Marge cradled Bart against her chest, petting his spikey head while Homer hung back in the doorway, abashed. “It’s okay, sweetie!”

Bart spoke through quavering tears. “But she died! Charlotte worked hard, did her best, helped Wilbur out and she STILL died!” Marge rocked her son in her arms, making soft, soothing sounds.

“Story of my life,” Homer snorted.

“Dear! Now’s not the time!” Marge said.

“When will it be?” Homer whined. Marge shushed him, and he returned to his position in the doorway.

“Barty,” Marge said, “Charlotte lived a pretty long life for a spider, and before she died she did something incredible and selfness out of friendship. And before left she made sure that her babies would have a home with Wilbur. I know you’re sad she died, but because even though she died, Wilbur and his friends will never forget her.”

“I didn’t get to that part,” he sniffled, rubbing his nose against the back of his hand. “You’re not gonna tell Lisa I cried like a dork, are you?”

“Boy,” Homer said, “when I was a kid I went to Old Yeller and I cried until I threw up. It was the worst day of my life. But then the girl working behind the popcorn counter felt sorry enough for me to take me out on a date! I learned there’s no shame of crying really hard and showing your feelings.”

“You cried at Old Yeller?” Bart asked. Mischief sparked up in his eyes.

“It happens to be a very sad story about a very good dog.” He sniffed. “And a boy who loved him enough to put him out of his misery.”

“Geeze, Homer,” Bart said. “I didn’t think you had feelings!”

“Bart, don’t make fun of your father,” Marge said. “I think you’re nervous about Edna.”

“Maybe,” Bart said.

“Well,” Marge said, fully mock-cheerful, “There are some things that can’t be helped. But,” she added, “there’s always a way to make things easier for someone who’s suffering.”

“By proving to her I can read a whole book?” Bart asked.

“And by trying to prove she’s a good teacher,” Marge said. “You’re the last best proof Edna has that she’s led a life of meaning and importance, and you know what? You’re doing great! You and Rod and Todd, and all your friends – and all the people she taught before you – you’re all her Wilburs.” Bart mumbled something in response, something Marge couldn’t hear what he was trying to say when he spoke them buried against her chest. “A person can’t die, as long as what they’ve taught still lives.” She paused and glanced at her husband. “Homer, are you crying?”

“My face is sweating!” Homer lied, wiping his cheeks.

Marge kissed Bart’s head, and then wiped away the rest of his tears. “You go to bed, no more books, no comics, no more reading. Everything will be better in the morning.”

“Thanks, mom,” he muttered.

“Nights, son,” Homer said.

“Night, Homer,” Bart said. Marge carefully tucked the boy in and kissed his forehead before letting him snuggle up under the covers.

Marge didn’t head back to the bedroom until Bart’s breathing pattern switched into a regular, softer one that indicates he’s tuckered out. Then she heads to the relative safety of her own room, and the silence of contemplation – with her husband’s hand spread out along her back.

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“I don’t believe it. You have feelings!”

Bart grumbled as he and Lisa headed over to the Flanders place. “Rub it in, why don’t you?”

“I know mom told me not to make fun of you but hah! You cried over Charlotte’s Web!”

“You’re just mad at me because I laughed at you for crying,” Lisa said. “Bart, you make fun of me for every indiscretion I make. What’s good enough for you’s good enough for me.”

Bart grumbled. “This is the last time I ever get emotionally involved with a book character.”

When they reached Ned’s front step, he was in his gardening hat and apron. “Hiedly-ho!” Ned called. He’d been sitting on the front steps with the morning’s mail clutched in his hands. “Guess what I’ve got,” Ned said, waving a handful of paper. “Two tickets to Italy. Edna and I are gonna spend the last…” his mustache twitched, and his voice grew thick, “…the last bit of time we have left together in Italy. She’s always wanted to go to Europe.”

“That’s a lovely gesture,” said Lisa. She waved the script. “I finished this last night. I think there could be some third act problems but I could use a second set of eyes on it,” Lisa said.

Ned grinned. “Let me be your peepers!” Then he said. “Bart, Seymour’s waiting for you in the kitchen.”

Bart shook his head and groaned, sensing an interminable afternoon ahead of him.