

Visiting Friends

By Helen Olson¹

The day^{*2} started kind of funny. Uncle Myrt was backing his car out of the driveway just as Kathryn got up.

"What's Uncle Myrt doing here? Why didn't he wait to see me?" demanded Kathryn. Uncle Myrt never left without a tease and a treat for them. Bachelor uncles were fun.

Mom seemed kind of distracted as she rushed around the kitchen.

"Grandma Ellison is a lot worse. They need to me to come down to help. You'll have to go to Grandma Piper's after school. I'll take the Baby over and tell her you're coming."

"Oh, goody," Kathryn yelped. She felt bad just for a minute about Grandma Ellison, but it was so much fun to go to Grandma Piper's. You got to walk part way home with the Pierce kids; then you got to walk along the swamp road where the cowslips always grew and Kathryn always got her feet wet stepping into the swamp to pick some; and then, when you got there, you got to help feed the chickens and watch Grandpas milk the cows and sometimes you got to ride Maude out to be watered.

As Kathryn and Frankie left for school, their mother reminded them again.

"Don't forget to go to Grandma Piper's. You may have to stay all night. I'll take your pajamas over when I take the Baby and I'll come to see you before you go to sleep."

Stay all night. Whoopee. Grandpa always told, not read, but told, neat stories about her and Frankie. And they always got to sleep together in their Mother's old room with a really high bed and a china Cupie doll on the dresser.

Kathryn skipped and chattered all the way to school about going to Grandma Piper's. Frankie was kind of quiet. She suspected he was worried about Grandma Ellison. Well she was, too, but there was nothing she could do about that and it was so adventuresome to go to Grandma Piper's.

As usual they got to school just as the last bell was ringing, so Kathryn couldn't tell anyone. But as soon as it was recess time, she ran right out to Patsy Pierce.

"My Grandma Ellison's sick, so we have to go to Grandma Piper's and that means we get to walk part way home with you."

She spun Patsy Pierce right around so that Patsy's pigtails flew straight out.

Patsy as pleased. Kathryn knew she would be.

"That's really nice, Kathryn. I wish you could come all the way home with us."

¹ This is a somewhat fictionalized story about the same event that Kathryn describes in "Disobedience," which she wrote in 2010. I wrote this story in 1978, shortly after she told me about that day.

² The day was September 26, 1938 -- my first birthday and the day our grandmother, Karen Hermanson Olson Ellison, died.

"Well, Mom said to go to Grandma Piper's, so I guess I'd better, but we can walk slowly to the corner."

After they were back in the school house, Kathryn kept thinking about the Pierces. It was so nice to go to their house. They didn't "have much," and their house was kind of little for so many kids, but the Pierce kids were so much fun and they thought of so many great things to do. Sometimes they built big elaborate tree houses out of old lumber they found. Sometimes they went to the creek to catch frogs. Sometimes they played "Anti-I-Over" with a ball over the house roof. Whatever they did, it was fun because the Pierce kids were fun.

And Mrs. Pierce was such a special person. She had dark red hair and freckles on the backs of her hands and her voice was deep and rich and sounded like bells when she talked. Kathryn loved it when she laughed.

Kathryn wished she had asked her Mother if she could go to the Pierces.

After school they all started out together. They had a real good time poking around the sides of the road and talking together. It was so nice walking home with a big gang of kids. Then they got to the corner.

"Well, s'long," said Frankie. "C'mon, Kathryn."

That was when Kathryn made up her mind.

"I'm going to the Pierces," she said. "You can tell Grandma."

"But, Kathryn, Mom said to go straight to Grandma Piper's," Frankie insisted.

"That's because I forgot to ask if I could go to Pierces," said Kathryn, "but she would have said OK. You just tell Grandma where I am."

"I don't think you should do that," said Frankie. "I don't think it's right."

Darn that Frankie. Why did he have to act so responsible just because he was a year older.

"You're just a-scared to walk alone," said Kathryn. "Well, you're going to have to because I'm going to Pierces."

Frankie looked like he might cry, but Kathryn had made up her mind. She flipped her curls and turned around and started walking toward Pierces. The Pierce kids came along, though they seemed kind of quiet. For a tiny minute Kathryn was afraid they didn't approve. But then Patsy Pierce took hand and Kathryn decided it was probably OK. A minute later Kathryn pretended to twirl around in the road so she could get a glimpse of Frankie. He was trudging all alone toward Grandma Piper's.

"Why, Kathryn, what a nice surprise," said Mrs. Pierce when they arrived. "Does your Mother know you're here?"

"We're staying at Grandma Piper's. Frankie's telling," said Kathryn.

Mrs. Pierce seemed happy to see her at least.

"Well, it's been awhile since we've seen you. I must have known you were coming. I made cookies. I'll put some aside for you to take to Frankie."

"Thank you," said Kathryn.

They all ate some cookies and Kathryn wondered what Frankie was doing. He would be at Grandma's by now.

"Let's go to the creek," said Earl Pierce.

"OK," said Kathryn.

They caught seven frogs and let them go again. Then they climbed the big climbing tree and bounced on the bouncing branch. Then they played "Hide and Seek." Kathryn wasn't having as much fun as she had expected. She kept wondering what would happen when Grandpa or her Mother came after her. Then she began to wonder if anyone would come after her. She was getting hungry and wondered what she would do about supper.

She went in the house for a drink and while she was in she quickly counted the plates Mrs. Pierce had put on the table. Eight. There were five Pierce kids and Mr. and Mrs. Pierce. That made seven. That meant she was going to eat with the Pierces. Kathryn felt really glad that Mrs. Pierce was that kind of person.

At supper everybody ate and talked at once. Kathryn's plate still had most of her potato on it when everybody else was finished.

"Don't you like boiled potatoes, Kathryn?" asked Mrs. Pierce. "You don't have to finish if you don't want to."

"I guess I'm just not too hungry," said Kathryn. "Usually I love potatoes. Frankie always teases me about how much I like potatoes."

"It's probably the cookies," said Mrs. Pierce. "You can play outside until your Grandpa comes. He probably was too busy to come for you until after the chores were done."

"Let's play statue tag," said Kathryn. She always played statue tag in the front yard. That way she could watch for Grandpa.

It was already getting dark and Kathryn was getting worried that they didn't want her back and nobody would come for her, when she saw Grandpa's Ford coming down the road. She was just about to run up to it as it turned into the driveway when she realized that Grandpa wasn't driving; it was Aunt Helen. Oh no, now she was in for it. Aunt Helen was the most fun aunt in the whole world when you were being good. She could think of more fun and silly and great things to do than any grown-up Kathryn knew. But when you made a little mistake, it was awful.

"Oh boy," thought Kathryn, "now I'm going to hear about how I disappointed the whole world. Well, I just won't listen."

Aunt Helen got out of the car.

"Thank Mrs. Pierce for the nice time and get in the car, Kathryn."

Boy, doesn't she know that I've got manners and I don't have to be reminded, thought Kathryn.

"Thanks for the nice time and the cookies and the nice supper," said Kathryn and stomped to the car. That'll show her.

Aunt Helen stood in the yard talking to Mrs. Pierce. Kathryn just knew they were talking about her. I bet she's telling Mrs. Pierce about how willful I am, thought Kathryn, "with all the Pierce kids listening."

Sure enough, Aunt Helen talked all the way home. Kathryn tried not to listen, but she couldn't help hearing "disappointed" and "willful" and "Frankie would never" and "enough on her mind without." Kathryn thought about putting her hands over her ears, but decided that wouldn't be too smart.

As they drove in the lane, Aunt Helen said, "your cousin, Joyce is here, too. Your Aunt Lena is helping with Grandma Ellison, so we said Joyce could spend the night here where things are a little more fun."

Oh wow, just what I need, thought Kathryn. Joyce'll have fun all right. She loves it when I get into trouble--just because she's older and has better judgment.

Frankie and Joyce were sitting at the little red table, and they had new coloring books. Kathryn tried to see if there was a third for her.

I bet Joyce got mine, she thought.

"Hi, Kathryn," said Joyce happily.

"Lo, Joyce. 'Lo, Frankie," said Kathryn.

"Hi, Kathryn," said Frankie quietly. He slipped another coloring book out from under his, just for a minute. Good old Frankie. He was such a dependable and sympathetic brother. Kathryn felt kind of bad that she had given him such a hard time. She didn't even mind right now that sometimes he teased her. She guessed she could take a little teasing. She smiled a special little secret smile at Frankie.

"Kathryn, you go right up to bed," said Aunt Helen. "You've had enough fun today."

I could have expected that, thought Kathryn. She marched right past everybody and up the stairs. She wasn't going to let anybody see her feel bad.

It was pretty lonely in the big bed all alone. Kathryn thought about how glad she would be when Frankie came up. She knew he'd be up in a few minutes. Aunt Helen tried to be firm, but Kathryn knew she would feel sorry for her and would send Frankie up to keep her company. Aunt Helen really loved her a lot; she just didn't understand that Kathryn sometimes made mistakes about things. Kathryn decided to try to keep awake until Frankie came up so that she could talk to him.

Kathryn was just drifting off to sleep when she heard her Mother's car pull into the yard. Then she heard quiet voices down below and then her Mother's steps on the stairs. In a minute the door opened and her Mother came in. She seemed tired and distracted, but she gave Kathryn a really big hug and tucked her in really well, and sat and held her hand for a few minutes. She didn't ask anything at all about what had happened.

A few minutes after her Mother went back downstairs, the door opened again and Frankie came in.

Kathryn knew everything was all right.

(1978)