

The Optimist's Daughter: Synopsis
By Suzanne Marrs
Eudora Welty Foundation Scholar

The Optimist's Daughter is a short novel divided into four sections. Summaries of each section follow.

One:

Judge Clinton McKelva and his much younger second wife (Fay) have come from Mount Salus, Mississippi, along with his daughter, Laurel McKelva Hand, from Chicago, to the office of a New Orleans ophthalmologist because the Judge has had some recent problems with his vision and wants to be treated by his old family friend Nate Courtland. Dr. Courtland quickly diagnoses a retinal tear and recommends surgery. Fay is resistant, wanting to let nature take its course, but Laurel and her father recognize the medical realities of the situation. The surgery is performed, and the Judge settles into the long period of bed rest and immobility then required for recovery. Laurel and Fay take turns sitting with him, but the Judge sinks into silence and seeming despair. Laurel worries that he will die from the eye surgery just as her mother had years before. Fay worries that she is missing Mardi Gras and the opportunity to celebrate her own birthday. She becomes increasingly irritated with her husband and finally attempts to pull him from his bed. A nurse stops her, but the damage has been done. The Judge dies, probably from a heart attack.

Two:

Fay and Laurel bring the Judge's body back to Mount Salus for burial. There they are surrounded by old friends of the McKelva family, much to Fay's annoyance. Then unexpectedly, Fay's mother, sister, and brother arrived from Madrid, Texas, summoned because Judge McKelva has left a letter asking his friend Major Bullock to notify them. The contrast in social class between the Texas Chisoms, including Fay, and the Mount Salus contingent provides comedy in the midst of tragedy, with all involved performing badly. Finally the Judge, at Fay's insistence, is laid to rest in the new part of the town cemetery, next to the Interstate highway, and Fay decides to leave with her family for a brief visit to Texas. Laurel vows to go back to Chicago before Fay returns.

Three:

Briefly free from Fay, friends of Laurel's mother Becky gather in the McKelva garden with Laurel, who works in the iris bed as they talk, questioning her father's judgment in remarrying and fondly recalling Becky. Then they all wander toward the rose garden, where they see the rose named after her mother and where Laurel

equates the spring rebirth of that rose with the power of memory. When the ladies leave, Laurel spends time in her father's library, recalling him but attempting to erase memories of Fay, just as she removes tracks of Fay's nail polish from her father's desk. Afterwards, Laurel spends the evening with old friends who had been her bridesmaids, objecting at one point to their recollections of her parents. But she too has been falsifying her past. Back in her childhood home, she discovers a chimney swift in the house and, in the process of fleeing, it shuts herself in what had been her parents' bedroom and then into the little sewing room that opens off of it. There she discovers letters, journals, photographs, and mementoes of her parents, and there she gives herself up to memories of them, ultimately facing the alienation that her mother's blindness and failing health had caused—an alienation based on her father's refusal to accept the doom that her mother so clearly saw ahead. Facing these dark memories, Laurel ceases to repress the pain and the memory of losing her husband Phil, who had been killed in World War II and denied the life he might have led.

Four:

The next morning Laurel awakes from a dream and a memory that help to restore her. She has dreamed of the wedding journey she and Phil made by train from Chicago to Mount Salus. In this dream Laurel recalls the moment on a high railroad bridge in Cairo, Illinois, when she and Phil "were looking down from a great elevation" and could see the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers "moving into one" even as the trees along the shore seemed to converge on the horizon and the birds above flew in a V-shape: "All they could see was sky, water, birds, light, and confluence. It was the whole morning world./ And they themselves were a part of the confluence. For Laurel, this dream embodies the continuity wrought by love, the living nature of memory itself, and the confluence of lives that her husband's death has not ended, a confluence as powerful to her as that of two mighty rivers.

Laurel, assisted by her family's long-time maid Missouri, then manages to get the bird from the house, burn the papers that had prompted her flood of memory, and prepare to catch her plane. Waiting for her bridesmaids to take her to the airport, she hears a sound in the kitchen, opens a cupboard, and discovers the breadboard Phil had made for her mother. At this very moment Fay comes into the kitchen, and Laurel asks her, "What have you done to my mother's breadboard." It is now stained and splintered because Fay has used it as a surface for cracking nuts. The loving memories of her mother and husband, Laurel feels, have been similarly defaced by Fay, and she now asks a question that she has been repressing. "What were you trying to scare father into when you struck him?" Fay claims she was trying to make the Judge "quit his old-man foolishness." She was acting the role of wife, she tells Laurel, and asks if Laurel has forgotten what being a wife means. Laurel then tells Fay that the breadboard was made by her husband. It is for Laurel a symbol of her husband and his love for her and her family, the sort of love Fay cannot comprehend. For a moment it seems that Laurel may even strike Fay with the breadboard, but she ultimately puts it down and resolves to leave it in the house.

Memory, she realizes “lived not in the initial possession but in the freed hands, pardoned and freed, and in the heart that can empty but fill again, in the patterns restored by dreams.”