipping Bureau. The desired applicant is to be sixteen. Francie writes a letter to them, saying she's sixteen, though she's only fourteen. She gets a reply two days later, asking for an interview. Sissy goes shopping with Francie to help her pick out a grown-up outfit for the interview. Francie talks again about cutting her hair and Katie refuses. The interview is short and Francie is hired on trial. The readers read papers from every state in the country, mark and box the desired news items, and write down the total of marked items and their ID numbers on the top of the front page.

Francie goes shopping for "a grown-up outfit" so that she can look more like a sixteen-year-old. To aid with her look of maturity, Francie wants to cut her hair. Shorter hair is also increasingly becoming a symbol of modernity and independence. Katie may balk at the prospect of Francie cutting her hair for these reasons, though she makes it a matter of not wanting Francie to spoil her beauty. This, too, is a way for Katie to control how Francie presents herself to the world.

Francie works easily. By the end of August, she's reading more papers and marking more items than any other reader. Francie is the fastest reader and the poorest paid. She makes ten dollars per week, while the others make twenty or twenty-five. At first, she's excited to work in New York. She figures that, if a tiny thing like **the brown bowl** excited her, surely the great city would. However, this proves not to be so.

The job comes easily to Francie who is making money doing the thing that she loves the most. She is paid less than the others because of her age and, perhaps, her relative inexperience. Francie is underwhelmed by Manhattan, which seems to lack the beauty and mystery of the brown bowl.

Miss Armstrong is the special city reader. Once, in the washroom, Francie overhears someone saying that Miss Armstrong is the boss's mistress. Francie thinks this may be on account of Miss Armstrong's lovely legs. Francie looks at her own "long thin legs" and thinks she would never "make it" as a mistress.

Francie is becoming aware of her sex appeal—or perceived lack thereof—as she develops into a woman. She doesn't think that she has the physical attractiveness to convince any man to give her special favors.

Francie learns that there's a class system at the Bureau. The division is between the better-educated readers and the working-class cutter, printer, delivery boy, and other laborers who make up a group called The Club. The Club members use her as a go-between to spread rumors and stir up trouble among readers. However, Francie isn't friendly enough with any of the readers to share rumors, so they die with her.

The class system at the Bureau is reminiscent of the division Francie witnessed in the classroom at her first school. This time, she's unsure of where her class loyalties lie. This is another way in which Smith illustrates the complexity of class, which is not always about money.

Just before Labor Day, the boss at the Bureau tells Francie that he and Miss Armstrong are getting married; therefore, she is leaving her job as city reader. He says that Miss Armstrong recommended Francie for the job and asks if Francie would be interested. Francie is delighted. Her boss thinks to himself about how to negotiate a raise for Francie. He offers her twenty dollars per week, which is a lot of money to Francie but ten dollars less than what he would normally pay someone in the position.

It's possible that Francie's boss doesn't negotiate a wage that is based on the value of her work because she is female. This, along with her youth, would make her less likely to fight for a higher wage. Though Francie's other co-workers are women, they've been working in this field for some time and are better equipped to know the value of their work.

Francie knows that the family's troubles would be over with that money, but she wants to go back to school. Later that evening, Francie tells Katie about how much she wants to go back to school, while Neeley says that he doesn't want to go. Katie insists that he will be a great doctor. Francie doesn't like how her mother insists that Neeley go back to school, while she thinks it fine for Francie not to go. Francie finally tells her mother about the job promotion. She also expresses her anger about how Katie favors Neeley, but she softens when she realizes how much she is like her mother in her willingness to fight for herself.

Francie uses her job offer to test Katie. She suspects that Katie places more value on Neeley's education, though he's an inferior student, because he's a boy. Francie turns out to be right. However, in fighting with her mother over her belief that she has an equal right to an education, she realizes that she has inherited her strong will from her mother. Thus, the more Francie resists Katie, the more she reveals the same tendencies.

CHAPTER 45

It is Christmas again. This year, there is money for presents. Francie takes comfort in not returning to school when she sees how her salary makes life so much easier for the family. When she, Neeley, Katie, and Laurie go Christmas shopping, they first go to buy Katie a new hat. Katie bargains with the shopkeeper and gets the hat for two-fifty. When the door closes on them, the shopkeeper whispers bitterly, "Goyem!" and she spits after them. They then go to Seigler's for a sweater suit for Laurie and finally to buy Neeley spats for his shoes. They pass a Christmas tree market and Neeley sees a two-foot fir tree that is still growing because it has roots. They take it home and decide to care for it long after Christmas. They call the tree "Annie."

Katie's experience at the hat shop reveals some of the underlying tension between Jewish residents and Gentiles, which is also alluded to elsewhere in the novel. The episode at the hat shop, however, is contrasted with the family's visit to Seigler's, which is friendly. The family's decision to nurture the fir tree long after Christmas comes from the fact that they feel they are no longer people merely scraping by to survive, but that they now have the ability to support the growth and survival of other things.

On Christmas morning, the Nolans attend mass together. Francie thinks that the church is the most beautiful in Brooklyn. Thomas Rommely gave his tithe of labor to this church and helped to carve its altar. The priest enters, followed by the altar boys, then ascends the steps to the pulpit. He asks for the congregation's prayers "for the repose of the soul of John Nolan." Nearly a thousand people kneel for the soul of a man whom maybe a dozen of them knew. Francie begins the prayer for souls in Purgatory.

The church is representative of all of the hardships that Francie's family has endured during their lives in Brooklyn. Thomas helped to build the church, using his labor to help establish his citizenship. Now, the church prays for the soul of a man who found it impossible to survive in the community that Francie's grandfather helped to build.

CHAPTER 46

It is New Year's Eve 1917. The Nolans talk about how their landlord is planning to rip out the old wood stoves in favor of steam heating. When the new year comes in, someone begins to sing "Auld Lang Syne." A group of Germans join in but sing in German. The Irish retaliate with a parody of their lyrics. Francie says that she doesn't like Germans because they're too insistent on having their way. Someone with a thick Irish brogue yells out "Happy New Year!" to the Nolans and Neeley responds with the same, but jokingly calls the well-wisher "a dirty Irish mick." Katie and Francie laugh. Then, they all decide to drink a toast to their Irishness. McGarrity gave them a bottle of fine brandy for Christmas. Neeley pours his out, while Francie drinks hers. Katie worries momentarily that Francie could be like her father, but thinks that her own characteristics are stronger in Francie.

Francie's expressed dislike of Germans inadvertently mimics her grandfather Thomas Rommely's professed hatred of Germans. The ethnic rivalry that results over singing "Auld Lang Syne" humorously illustrates the diversity of New York and how ethnic groups contend with one another for dominance, even over small things. Ethnicity, too, evokes signs of class. Neeley jokes and calls the Irish well-wishers "dirty micks," despite being Irish himself, because he's making fun of the reputation of the Irish as a lower-class ethnic group. He pokes fun, too, at the tension within his own family between an Austrian and an Irishman.


Francie and Neeley go to the roof and stand in the cold night air. Francie is drunk and thinks about how much she needs someone to love in a way that's different from how she loves her family. It isn't about sex, but rather understanding. She looks out over Brooklyn and says that it's "magical," while Neeley thinks it's like any other place. He says that it's only Francie's imagination that makes it different. His saying this reminds Francie of their mother. She thinks that he's so much of both of their parents. She wants to hug him, but, like their mother, he hates demonstrations of affection. They shake hands solemnly instead and wish each other "Happy New Year!"

For Francie, part of becoming a young woman is about experiencing her first love. The thought of finding the man she'll one day love, somewhere out in the city, makes the skyline appear suddenly appear "magical" to her. Neeley isn't having the same thought, so the city looks the same as ever to him. Neeley has his mother's practical way of looking at things, while Francie is dreamy like her father.


CHAPTER 47

After New Year's, things revert back to the old routine. Francie's evenings are lonely. The family is only together at supper time. Spring comes early and the warm nights make her restless and, in March 1917, all anyone can talk about is the impending war. Then, Sissy creates a minor sensation in the family when everyone finds out that her first husband, Jim, died in a blaze. The newspaper declares Sissy his widow and she gets his pension. Steve protests that, when he married Sissy, she said she was divorced. Sissy never thought she had to get divorced because she wasn't married in a church. Steve says that, now that she's widowed from Jim, she can get divorced from the second husband. He then demands that everyone stop calling him "John."

The announcement about Sissy's first husband confronts her, for the first time in a long time, with her complicated past. In her naivete, Sissy didn't think that a marriage that occurred outside of church counted as legal. Despite her promiscuity, she doesn't believe in divorce, due to being Catholic. In keeping with her value of doing only what feels good, Sissy is selective with church doctrine. She refuses to accept any aspect of it that denies her sexual freedom, while accepting the part that makes her marriages void for being non-religious.

As it turns out, Sissy did divorce her second husband. He tells her that he is well, obtained a divorce in Wisconsin seven years ago, and married shortly thereafter. He writes, "in belligerently underlines words," that he is "very happy" with his wife, good job, and three children and intends to stay that way. Sissy tells Francie to write back that she, too, is very happy and has a beautiful baby girl. Francie says that it might seem funny that Sissy got a baby so soon when Steve's letter to her ex-husband said that they were planning to marry. Sissy insists on Francie writing the letter as she is dictating it. She also insists on telling him that she got a divorce before him but forgot about it.

Sissy feels suddenly competitive with her second husband. Though they parted on good terms, Sissy seems jealous of the fact that he was able to find happiness very soon after leaving her. She may be especially jealous of the fact that her second husband was able to have three healthy children without her, while Sissy delivered four stillborn children. Her assertion of her own happiness and expectant pregnancy reinforces her feeling of not being a failure as a wife and mother.

Steve gets a marriage license and marries Sissy all over again in a Methodist church. For the first time in their marriage, he feels "happy, secure, and masterful" and Sissy is "madly in love with him." One evening, Sissy comes over and tells Katie that she's pregnant again. Katie worries because Sissy is thirty-seven and too old to get over another heartbreak. Sissy insists that this child will live. She then marvels at how much Sarah looks like Steve. After another moment, she tells Katie that it was Steve who told her where Lucia lived and that she was pregnant. They are both quiet for a long time, then Katie describes the incident as "accidental." She then tries to correct herself and say that it is "less than accidental." As she gropes for the word, Francie, who has been listening in, offers "coincidental." A shocked silence comes from the bedroom. The sisters continue talking in whispers.

For Sissy, this is the only one of her marriages that counts because it's a religious marriage. The renewal of wedding vows has symbolic importance for her and Steve and rekindles the romance between them, while also solidifying their bond, which seemed more tenuous before due to Sissy's unpredictability. We also learn here that Steve was probably the married man with whom Lucia had an affair. To protect her pride, or to avoid feeling the hurt of betrayal, Sissy refuses to admit to this outright.

CHAPTER 48

On April 6, 1917, the United States goes to war. Francie makes a little time capsule of this moment by sealing a lock of her hair in a square of paper, which bear the marks of her fingerprints and lipstick, in an envelope. She prays to God for every moment of her life to matter. Francie puts her head down on her desk and weeps. One of the other readers asks her if she has a brother or a sweetheart. When she confirms that she has a brother, the reader offers her sympathies. That evening, Francie tells Katie and Neeley how a German spy was caught in her office. Business is also spoiled by houses holding off on important publications and research workers canceling their accounts in anticipation of being drafted. The government, anticipating a man shortage, opens the civil service to women and many of the file clerks apply and are accepted.

It isn't entirely clear why Francie begins to cry. Neeley is too young to go to war, so it's unlikely that she's thinking of him when her co-worker talks about a brother of hers going to war. It's possible that the prospect of war makes her think that it'll be that much more difficult for her to find "a sweetheart," as her co-worker puts it. To avoid explaining this longing for romantic companionship, she lets her co-worker think that the truth lies somewhere between. In a way, it does, because Francie wants both friendship with a man (so far, she only has this with her actual brother) and someone to love romantically.

Soon, Francie, Miss Armstrong, and the boss are the only ones reading papers. Then, Francie is laid off when the boss decides to close the Bureau. The boss promises Francie her last week's salary, but she doesn't expect to receive it. Her next job is at the Communications Corporation in downtown New York, working as a teletype operator. Despite Francie having another job, Katie begins to worry. The war has sent the prices of goods skyrocketing. The family's dependence on Francie's wages will prevent her from going to college. However, Francie likes her work, and the household adjusts itself to her new schedule. She leaves home at four in the afternoon and gets home a little before two in the morning. She sleeps until 11:00 AM. Francie works Sunday nights, but she has Wednesdays off. The arrangement cures her of her lonely evenings. It also gives her a few hours to spend in the park with Laurie.

Francie's lack of expectation regarding her final salary indicates that she's had some idea that her boss has been dishonest with her regarding her pay. Francie expresses no sense of mourning about losing her job at the Bureau, though she seems to have thoroughly enjoyed it. Her ability to continue on, despite setbacks, mirrors Katie's stoicism and perseverance over the years in response to losing jobs and enduring Johnny's bouts of drunkenness. Francie quickly adjusts to her new schedule and doesn't seem to be dismayed by the slight decline in her pay. As usual, she looks on the bright side: she'll have more time to spend with Laurie.

When the subject of high school comes up, Francie says that she refuses to go. Now, Katie protests, but Francie fears that she'll be too old when she finally graduates and gets through college. Then, Francie has the idea of taking some college courses during the day. She signs up for three afternoon classes with Brooklyn's "oldest and most reputable college." Francie figures she can take the classes as a non-degree seeking student. Her plan works and the cashier accepts her money for tuition. When it is time to buy her books, she balks at the choice between new and secondhand texts until a "tall and good-looking" young man behind her suggests that she buy them second-hand to save money. She thanks him and watches him leave. On the way home, she clutches her books, hardly able to believe that she is in college.

Roles are reversed in that it's now Katie who wants Francie to go back to school, while Francie balks at the prospect. She fears being outcast due to being so much older than the other students. Furthermore, Francie has gained a fair amount of work and life experience that would also make her seem out of place in high school. Her decision to skip ahead to college seems more suitable and also opens up the prospect of meeting a possible boyfriend.

CHAPTER 49

Francie is excited by her classes in chemistry and Restoration drama, but she struggles with beginner's-level French—that is, until Ben Blake intervenes. Ben helps Francie with all of her homework and she dreads the end of the summer because she'll no longer be seeing Ben every day. On the eve of her French exam, Ben invites her to study so that they can cram for the French exam. They meet at a Broadway theater where he works as an usher on Saturday nights. He creates a master exam paper, made up of frequently asked questions and those seldom asked. He also helps her memorize a page from Molière's *Tartuffe*. When she encounters the one question from the exam that she will be unable to answer, she is to offer the passage that she has memorized instead. He assures her that this tactic will help her pass the exam, and it works. Francie gets a passing grade. She also does very well on her exams in chemistry and drama.

Ben becomes a wonderful friend and companion for Francie because he shares her love of learning and her ambition. For the first time in her life, Francie knows someone who can identify with her need learn as well as her curiosity of the world beyond New York. She struggles with French because, though it is a beginner's-level course, it's taught with the assumption that the students have had some previous exposure. It's also possible that Francie struggles with it because it represents a foreign world that Francie can't trick herself into understanding. Her love of theater, on the other hand, makes Restoration drama somewhat familiar.

A week later, Francie and Ben go out for chocolate sodas. Ben confesses that he likes Francie a lot, though he has no time for girls. They part, promising to see each other the following summer. Francie enjoys summer school so much that she tries to attend the same college again in the fall, but she doesn't have the tuition money. She finds a women's college that is free for residents, but they refuse to accept her without a high school diploma. There is an alternative, however: if she passes the regents' examination, she can enroll regardless of high school credits. Francie takes the exam and flunks every subject but chemistry. She promises to study and take the exam again next year. She thinks of Ben and wonders if she should write him, then she decides against it, figuring that he wouldn't have time to see her anyway.

Though it is an interest in education that has brought Francie and Ben together, it is also this very thing that is keeping them apart. Ben is extremely ambitious and driven and seems to have his life figured out in a way that Francie does not at this point. She's still trying to navigate through the world of higher education, figuring out how to get to college without a diploma, which proves tricky. At the same time, she also wants a boyfriend and can't stop thinking of Ben, who seems so suitable for her, while he's also less concerned than she is about falling in love.

CHAPTER 50

Aunt Sissy expects her baby in late November. Sissy says that she will have the baby at a hospital and a doctor will deliver it. This is a first in the Rommely family. The birth is the same as all of the others, but when the baby comes out, Sissy closes her eyes. When she opens them, she sees that the baby is still and blue. The doctor calls for oxygen. She watches him work on the baby and believes that she is seeing a miracle when the baby boy comes back to life. When Sissy asks Dr. Aaron Aaronstein if he is sure the baby will live, he shrugs and says, "Why not?" Sissy kisses his hands and names the baby Stephen Aaron.

Sissy breaks with her past tradition of using a midwife, perhaps partly to see if her luck will change by doing things differently and also, perhaps, because she now thinks that the attention of medical professionals could ensure her next baby a better chance of survival. She closes her eyes, as though making a wish. She is surprised that her child has survived. Not understanding the science involved, she thinks it's a miracle.

Meanwhile, Uncle Willie tries to join the army and fails. At the same time, he quits his job with the milk company and declares himself a failure. Steve is working as a foreman at a munitions factory and gets Willie a job there. With his first check for overtime work, Willie buys a bass drum and a pair of cymbals. He then starts to manipulate other instruments in his effort to form a one-man band.

Willie tries to take yet another job that will help him fulfill his role as a husband and a father. The money that he earns also gives him the money to afford new instruments so that he can dedicate more time to what he loves—music.

CHAPTER 51

When it gets cold, Francie enrolls in sewing and ballroom dancing classes. Meanwhile, Mary Rommely, who is eighty-five, prepares for her death. As Christmas approaches, Katie has the idea of pooling their money to buy a roast chicken, a big bakery cake, and a pound of good coffee instead of gifts. When Francie protests because they have enough money to buy food and gifts, Katie says that she wants to give their Christmas money to the Tynmores, who are struggling. Francie agrees, though not enthusiastically.

Katie hasn't forgotten the great favor that Lizzie Tynmore did for her family by exposing her children to music for a fraction of the cost that she could have charged. To repay the Tynmores' kindness, and the invaluable lessons that Lizzie provides, she wants to provide them with funds in return. Francie looks forward to a bountiful Christmas and doesn't yet have the maturity to think beyond her own needs.

CHAPTER 52

One sunny day in the spring, when Francie is sixteen, she leaves work and sees her co-worker, Anita, standing with her boyfriend, Joey. Anita asks Francie if she can help them by hosting Joey's friend, who is a fellow soldier. Francie doesn't think the boy looks like much at first, but he wins her over with his shy smile. He later introduces himself as Lee Rhynor. He offers his arm to Francie while they make their way to Ruby's for chop suey.

Lee's shy smile makes him seem vulnerable. To Francie, this is more appealing than a man who is simply handsome. The smile signals him as someone who needs her. Furthermore, Anita confirms that Lee needs Francie because he is alone in a new city.

Lee tells Francie all about his boyhood in Pennsylvania, his family, his school days, and his life at army camp. He tells her about everything except the girl to whom he is engaged back home. Francie, in turn, tells him about her life. She and Lee bond over their lingering sense of loneliness. When Francie says that she has to go home, Lee offers to escort her. They take the subway to the Brooklyn Bridge so that they can walk across it. When they get to the Brooklyn side of the East River, she tells him that he is not to take her all the way home; otherwise, he might get lost. In truth, Francie doesn't want Lee to see where she lives. When her trolley arrives, he holds out his arms to her. She goes to him and he kisses her.

When Francie meets Lee, it seems that she's met a kindred spirit. Though Ben is attractive to her and interesting, his ambition and confidence make it seem as though he has no particular need for Francie. On the other hand, Lee's openness and expression of loneliness make Francie think that she could fill the void that supposedly exists within him. Though she begins to think that she loves him, she isn't ready to reveal everything about herself.

The next morning, Francie dresses up, expecting that Lee will be waiting for her outside of her work at 5:00 PM. Indeed, he is. He greets her with the shy smile that first enticed her. They eat at the Automat—another place that he wants to see, and then they go dancing. Despite his gangly frame, Lee is a good dancer. She feels Lee's arm tighten around her. She rests her cheek on his tunic. She wishes to have Lee near her always.

The way in which Francie anticipates seeing Lee after work mirrors Katie's anticipation to see Johnny after her release from the Castle Braid Factory. Francie doesn't know it, but she's repeating her parents' pattern of courtship.

On their way home, it starts to rain. Francie and Lee find shelter in the doorway of a vacant store. He announces that he's leaving in the morning to spend a couple of days with his mother before shipping out to France. Lee tells Francie that he loves her. She reminds him that he's engaged, but Lee implies that it is just a childish romance and that things are different between him and Francie. Francie tells Lee that she loves him, too, and he asks to spend the night with her. Francie demurs; she's a virgin. Then, Lee asks to marry her, if he comes back. Francie accepts the proposal and promises to write him every day.

Smith's use of a sudden rainstorm lends an aura of romance to the scene. It's a device that gives Francie and Lee an excuse to stop moving and focus on each other. Lee downplays the seriousness of his engagement to convince Francie that she has replaced his fiancée in his affections. Francie doesn't yet know it, but this is Lee's ruse to convince her to go to bed with him.

CHAPTER 53

Francie writes Lee that night, as promised. On Friday, she receives a letter from Mrs. Elizabeth Rhynor. Francie thinks that she is Lee's mother or sister-in-law and that maybe he was sick and couldn't write to her himself. When she continues reading, she finds out that the letter is from Lee's wife and that Lee pretended to be in love with Francie. Francie cries out for Katie, who empathizes but, as a mother, feels powerless to protect her daughter from heartache. Francie asks her mother to say something. All that Katie can say is that, Francie will never forget the boy and, when she falls in love again, it'll be because something in the next man will remind her of Lee.

Francie experiences her first love and her first heartbreak, but she also learns something about the willingness of some men to manipulate women for sex. Francie asks Katie to say something because she wants her mother to provide some explanation for what Lee did, though there isn't one that will be satisfying to Francie. Katie senses that Francie will always maintain Lee as the standard for the kind of love she wishes to feel, just as Johnny set the standard for Katie.

Francie then talks about how Lee invited her to sleep with him. As a mother, Katie worries about the "horrible things" that might have happened and the possibility of Francie's life being ruined. As a woman, however, she admits that it would've been a beautiful experience. Francie regrets not going with him.

Katie takes a nuanced view. Still, she worries about the possibility of Francie having become pregnant and "being ruined," or losing the virginity that Katie thinks Francie's future husband should take.

Katie then mentions that she, too, received a letter from Sergeant McShane, announcing that he will pay the family a visit the following week. Francie gets up earlier than usual and decides to stay up. She gets a box of writing paper and begins a letter to Ben. She then tears it up, refusing to give in to her feeling of needing someone but wanting to be needed.

Francie wants Ben's companionship but dislikes the way in which her need for him makes her vulnerable. Her upbringing with Katie has also shown her that marriage should involve some form of dependency as opposed to mutual cooperation.

CHAPTER 54

When Sergeant McShane comes to the Nolan house, it is the first time that Francie has seen him without his uniform. After playing with Laurie for a bit, Sergeant McShane states his wish to marry Katie. Katie worries, briefly, about the possibility of a public man like McShane having a scrubwoman for a wife. However, he insists that she's a good woman and a better man would be lucky to marry her. Katie agrees to marry McShane because he is a good man and she would like to have him for a husband.

Katie's decision to marry McShane has none of the romance of her marriage to Johnny. It is, instead, a practical decision made by two people who admire each other and desire companionship. Though there's some attraction between them, this seems to matter less than what they can offer each other: Katie offers McShane a healthy child and he offers financial stability.

Sergeant McShane makes it clear to Francie and Neeley that he doesn't wish to replace their father, but he would like to adopt Laurie, since she has never had a father. Francie and Neeley think of what an easy life Laurie will have, given McShane's financial security. On the other hand, she also won't have all of the fun they did during their hard times.

Now that they have put their impoverished pasts behind them, Francie and Neeley can see how their poverty made them creative and gave them a greater appreciation for the small things they could afford. Laurie will have a better life, but she won't develop those skills.


CHAPTER 55

Uncle Willie leaves his family in favor of roaming the streets of Brooklyn as a one-man band and collecting pennies. He decides this after winning first prize in an amateur competition at a movie house. Aunt Evy says that he'll come back home when it starts snowing again, but Francie isn't so sure. Evy takes over Willie's job in the munitions factory. She gets along fine financially, but, like all of the Rommely women, she finds it hard to live without a man.

Uncle Willie finally discovers what makes him happy. Evy, like Katie, fell in love with a man who loved to make music and was discontented when he was forced into another line of work to support his family. Willie and Johnny both serve as examples of men who privilege their art over financial stability.

Francie, meanwhile, is making plans to go to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Thanks to Ben's help with cramming, she passes the regents' college entrance exams. She originally wanted to go to school in New York, perhaps to Columbia, but Ben insists that part of an education is adjusting to a new environment. Ben is twenty now and in the Reserve Officers' Training Corps at his college. He graduated from high school in January 1918.

Ben serves as a kind of informal mentor to Francie. Not only does he help her with her studies and help her navigate the world of higher education, which is unfamiliar to anyone else she knows, but he is her first close friend. He also convinces her to leave Brooklyn so that she can develop a more expansive world view.

Francie likes Ben and is proud to have his friendship, but she still thinks of Lee. She wonders if he is now lying dead in France "under a plain white cross." She cannot ask Anita, who left the Communications Corporation months ago and didn't leave an address.

Francie thinks of Lee because she's holding on to the dream of a union with someone she could never really have. The possibility that he's dead heightens her romantic attraction.

CHAPTER 56

Saturday arrives and it is the Nolans' last day in their home. The movers are coming on Monday morning for their things. Katie insists on working as usual that Saturday. Francie straps Laurie into her "two-wheeled sulky" and takes her outside. She watches kids lug junk to Carney's and then go to Cheap Charlie's. Francie goes into Charlie's with a fifty-cent piece and announces that she wants all of the prize picks. Charlie admits that the prizes are fake. He pulls an ugly doll from behind the counter, which is worth sixty-nine cents, and offers that to Francie instead. Francie says that she'll pay for it if he offers it up as a prize. She wants one little kid to get something for nothing. She tells him that the family is moving away. Charlie wishes her the best.

That last Saturday in Williamsburg seems like a replay of Francie's childhood in the neighborhood. She watches other children performing the same rituals she did on Saturdays. With adulthood, she realizes that some of the things that she dreamed of having, such as the prizes in Charlie's shop, were never attainable. She rectifies that by paying for the real prospect of a child winning a prize. Her gesture is an attempt to provide one moment of brightness in what might otherwise be a child's bleak existence.

While out with Laurie, Francie passes by the house whose address she used to go to her preferred school. The house looks "little and shabby" to her now, but she still loves it. She also passes McGarrity's saloon, though Jim McGarrity no longer owns it. Anticipating Prohibition, he and Mae move to a large place out on Long Island and turn it into a speakeasy called The Club Mae-Marie, where his wife wears an evening dress and is a hostess.

Smith uses the little white house as an example of how the things that we idealize or find wonderful in our childhoods become rather ordinary in adulthood. There's something a bit sad in this, in our reduced capability to see things as beautiful. Also, if nothing else, the McGarritys continue to have a successful business partnership.

After lunch, Francie goes to the library and asks the librarian, for the last time, if she can recommend a book for an eleven-year-old girl. The librarian brings out *If I Were King*. Francie announces that she doesn't want to borrow it and isn't really eleven years old. The librarian looks at her for the first time. Francie then mentions how important **the brown bowl** has always been to her. The librarian barely notices what she is talking about and absently mentions that the janitor, or someone, fills it. She impatiently asks Francie if she needs anything else. Francie thinks to turn in her library card but changes her mind when the librarian prepares to tear it up. Francie decides to keep it, though she'll never go back to the library.

This episode at the library reveals how seemingly simple, mundane objects—the brown bowl and the library card—can bear great significance to some people. The librarian's indifference contrasts with Francie's eagerness to share with the librarian what the space and its objects meant to her in her childhood and how it is all key to the woman Francie has become. The librarian isn't receptive because, to her, Francie is like any other visitor. She regards Francie with an indifference similar to how people regard the tree in Francie's yard.

While Laurie naps, Francie packs some of her things into a box, including her Bible, her edition of Shakespeare's plays, and her diary. Neeley comes running up the stairs, whistling. Francie thinks of how much he is like their father, even able to sing like Johnny. Neeley tells Francie "goodbye" because this will be their last moment alone. She says that she'll be home for Christmas, but he says it won't be the same.

Francie keeps the books that defined her early life. Though she's moving to Michigan to start anew, she doesn't wish to forget how her pursuit of learning began. Neeley doesn't think the next Christmas will be the same because it'll merely be a visit. They will each have their separate lives

At 4:00 PM, Francie decides to dress first and then prepare supper for her and Ben. He has tickets for them to see a show. It'll be their last date until Christmas. Ben leaves for college on Sunday. Francie likes Ben very much, but worries over the fact that he doesn't need her. She looks toward the window and brushes her hair. She remembers how, when she was a girl, she would watch young women preparing for their dates. She wonders if anyone is watching her. Across the yard, she sees a little girl named Florry Wendy with a book in her lap and a bag of candy at hand, sitting on the fire escape. Francie waves and calls: "Hello, Francie." Florry corrects her.

Ben's lack of "need" for Francie makes her feel superfluous in his life. She doesn't realize that it's a greater compliment to be wanted *rather than needed because her parents' marriage was based on Johnny's need for Katie to look after him and the children. Francie has now become the young woman who once made her so curious. She is now performing the rituals in preparation for a date that seemed so mysterious to her in her girlhood.*

Francie looks down into the yard and sees that the tree of her youth, which has since been cut down to make room for wash lines, is growing a new tree from the stump. It grew along the ground until it reached a place with no wash lines. Then, it grew toward the sky again. Their old fir tree, Annie, died, but this tree that men chopped down lived! Once more, Francie looks at Florry Wendy reading on the fire escape. "Good-bye, Francie," she whispers, and closes the window.

When Francie first moved to the tenement, the tree was only a couple of feet tall, mirroring Francie's own diminutive state of childhood. Despite being cut down, it has endured, just as Francie has endured the loss of her father. Recognizing the ability of things to survive and to find new spaces in which to thrive, Francie prepares for her next phase of life.

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