



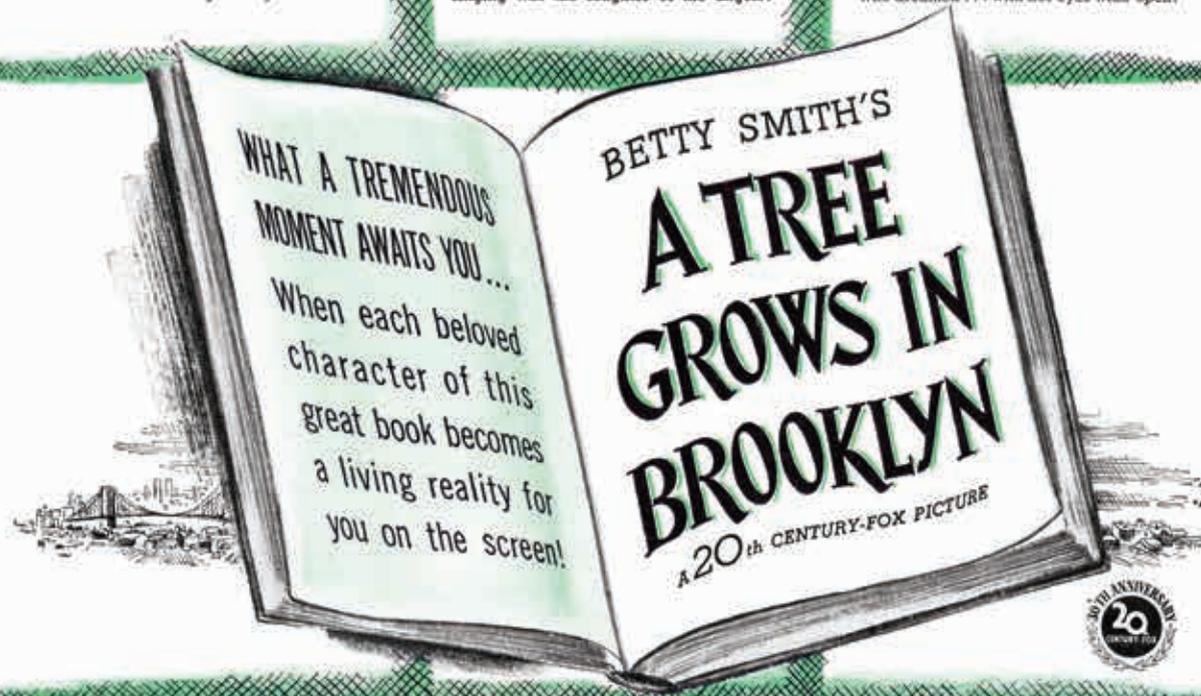
KATIE ... who forgot that loving a man was thinking with your heart!



JOHNNY ... who sang 'cause singing was the laughter of the angels!



FRANCIE ... the little girl who dreamed ... with her eyes wide open!



AUNT SISSY ... who wasn't bad ... she was only friendly!



NEELEY ... whose world was Brooklyn ... and "alla candy you can eat"!



McSHANE ... and wasn't it an officer's duty to look after the ladies?

DOROTHY McGUIRE as Katie • JOAN BLONDELL as Aunt Sissy • JAMES DUNN as Johnny
LLOYD NOLAN as McShane • PEGGY ANN GARNER as Francie • TED DONALDSON as Neeley
and JAMES GLEASON • RUTH NELSON • JOHN ALEXANDER • B. S. PULLY • Directed by ELIA KAZAN • Produced by LOUIS D. LIGHTON
Screen Play by Tess Slesinger and Frank Davis • Adapted from the Novel by Betty Smith

FAMILY TREES

Cathy Fiorello

I first met Francie Nolan in 1943 when we were both thirteen and both living in Brooklyn—she in the pages of Betty Smith’s novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, I in real-life—and both our families were struggling through the dark days of the Great Depression. I met her again recently when I watched a television airing of the movie based on the book. I don’t often cry at movies, but I wept throughout this one. The characters in the drama unfolding on screen were so like the family in my own childhood that, for two nostalgic hours, I was with them again.

The story of the Irish-American family coping with the hard times is told in Francie’s wistful voice. Its heroic fictional characters,

like the characters in my reality, were poor in material things but rich in relationships. They survived because they had each other.

Francie is a hard worker like her mother, and a dreamer like her father. Her love of reading provides an escape from the hardships around her. When we meet her, she is reading her way through her local library; she’s finished the *As* and is starting on the *Bs*. In another scene, we see her sitting on the fire escape of her tenement flat, lost in a book, oblivious to the hawking of street vendors below and the shouting of hard-pressed neighbors all around her. She is in another place; through her reading and writing she creates better worlds than the one in which she lives.

image info

“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.”

—*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, by Betty Smith

Francie’s mother, Katie Nolan, is the strength in this family; she earns the money that supports them by scrubbing floors. She can’t depend on her husband, Johnny, a singing waiter who rarely finds work. A lovable alcoholic, drunk with drink but also with dreams, Johnny is Francie’s hero. They tell each other their dreams and, though he knows his won’t come true, he encourages Francie to believe that hers will. Katie doesn’t have time for dreams because it’s she who puts food on the table and shoes on her children’s feet.

My mother didn’t put any store in dreams, either. “You’ll need jobs, not dreams,” she told us. My father, a hard-working Italian immigrant, never stopped believing that all things are possible in America. I grew up driven by that same dream.

Watching Katie scrub the halls of their tenement on her knees, tenants coming and going, tramping over her just-washed floors, brought me back to the chore my sister Eleanor and I hated the most—the Saturday morning cleaning of the halls in our four-story brownstone that my father owned. I swept the floors and dusted the wood balusters, one by one. When I was finished, Eleanor mopped the steps and the landings. We had a tenant family on the top floor, the antiseptic Karpuses, a mother with two daughters who were exact replicas of her. Dressed in their somber gray dresses and veiled caps, they attended religious services every Saturday morning without fail, interrupting my sweeping as they descended and making their return ascent as Eleanor was doing the mopping. They were

impervious to her scowls as they tracked dirt over her still-wet floors. “Who goes to church on Saturdays, anyway?” Eleanor would grumble to me. She had another reason for not liking them. Mrs. Karpus, her face pinched with disapproval, inspected her work on the way up and pointed out places her mop had missed. Then she rapped loudly on our door and issued a complaint to my mother. “Eleanor should get down on her knees and use a brush, not a mop. She’s not getting the corners clean.”

Formidable as she was, Mrs. Karpus was no match for Eleanor, who wasn’t getting on her knees for anyone. I always swept the landing between the third and second floors as fast as I could. That’s where my Grandmother’s coffin got stuck on the way down after being waked in Aunt Grace’s living room. Let Mrs. Karpus find dust balls and report me; I wasn’t going to spend a minute more than I had to there.

Katie managed the money in her family as my mother did in mine. Both always short on funds, they knew how to get a nickel’s worth for a nickel spent. When Katie sent Francie to the store, she gave her specific instructions on what to ask for and told her to accept nothing less. Watching Francie give her order to the butcher, starting with “Mama says she wants the beef fresh ground...” reminded me of my opening dialogue when I was sent to the market: “My mother said she wants a nice head of lettuce.” Shopping at my local farmer’s market recently, I spotted a head of butter lettuce that was perfection. Cradling it

in two hands, I walked it over to my husband and exclaimed, “Isn’t this gorgeous?” Puzzled by my awe, he said, “It’s a head of lettuce.” He didn’t understand. That head of lettuce would have earned my mother’s approval.

There is a minor character in the story who plays a major role in Katie’s life—Mr. Barker, the insurance agent who comes each week to collect the ten-cent premium for the insurance policy that Katie struggles, but never fails, to pay. This is her security against a disaster that could fall any day. After he collects the dime, Mr. Barker delivers the news about family members whose dimes he also collects weekly. My mother’s insurance agent was George—“the Prudential man,” we kids used to call him. He went from floor to floor collecting dimes and delivering news from my grandmother and the one aunt who didn’t live in our neighborhood. In effect, he was the phone none of us had.

I’ve saved my favorite character for last: Aunt Sissy, Katie’s sister, who is as flamboyant as Katie is stable. Her vulnerability, put delicately, is that “men liked her too much.” She is a free spirit in conventional times. Even though Katie disapproves of Sissy, she always ends up forgiving her, as my mother did her youngest sister, Anna. Francie adores her aunt for the fun she brings to an otherwise drab life, just as I loved my Aunt Anna, who also thumbed her nose at convention and brought laughter with her wherever she went.

Me? I’m Francie, the reader who wanted to be a writer. ∞