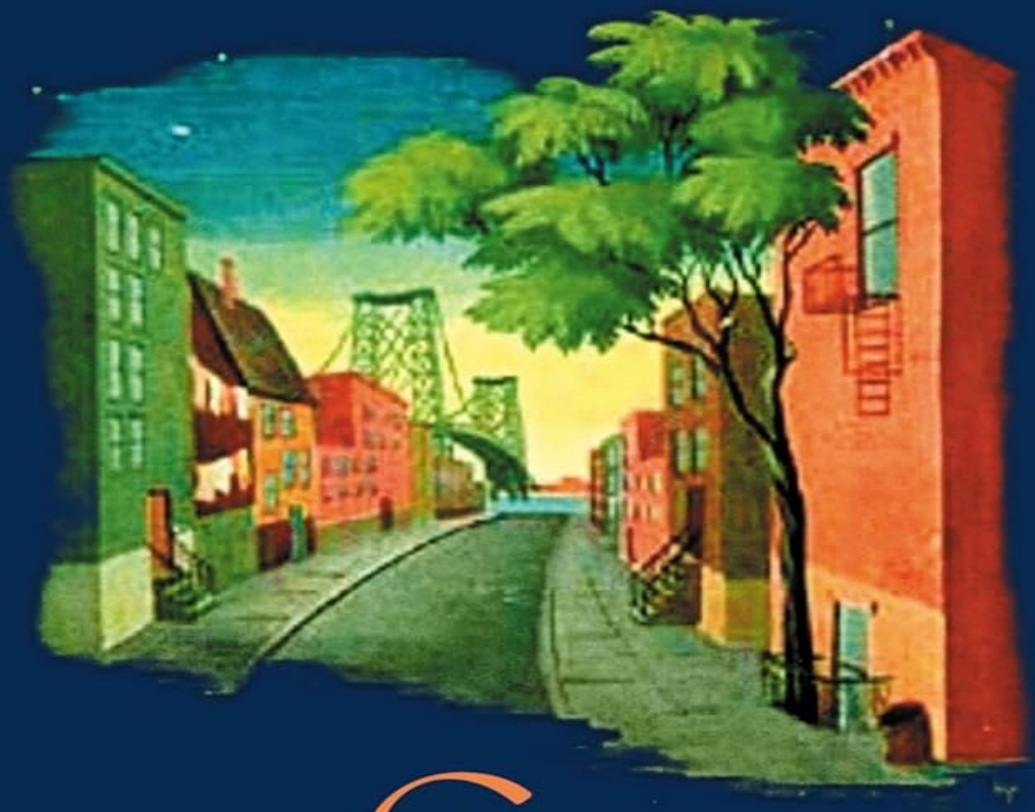

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

With a Foreword by
ANNA QUINDLEN

Betty Smith

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TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In a particularly revealing chapter of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Francie's teacher dismisses her essays about everyday life among the poor as "sordid." Indeed, many of the novel's characters seem to harbor a sense of shame about their poverty, but they also display a remarkable self-reliance (Katie, for example, says she would kill herself and her children before accepting charity). How and why have our society's perceptions of poverty changed—for better or worse—during the last one hundred years?

2. Some critics have argued that many of the characters in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* can be dismissed as stereotypes, exhibiting quaint characteristics or representing pat qualities of either nobility or degeneracy. Is this a fair criticism? Which characters are the most convincing? Which are the least convincing?

3. Francie observes more than once that women seem to hate other women ("they stuck together for only one thing: to trample on some other woman"), while men, even if they hate each other, stick together against the world. Is this an accurate appraisal of the way things are in the novel?

4. The women in the Nolan/Rommely clan exhibit most of the strength and, whenever humanly possible, control the family's destiny. How does Francie continue this legacy?

5. What might Francie's obsession with order—from systematically reading the books in the library from A through Z, to trying every flavor of ice cream soda—in turn say about her circumstances and her dreams?

6. Although it is written in the third person, there can be little argument that the narrative is largely from Francie's point of view. How would the book differ if it was told from Neeley's perspective?

7. How can modern readers reconcile the frequent anti-Semitism and anti-immigrant sentiments that characters espouse throughout the novel?

8. Could it be argued that the main character of the book is not Francie but, in fact, Brooklyn itself?

Foreword

AS MUCH AS ANY OTHER BELOVED BOOK IN THE CANON, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* illustrates the limitations of plot description. In its nearly five hundred pages, nothing much happens. Of course that's not really accurate: Everything that can happen in life happens, from birth and death to marriage and bigamy. But those things happen in the slow, sure, meandering way that they happen in the slow, sure, meandering river of real existence, not as the clanking "and then" that lends itself easily to event synopsis.

If, afterwards, someone asked, "What is the book about?"—surely one of the most irritating and reductionist questions in the world for reader and writer alike—you would not say, well, it's about the pedophile who grabs a little girl in the hall, or about the time a man went on a bender and lost his job, or about a woman who works as the janitor in a series of tenement buildings. *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* is not the sort of book that can be reduced to its plot line. The best anyone can say is that it is a story about what it means to be human.

When it first appeared, in 1943, it was called, by those critics who liked it, an honest book, and that is accurate as far as it goes. But it is more than that: It is deeply, indelibly true. Honesty is casting bright light on your own experience; truth is casting it on the experiences of all, which is why, six decades after it was published and became an instant bestseller, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* continues to be read by people from all countries and all circumstances. Early on in its explosive success it was described as a book about city life, a story about grinding poverty, a tale of the struggles of immigrants in America. But all those things are setting, really, and the themes are farther-reaching: the fabric of family, the limits of love, the loss of innocence, and the birth of knowledge.

All of this takes place in the life of Francie Nolan, who is eleven years old when her story opens in the summer of 1912, in a third-floor walk-up apartment in the shadow of the hardy urban ailanthus tree, the "only tree that grew out of cement," a tree "that liked poor people." The scene is set immediately in the first few pages, of a hectic, vivid, hard-scrabble neighborhood where the children sell junk for pennies, spending half on petty indulgences and bringing half home to parents who can barely make the rent or pay for bread, even the stale next-day sort sold at the local wholesaler.

Francie's mother is small and pretty but steely and tough; her father is warm and charming but feckless and, above all, a prisoner of his need for drink. And all of this would lapse into stereotype were Smith's people and situations not seen by the girl in ways that are so undeniably true, simply told but full of the small details and moments that remind us of our own lives: the bank made from an old can Francie's mother nails inside the closet to save money to buy a bit of land, the starched shirtfront her father wears beneath his old tuxedo as he works as a singing waiter, the librarian who never looks up as she stamps the child's books, the

teacher who insists she write only about the beautiful and serene and never about what she really sees around her.

It is not a showy book from a literary point of view. Its pages are not larded with metaphor or simile or the sound of the writer's voice in love with its own music. Its glory is in the clear-eyed descriptions of its scenes and people. When the Nolans move, their emptied apartment has "that look of a nearsighted man with his glasses off." When the children watch their father drink, they "pondered how a nightcap could also be an eye opener." When Francie writes the sort of grand essay her teacher expects, she rereads her own words and concludes: "They sounded like words that came in a can; the freshness was cooked out of them."

There is little need for embellishment in these stories; their strength is in the simple universal emotion they evoke. Francie must go and be immunized at a public clinic to be allowed to attend school; added to her fear of the needle is the ignominy of listening to the doctor and nurse discuss how dirty she is. Across the broad divide of class that separates her from the well-to-do doctor and the nurse who has risen out of the same environment but turned her back on it, Francie finally says when her arm has been bandaged, "My brother is next. His arm is just as dirty as mine so don't be surprised. And you don't have to tell him. You told me."

"I had no idea she'd understand what I'm saying," the doctor says afterwards, surprised.

This is one of those children who understands almost everything around her. The description of her passage into adolescence, when she suddenly sees the world as dingy and flawed, her parents as human and not omnipotent, the theater melodramas she had formerly loved as creaky chestnuts, is among the great descriptions in fiction of the turn of the kaleidoscope occasioned by growing older and growing up. Finally she questions the game her mother has created when food runs low, the game in which she and her brother pretend they are explorers at the North Pole trapped by a blizzard in a cave. "When explorers get hungry and suffer like that, it's for a reason," Francie says. "But what big thing comes out of us being hungry like that?" Katie Nolan replies sadly, "You found the catch in it."

Readers have met this sort of girl before in the pages of memorable fiction, the perceptive child who reads indefatigably, writes obsessively, dreams of a future different than what the past and present would portend. Jo March of *Little Women* is one, the eponymous *Anne of Green Gables* another, Betsy Ray of the beloved Betsy-Tacy books a third. But Francie Nolan and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* reveal the inherent weakness in those stories, a lack of realism that has made them enduring novels for girls while this has as often been a book for adults.

In Francie's beloved Brooklyn, a rapist stalks the hallways, young women give birth out of wedlock and are reviled and even attacked, the nice old man in the junk store is not someone a child should risk being alone with. The March girls of *Little Women* are poor, but their poverty is styled a kind of noble blessing; Betsy Ray is bound and determined to be a writer and this is portrayed as an inevitability. But the poverty of Francie's family is degrading and soul destroying, and the possibility of really becoming a writer a considerable dream, given the need to leave school and work in factories and offices to provide food and rent money. When Francie goes to the theater, she is disdainful of the plot twist in which the hero appears at the last moment to pay the mortgage and save the day. "What if he'd been held up

and couldn't make it?" she asks herself, and answers the question the only way she knows how: "You betcha they'd live, thought Francie grimly. It takes a lot of doing to die."

So why is this not a grim book, with Francie's beloved father crying through delirium tremens and her teacher giving her "C"s in English when she dares to write about that real-life horror instead of gerrymandered tales of apple orchards and high tea? Part of it is certainly because we know Francie has finally triumphed. A wise contemplative voice oversees the action of the novel from time to time, and it is both the voice of the author, Betty Smith, and the unmistakable voice of a Francie grown to equanimity and stability. There is no doubt that this is an autobiographical story; originally written as memoir, it was reconfigured as fiction at the request of an editor at its publishing house. Smith herself, describing the deluge of reader letters that accompanied both the initial publication of *Tree* and its subsequent editions, wrote, "One fifth of my letters start out 'Dear Francie.'"

But even did we not suspect that Francie has in fact grown up not only to write but to write a spectacularly successful bestseller, there is already a kind of peace at the end of the novel that prefigures a better life for the beloved characters. Francie's little sister, born after their charming and ineffectual father's death, will know a life far easier than Francie and her brother Neely have; even as she irons the union label in Neely's shirt, Francie is on her way to college far from Brooklyn. She is leaving, but leaving with everything she has learned from a place of great poverty and great richness. In a deeply affecting conclusion she looks across the tenement backyards where the tree has been chopped down and yet grown again and sees a little girl and whispers, "Good-bye, Francie" to her former self.

Is it only Francie to whom we say farewell at that moment? Of course not, or else this book would have been long forgotten. This is not simply a portrait of a section of a city nearly a century ago, nor a description of how the poor lived then in America. It is not, despite what some critics wrote, a book about social issues, about the class struggle and union membership and public education for the poor. This is not one of those social welfare novels in which the characters exist as marionettes, the strings jerked by the fashionable causes of their time. In life such issues only exist embodied in human beings, and to the extent that they are part of this book it is because of the portraits of people trampled or saved or scarred by them.

Instead this is that rare and enduring thing, a book in which, no matter what our backgrounds, we recognize ourselves. Francie does not say "good-bye" to the tenements or the tragedies but to the girl she once was, the illusions she once had, the life she once led.

—Anna Quindlen

Book One

1

SERENE WAS A WORD YOU COULD PUT TO BROOKLYN, NEW YORK. Especially in the summer of 1912. Somber, as a word, was better. But it did not apply to Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Prairie was lovely and Shenandoah had a beautiful sound, but you couldn't fit those words into Brooklyn. Serene was the only word for it; especially on a Saturday afternoon in summer.

Late in the afternoon the sun slanted down into the mossy yard belonging to Francie Nolan's house, and warmed the worn wooden fence. Looking at the shafted sun, Francie had that same fine feeling that came when she recalled the poem they recited in school.

This is the forest primeval. The murmuring

pines and the hemlocks,

Bearded with moss, and in garments green,

indistinct in the twilight,

Stand like Druids of eld.

The one tree in Francie's yard was neither a pine nor a hemlock. It had pointed leaves which grew along green switches which radiated from the bough and made a tree which looked like a lot of opened green umbrellas. Some people called it the Tree of Heaven. No matter where its seed fell, it made a tree which struggled to reach the sky. It grew in boarded-up lots and out of neglected rubbish heaps and it was the only tree that grew out of cement. It grew lushly, but only in the tenements districts.

You took a walk on a Sunday afternoon and came to a nice neighborhood, very refined. You saw a small one of these trees through the iron gate leading to someone's yard and you knew that soon that section of Brooklyn would get to be a tenement district. The tree knew. It came there first. Afterwards, poor foreigners seeped in and the quiet old brownstone houses were hacked up into flats, feather beds were pushed out on the window sills to air and the Tree of Heaven flourished. That was the kind of tree it was. It liked poor people.

That was the kind of tree in Francie's yard. Its umbrellas curled over, around and under her third-floor fire escape. An eleven-year-old girl sitting on this fire escape could imagine that she was living in a tree. That's what Francie imagined every Saturday afternoon in summer.

Oh, what a wonderful day was Saturday in Brooklyn. Oh, how wonderful anywhere! People were paid on Saturday and it was a holiday without the rigidness of a Sunday. People

had money to go out and buy things. They ate well for once, got drunk, had dates, made love and stayed up until all hours; singing, playing music, fighting and dancing because the morrow was their own free day. They could sleep late—until late mass anyhow.

On Sunday, most people crowded into the eleven o'clock mass. Well, some people, a few, went to early six o'clock mass. They were given credit for this but they deserved none for they were the ones who had stayed out so late that it was morning when they got home. So they went to this early mass, got it over with and went home and slept all day with a free conscience.

For Francie, Saturday started with the trip to the junkie. She and her brother, Neeley, like other Brooklyn kids, collected rags, paper, metal, rubber, and other junk and hoarded it in locked cellar bins or in boxes hidden under the bed. All week Francie walked home slowly from school with her eyes in the gutter looking for tin foil from cigarette packages or chewing gum wrappers. This was melted in the lid of a jar. The junkie wouldn't take an unmelted ball of foil because too many kids put iron washers in the middle to make it weigh heavier. Sometimes Neeley found a seltzer bottle. Francie helped him break the top off and melt it down for lead. The junkie wouldn't buy a complete top because he'd get into trouble with the soda water people. A seltzer bottle top was fine. Melted, it was worth a nickel.

Francie and Neeley went down into the cellar each evening and emptied the dumbwaiter shelves of the day's accumulated trash. They owned this privilege because Francie's mother was the janitress. They looted the shelves of paper, rags and deposit bottles. Paper wasn't worth much. They got only a penny for ten pounds. Rags brought two cents a pound and iron, four. Copper was good—ten cents a pound. Sometimes Francie came across a bonanza: the bottom of a discarded wash boiler. She got it off with a can opener, folded it, pounded it, folded it and pounded it again.

Soon after nine o'clock of a Saturday morning, kids began spraying out of all the side streets on to Manhattan Avenue, the main thoroughfare. They made their slow way up the Avenue to Scholes Street. Some carried their junk in their arms. Others had wagons made of a wooden soap box with solid wooden wheels. A few pushed loaded baby buggies.

Francie and Neeley put all their junk into a burlap bag and each grabbed an end and dragged it along the street; up Manhattan Avenue, past Maujer, Ten Eyck, Stagg to Scholes Street. Beautiful names for ugly streets. From each side street hordes of little ragamuffins emerged to swell the main tide. On the way to Carney's, they met other kids coming back empty-handed. They had sold their junk and already squandered the pennies. Now, swaggering back, they jeered at the other kids.

"Rag picker! Rag picker!"

Francie's face burned at the name. No comfort knowing that the taunters were rag pickers too. No matter that her brother would straggle back, empty-handed with his gang and taunt later comers the same way. Francie felt ashamed.

Carney plied his junk business in a tumble-down stable. Turning the corner, Francie saw that both doors were hooked back hospitably and she imagined that the large, bland dial of the

swinging scale blinked a welcome. She saw Carney, with his rusty hair, rusty mustache and rusty eyes presiding at the scale. Carney liked girls better than boys. He would give a girl an extra penny if she did not shrink when he pinched her cheek.

Because of the possibility of this bonus, Neeley stepped aside and let Francie drag the bag into the stable. Carney jumped forward, dumped the contents of the bag on the floor and took a preliminary pinch out of her cheek. While he piled the stuff on to the scale, Francie blinked, adjusting her eyes to the darkness and was aware of the mossy air and the odor of wetted rags. Carney slewed his eyes at the dial and spoke two words: his offer. Francie knew that no dickering was permitted. She nodded yes, and Carney flipped the junk off and made her wait while he piled the paper in one corner, threw the rags in another and sorted out the metals. Only then did he reach down in his pants pockets, haul up an old leather pouch tied with a wax string and count out old green pennies that looked like junk too. As she whispered, "thank you," Carney fixed a rusty junked look on her and pinched her cheek hard. She stood her ground. He smiled and added an extra penny. Then his manner changed and became loud and brisk.

"Come on," he hollered to the next one in line, a boy. "Get the lead out!" He timed the laugh. "And I don't mean junk." The children laughed dutifully. The laughter sounded like the bleating of lost little lambs but Carney seemed satisfied.

Francie went outside to report to her brother. "He gave me sixteen cents and a pinching penny."

"That's your penny," he said, according to an old agreement.

She put the penny in her dress pocket and turned the rest of the money over to him. Neeley was ten, a year younger than Francie. But he was the boy; he handled the money. He divided the pennies carefully.

"Eight cents for the bank." That was the rule; half of any money they got from anywhere went into the tin-can bank that was nailed to the floor in the darkest corner of the closet. "And four cents for you and four cents for me."

Francie knotted the bank money in her handkerchief. She looked at her own five pennies realizing happily that they could be changed into a whole nickel.

Neeley rolled up the burlap bag, tucked it under his arm and pushed his way in Cheap Charlie's with Francie right behind him. Cheap Charlie's was the penny candy store next to Carney's which catered to the junk trade. At the end of a Saturday, its cash box was filled with greenish pennies. By an unwritten law, it was a boys' store. So Francie did not go all the way in. She stood by the doorway.

The boys, from eight to fourteen years of age, looked alike in straggling knickerbockers and broken-peaked caps. They stood around, hands in pockets and thin shoulders hunched forward tensely. They would grow up looking like that; standing the same way in other hangouts. The only difference would be the cigarette seemingly permanently fastened between their lips, rising and falling in accent as they spoke.

Now the boys churned about nervously, their thin faces turning from Charlie to each other and back to Charlie again. Francie noticed that some already had their summer haircut: hair cropped so short that there were nicks in the scalp where the clippers had bitten too deeply. These fortunates had their caps crammed into their pockets or pushed back on the head. The unshorn ones whose hair curled gently and still babyishly at the nape of the neck, were ashamed and wore their caps pulled so far down over their ears that there was something girlish about them in spite of their jerky profanity.

Cheap Charlie was not cheap and his name wasn't Charlie. He had taken that name and it said so on the store awning and Francie believed it. Charlie gave you a pick for your penny. A board with fifty numbered hooks and a prize hanging from each hook, hung behind the counter. There were a few fine prizes; roller skates, a catcher's mitt, a doll with real hair and so on. The other hooks held blotters, pencils and other penny articles. Francie watched as Neeley bought a pick. He removed the dirty card from the ragged envelope. Twenty-six! Hopefully, Francie looked at the board. He had drawn a penny pen wiper.

"Prize or candy?" Charlie asked him.

"Candy. What do you think?"

It was always the same. Francie had never heard of anyone winning above a penny prize. Indeed the skate wheels were rusted and the doll's hair was dust filmed as though these things had waited there a long time like Little Boy Blue's toy dog and tin soldier. Someday, Francie resolved, when she had fifty cents, she would take all the picks and win everything on the board. She figured that would be a good business deal: skates, mitt, doll and all the other things for fifty cents. Why, the skates alone were worth four times that much! Neeley would have to come along that great day because girls seldom patronized Charlie's. True, there were a few girls there that Saturday…bold, brash ones, too developed for their age; girls who talked loud and horseplayed around with the boys—girls whom the neighbors prophesied would come to no good.

Francie went across the street to Gimpy's candy store. Gimpy was lame. He was a gentle man, kind to little children…or so everyone thought until that sunny afternoon when he inveigled a little girl into his dismal back room.

Francie debated whether she should sacrifice one of her pennies for a Gimpy Special: the prize bag. Maudie Donavan, her once-in-a-while girl friend, was about to make a purchase. Francie pushed her way in until she was standing behind Maudie. She pretended that she was spending the penny. She held her breath as Maudie, after much speculation, pointed dramatically at a bulging bag in the showcase. Francie would have picked a smaller bag. She looked over her friend's shoulder; saw her take out a few pieces of stale candy and examine her prize—a coarse cambric handkerchief. Once Francie had gotten a small bottle of strong scent. She debated again whether to spend a penny on a prize bag. It was nice to be surprised even if you couldn't eat the candy. But she reasoned she had been surprised by being with Maudie when she made her purchase and that was almost as good.

Francie walked up Manhattan Avenue reading aloud the fine-sounding names of the streets she passed: Scholes, Meserole, Montrose and then Johnson Avenue. These last two

Avenues were where the Italians had settled. The district called Jew Town started at Seigel Street, took in Moore and McKibben and went past Broadway. Francie headed for Broadway.

And what was on Broadway in Williamsburg, Brooklyn? Nothing—only the finest nickel-and-dime store in all the world! It was big and glittering and had everything in the world in it…or so it seemed to an eleven-year-old girl. Francie had a nickel. Francie had power. She could buy practically anything in that store! It was the only place in the world where that could be.

Arriving at the store, she walked up and down the aisles handling any object her fancy favored. What a wonderful feeling to pick something up, hold it for a moment, feel its contour, run her hand over its surface and then replace it carefully. Her nickel gave her this privilege. If a floor-walker asked whether she intended buying anything, she could say, yes, buy it and show him a thing or two. Money was a wonderful thing, she decided. After an orgy of touching things, she made her planned purchase—five cents' worth of pink-and-white peppermint wafers.

She walked back home down Graham Avenue, the Ghetto street. She was excited by the filled pushcarts—each a little store in itself—the bargaining, emotional Jews and the peculiar smells of the neighborhood; baked stuffed fish, sour rye bread fresh from the oven, and something that smelled like honey boiling. She stared at the bearded men in their alpaca skull caps and silkolene coats and wondered what made their eyes so small and fierce. She looked into tiny hole-in-the-wall shops and smelled the dress fabrics arranged in disorder on the tables. She noticed the feather beds bellying out of windows, clothes of Oriental-bright colors drying on the fire escapes and the half-naked children playing in the gutters. A woman, big with child, sat patiently at the curb in a stiff wooden chair. She sat in the hot sunshine watching the life on the street and guarding within herself, her own mystery of life.

Francie remembered her surprise that time when Mama told her that Jesus was a Jew. Francie had thought that He was a Catholic. But Mama knew. Mama said that the Jews had never looked on Jesus as anything but a troublesome Yiddish boy who would not work at the carpentry trade, marry, settle down and raise a family. And the Jews believed that their Messiah was yet to come, mama said. Thinking of this, Francie stared at the Pregnant Jewess.

"I guess that's why the Jews have so many babies," Francie thought. "And why they sit so quiet…waiting. And why they aren't ashamed the way they are fat. Each one thinks that she might be making the real little Jesus. That's why they walk so proud when they're that way. Now the Irish women always look so ashamed. They know that they can never make a Jesus. It will be just another Mick. When I grow up and know that I am going to have a baby, I will remember to walk proud and slow even though I am not a Jew."

It was twelve when Francie got home. Mama came in soon after with her broom and pail which she banged into a corner with that final bang which meant that they wouldn't be touched again until Monday.

Mama was twenty-nine. She had black hair and brown eyes and was quick with her hands. She had a nice shape, too. She worked as a janitress and kept three tenement houses clean.

Who would ever believe that Mama scrubbed floors to make a living for the four of them? She was so pretty and slight and vivid and always bubbling over with intensity and fun. Even though her hands were red and cracked from the sodaed water, they were beautifully shaped with lovely, curved, oval nails. Everyone said it was a pity that a slight pretty woman like Katie Nolan had to go out scrubbing floors. But what else could she do considering the husband she had, they said. They admitted that, no matter which way you looked at it, Johnny Nolan was a handsome lovable fellow far superior to any man on the block. But he *was* a drunk. That's what they said and it was true.

Francie made Mama watch while she put the eight cents in the tin-can bank. They had a pleasant five minutes conjecturing about how much was in the bank. Francie thought there must be nearly a hundred dollars. Mama said eight dollars would be nearer right.

Mama gave Francie instructions about going out to buy something for lunch. "Take eight cents from the cracked cup and get a quarter loaf of Jew rye bread and see that it's fresh. Then take a nickel, go to Sauerwein's and ask for the end-of-the-tongue for a nickel."

"But you have to have a pull with him to get it."

"Tell him that your mother *said,*" insisted Katie firmly. She thought something over. "I wonder whether we ought to buy five cents' worth of sugar buns or put that money in the bank."

"Oh, Mama, it's *Saturday.* All week you said we could have dessert on Saturday."

"All right. Get the buns."

The little Jewish delicatessen was full of Christians buying Jew rye bread. She watched the man push her quarter loaf into a paper bag. With its wonderful crisp yet tender crust and floury bottom, it was easily the most wonderful bread in the world, she thought, when it was fresh. She entered Sauerwein's store reluctantly. Sometimes he was agreeable about the tongue and sometimes he wasn't. Sliced tongue at seventy-five cents a pound was only for rich people. But when it was nearly all sold, you could get the square end for a nickel if you had a pull with Mr. Sauerwein. Of course there wasn't much tongue to the end. It was mostly soft, small bones and gristle with only the memory of meat.

It happened to be one of Sauerwein's agreeable days. "The tongue came to an end, yesterday," he told Francie. "But I saved it for you because I know your mama likes tongue and I like your mama. You tell her that. Hear?"

"Yes sir," whispered Francie. She looked down on the floor as she felt her face getting warm. She hated Mr. Sauerwein and would *not* tell Mama what he had said.

At the baker's, she picked out four buns, carefully choosing those with the most sugar. She met Neeley outside the store. He peeped into the bag and cut a caper of delight when he saw the buns. Although he had eaten four cents' worth of candy that morning, he was very hungry and made Francie run all the way home.

Papa did not come home for dinner. He was a free-lance singing waiter which meant that he didn't work very often. Usually he spent Saturday morning at Union Headquarters waiting for a job to come in for him.

Francie, Neeley, and Mama had a very fine meal. Each had a thick slice of the "tongue," two pieces of sweet-smelling rye bread spread with unsalted butter, a sugar bun apiece and a mug of strong hot coffee with a teaspoon of sweetened condensed milk on the side.

There was a special Nolan idea about the coffee. It was their one great luxury. Mama made a big potful each morning and reheated it for dinner and supper and it got stronger as the day wore on. It was an awful lot of water and very little coffee but Mama put a lump of chicory in it which made it taste strong and bitter. Each one was allowed three cups a day *with milk.* Other times you could help yourself to a cup of black coffee anytime you felt like it. Sometimes when you had nothing at all and it was raining and you were alone in the flat, it was wonderful to know that you could have *something* even though it was only a cup of black and bitter coffee.

Neeley and Francie loved coffee but seldom drank it. Today, as usual, Neeley let his coffee stand black and ate his condensed milk spread on bread. He sipped a little of the black coffee for the sake of formality. Mama poured out Francie's coffee and put the milk in it even though she knew that the child wouldn't drink it.

Francie loved the smell of coffee and the way it was hot. As she ate her bread and meat, she kept one hand curved about the cup enjoying its warmth. From time to time, she'd smell the bitter sweetness of it. That was better than drinking it. At the end of the meal, it went down the sink.

Mama had two sisters, Sissy and Evy, who came to the flat often. Every time they saw the coffee thrown away, they gave Mama a lecture about wasting things.

Mama explained: "Francie is entitled to one cup each meal like the rest. If it makes her feel better to throw it away rather than to drink it, all right. *I* think it's good that people like us can waste something once in a while and get the feeling of how it would be to have lots of money and not have to worry about scrounging."

This queer point of view satisfied Mama and pleased Francie. It was one of the links between the ground-down poor and the wasteful rich. The girl felt that even if she had less than anybody in Williamsburg, somehow she had more. She was richer because she had something to waste. She ate her sugar bun slowly, reluctant to have done with its sweet taste, while the coffee got ice-cold. Regally, she poured it down the sink drain feeling casually extravagant. After that, she was ready to go to Losher's for the family's semiweekly supply of stale bread. Mama told her that she could take a nickel and buy a stale pie if she could get one that wasn't mashed too much.

Losher's bread factory supplied the neighborhood stores. The bread was not wrapped in wax paper and grew stale quickly. Losher's redeemed the stale bread from the dealers and sold it at half price to the poor. The outlet store adjoined the bakery. Its long narrow counter filled one side and long narrow benches ran along the other two sides. A huge double door opened

behind the counter. The bakery wagons backed up to it and unloaded the bread right on to the counter. They sold two loaves for a nickel, and when it was dumped out, a pushing crowd fought for the privilege of buying it. There was never enough bread and some waited until three or four wagons had reported before they could buy bread. At that price, the customers had to supply their own wrappings. Most of the purchasers were children. Some kids tucked the bread under their arms and walked home brazenly letting all the world know that they were poor. The proud ones wrapped up the bread, some in old newspapers, others in clean or dirty flour sacks. Francie brought along a large paper bag.

She didn't try to get her bread right away. She sat on a bench and watched. A dozen kids pushed and shouted at the counter. Four old men dozed on the opposite bench. The old men, pensioners on their families, were made to run errands and mind babies, the only work left for old worn-out men in Williamsburg. They waited as long as they could before buying because Losher's smelled kindly of baking bread, and the sun coming in the windows felt good on their old backs. They sat and dozed while the hours passed and felt that they were filling up time. The waiting gave them a purpose in life for a little while and, almost, they felt necessary again.

Francie stared at the oldest man. She played her favorite game, figuring out about people. His thin tangled hair was the same dirty gray as the stubble standing on his sunken cheeks. Dried spittle caked the corners of his mouth. He yawned. He had no teeth. She watched, fascinated and revolted, as he closed his mouth, drew his lips inward until there was no mouth, and made his chin come up to almost meet his nose. She studied his old coat with the padding hanging out of the torn sleeve seam. His legs were sprawled wide in helpless relaxation and one of the buttons was missing from his grease-caked pants opening. She saw that his shoes were battered and broken open at the toes. One shoe was laced with a much-knotted shoe string, and the other with a bit of dirty twine. She saw two thick dirty toes with creased gray toenails. Her thoughts ran….

"He is old. He must be past seventy. He was born about the time Abraham Lincoln was living and getting himself ready to be president. Williamsburg must have been a little country place then and maybe Indians were still living in Flatbush. That was so long ago." She kept staring at his feet. "He was a baby once. He must have been sweet and clean and his mother kissed his little pink toes. Maybe when it thundered at night she came to his crib and fixed his blanket better and whispered that he mustn't be afraid, that mother was there. Then she picked him up and put her cheek on his head and said that he was her own sweet baby. He might have been a boy like my brother, running in and out of the house and slamming the door. And while his mother scolded him she was thinking that maybe he'll be president some day. Then he was a young man, strong and happy. When he walked down the street, the girls smiled and turned to watch him. He smiled back and maybe he winked at the prettiest one. I guess he must have married and had children and they thought he was the most wonderful papa in the world the way he worked hard and bought them toys for Christmas. Now his children are getting old too, like him, and *they* have children and nobody wants the old man any more and they are waiting for him to die. But he don't want to die. He wants to keep on living even though he's so old and there's nothing to be happy about anymore."

The place was quiet. The summer sun streamed in and made dusty, down-slanting roads from the window to the floor. A big green fly buzzed in and out of the sunny dust. Excepting

for herself and the dozing old men, the place was empty. The children who waited for bread had gone to play outside. Their high screaming voices seemed to come from far away.

Suddenly Francie jumped up. Her heart was beating fast. She was frightened. For no reason at all, she thought of an accordion pulled out full for a rich note. Then she had an idea that the accordion was closing…closing…closing…. A terrible panic that had no name came over her as she realized that many of the sweet babies in the world were born to come to something like this old man some day. She had to get out of that place or it would happen to her. Suddenly she would be an old woman with toothless gums and feet that disgusted people.

At that moment, the double doors behind the counter were banged open as a bread truck backed up. A man came to stand behind the counter. The truck driver started throwing bread to him which he piled up on the counter. The kids in the street who had heard the doors thrown open piled in and milled around Francie who had already reached the counter.

"I want bread!" Francie called out. A big girl gave her a strong shove and wanted to know who she thought she was. "Never mind! Never mind!" Francie told her. "I want six loaves and a pie not too crushed," she screamed out.

Impressed by her intensity, the counter man shoved six loaves and the least battered of the rejected pies at her and took her two dimes. She pushed her way out of the crowd dropping a loaf which she had trouble picking up as there was no room to stoop over in.

Outside, she sat at the curb fitting the bread and the pie into the paper bag. A woman passed, wheeling a baby in a buggy. The baby was waving his feet in the air. Francie looked and saw, not the baby's foot, but a grotesque thing in a big, worn-out shoe. The panic came on her again and she ran all the way home.

The flat was empty. Mama had dressed and gone off with Aunt Sissy to see a matinee from a ten-cent gallery seat. Francie put the bread and pie away and folded the bag neatly to be used the next time. She went into the tiny, windowless bedroom that she shared with Neeley and sat on her own cot in the dark waiting for the waves of panic to stop passing over her.

After a while Neeley came in, crawled under his cot and pulled out a ragged catcher's mitt.

"Where you going?" she asked.

"Play ball in the lots."

"Can I come along?"

"No."

She followed him down to the street. Three of his gang were waiting for him. One had a bat, another a baseball and the third had nothing but wore a pair of baseball pants. They started out for an empty lot over towards Greenpoint. Neeley saw Francie following but said nothing. One of the boys nudged him and said,

"Hey! Your sister's followin' us."

"Yeah," agreed Neeley. The boy turned around and yelled at Francie:

"Go chase yourself!"

"It's a free country," Francie stated.

"It's a free country," Neeley repeated to the boy. They took no notice of Francie after that. She continued to follow them. She had nothing to do until two o'clock when the neighborhood library opened up again.

It was a slow, horseplaying walk. The boys stopped to look for tin foil in the gutter and to pick up cigarette butts which they would save and smoke in the cellar on the next rainy afternoon. They took time out to bedevil a little Jew boy on his way to the temple. They detained him while they debated what to do with him. The boy waited, smiling humbly. The Christians released him finally with detailed instructions as to his course of conduct for the coming week.

"Don't show your puss on Devoe Street," he was ordered.

"I won't," he promised. The boys were disappointed. They had expected more fight. One of them took out a bit of chalk from his pocket and drew a wavy line on the sidewalk. He commanded,

"Don't you even step over that line."

The little boy, knowing that he had offended them by giving in too easily, decided to play their way.

"Can't I even put one foot in the gutter, fellers?"

"You can't even *spit* in the gutter," he was told.

"All right." He sighed in pretended resignation.

One of the bigger boys had an inspiration. "And keep away from Christian girls. Get me?" They walked away leaving him staring after them.

"Gol-*lee!*" he whispered rolling his big brown Jewish eyes. The idea that those *Goyem* thought him man enough to be capable of thinking about *any* girl, Gentile or Jew, staggered him and he went his way saying gol-*lee* over and over.

The boys walked on slowly, looking slyly at the big boy who had made the remark about the girls, and wondering whether he would lead off into a dirty talk session. But before this could start, Francie heard her brother say,

"I know that kid. He's a white Jew." Neeley had heard papa speak so of a Jewish bartender that he liked.

“They ain’t no such thing as a white Jew,” said the big boy.

“Well, if there was such a thing as a white Jew,” said Neeley with that combination of agreeing with others, and still sticking to his own opinions, which made him so amiable, “he would be it.”

“There never could be a white Jew,” said the big boy, “even in supposing.”

“Our Lord was a Jew.” Neeley was quoting Mama.

“And other Jews turned right around and killed him,” clinched the big boy.

Before they could go deeper in theology, they saw another little boy turn on to Ainslie Street from Humboldt Street carrying a basket on his arm. The basket was covered with a clean ragged cloth. A stick stuck up from one corner of the basket, and, on it, like a sluggish flag stood six pretzels. The big boy of Neeley’s gang gave a command and they made a tightly-packed run on the pretzel seller. He stood his ground, opened his mouth and bawled, “Mama!”

A second-story window flew open and a woman clutching a crepe-paperish kimono around her sprawling breasts, yelled out,

“Leave him alone and get off this block, you lousy bastards.”

Francie’s hands flew to cover her ears so that at confession she would not have to tell the priest that she had stood and listened to a bad word.

“We ain’t doing nothing, lady,” said Neeley with that ingratiating smile which always won over his mother.

“You bet your life, you ain’t. Not while I’m around.” Then without changing her tone she called to her son, “And get upstairs here, you. I’ll learn you to bother me when I’m taking a nap.” The pretzel boy went upstairs and the gang ambled on.

“That lady’s tough.” The big boy jerked his head back at the window.

“Yeah,” the others agreed.

“My old man’s tough,” offered a smaller boy.

“Who the hell cares?” inquired the big boy languidly.

“I was just saying,” apologized the smaller boy.

“My old man ain’t tough,” said Neeley. The boys laughed.

They ambled along, stopping now and then to breathe deeply of the smell of Newtown Creek which flowed its narrow tormented way a few blocks up Grand Street.

“God, she stinks,” commented the big boy.

“Yeah!” Neeley sounded deeply satisfied.

“I bet that’s the worst stink in the world,” bragged another boy.

“Yeah.”

And Francie whispered yeah in agreement. She was proud of that smell. It let her know that nearby was a waterway, which, dirty though it was, joined a river that flowed out to the sea. To her, the stupendous stench suggested far-sailing ships and adventure and she was pleased with the smell.

Just as the boys reached the lot in which there was a ragged diamond tramped out, a little yellow butterfly flew across the weeds. With man’s instinct to capture anything running, flying, swimming or crawling, they gave chase, throwing their ragged caps at it in advance of their coming. Neeley caught it. The boys looked at it briefly, quickly lost interest in it and started up a four-man baseball game of their own devising.

They played furiously, cursing, sweating and punching each other. Every time a stumble bum passed and loitered for a moment, they clowned and showed off. There was a rumor that the Brooklyn’s had a hundred scouts roaming the streets of a Saturday afternoon watching lot games and spotting promising players. And there wasn’t a Brooklyn boy who wouldn’t rather play on the Brooklyn’s team than be president of the United States.

After a while, Francie got tired of watching them. She knew that they would play and fight and show off until it was time to drift home for supper. It was two o’clock. The librarian should be back from lunch by now. With pleasant anticipation, Francie walked back towards the library.