

BEDTIME STORIES

By Helen Olson

ANNETTE

It was a Saturday night. Peter was off somewhere at a rehearsal or a band job. The children had long since gone up to bed. I was dreaming as I leisurely finished the dishes and cleaned up the counter.

A small something, more a sense of presence than a sound, pulled me out of my reverie and turned me toward the kitchen door. There, looking crumpled and tear-stained in her flannel nightie, was nine-year-old Annette, her finger marking the spot in a paper-back book.

"Honey, what's the matter?"  
Big sob. "Charlotte died!"  
"Charlotte died?"  
A nod.  
"Oh," I reassured, "It's OK. That's what happens to spiders at the end of the summer."  
"She didn't want to die!"  
"Well, I guess no one does, but it will be OK when you read the rest of the book."  
Another sob. "I can't!"  
"Can't what?"  
"Read the rest!" The tears were now flowing copiously.  
"Oh, ..... Do you want me to read the rest of the book to you?"  
Another nod.

So we snuggled down on the couch to finish *Charlotte's Web* and Annette, who as an even-littler girl had insisted that people were her newest word, "infinite," because they had children, was able to accept Charlotte's death.

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About a year later, the scene was almost exactly the same, except that this time I was interrupted by a fairly big sniff. There in the doorway stood a slightly bigger little girl in the same nightie with the same book in her hand, with a little smile on the tear-stained face.

"Help," she said. "I'm reading it again."

DANNY

The bedtime ritual at our house always took the same form: a fairly wild bathing, chasing and drying to two squealing kids, followed by a story each and piggy back rides up to bed. On a late night, the bath could be overlooked, but never the story. On a tired evening, Dan's story could be especially trying because the page couldn't be turned until all the drawings had been carefully studied. Dan's bedtime choices were usually books by people like Maurice Sendak or Richard Scary, so the process could be lengthy.

One night, when Dan was about four, we were very late getting home. He was barely awake, as was I. Nonetheless, he insisted on his story. In frustration I asked, "Why do you always have to have a story?" He replied, "Because just before you go to sleep, you have to be real close to someone."