

[Mrs. Brown]

Mrs. Joe P. [(Carrie?)] [Stroh?],

114 Parker Street, [?]

[Atlanta?], Georgia.

The apartment was next to the last in the brick building, one of a series of duplex units which extended up the hill like a huge set of children's playblocks, aligned closely together but on varying levels. I rang the bell and, while waiting, looked back over similar groups of buildings spread out in the hollow [?] up the far hill. This was the [?] Housing Development, a government slum-clearance project of twenty-two buildings constructed on the same number of acres. They are severely plain in their square simplicity and are separated by wide expanses of lawns and broad streets. There are but few trees and little shrubbery, and the buildings rises with bare abruptness from the ground, as though they had suddenly mushroomed into growth and had not yet been gathered about them those elements of greenery indicating a decision to stay.

Yet, viewed with a visionary eye, the potential beauty of the development is evident. When the trees become larger, the shrubbery more luxurious, the buildings will appear more settled and the area will assume an air of more stability and charm.

Mrs. Brown opened the door and I explained the nature of my call, apologizing for interfering with her early morning housekeeping. She was most gracious. "Oh that's all right. You come on in. I haven't done much cleanin' this mornin' anyway.... just doin' my curtains. You come on in. The house is a mess."

And indeed the living room was. While getting settled and speaking of generalities I looked around. All but the most stable pieces of furniture seemed to have rushed away from the

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walls, collided in the middle of the room and bounced halfway back, coming to a [?] at the most inconvenient and inartistic angles. This [?] state of things we attributed largely to two children she were wrestling on the floor. The left side of the room was dominated by a stairway leading up to the second floor. The walls were of 2 rough-finished white plaster and bore only three pictures, one of a dog [baying dolefully?] over the body of another fallen in the snow, and the two other small views of an identical scene showing [?] summer and winter landscapes. There was a nice studio couch in the far corner, on of its pillows askew, the other two on the floor serving as temporary wrestling mats for the children. There were two matching chairs and the ensemble was covered with a rust-colored [rug?] which appeared to be quite new.

"I just re-covered them myself", said Mrs. Brown, "... that is, me and a friend." [A?] floor model radio stood just to the right of the door. On top of it was a world globe, with dark blue [oceans?] and dull gray continents, mounted on a clock base. "Yes, it is nice, isn't it?"

[Bill?] — that's my husband — [won?] it on a punchboard. The clock part [works?] all right too, but I never wind it 'cause it ticks so loud.

Now don't think Bill throws much money away on things like that, 'cuse he don't; but ever once in a while he'll take a chance on some fool thing.

When I think about [them?] people who [?] all that money on the Sweep [Stakes?] like I saw in the news real....."

Her voice trailed off speculatively, giving me a chance to raise my eyes from my notepad and really study her. She was not a pretty woman and I was seeing her probably at her worst, but she was very pleasant and had a warm smile. I realized that if she but had more time and money to devote to personal grooming she could present a pausably fair appearance. Now, however, she merely slumped in a chair, somewhat worn from her morning activities. Her red-gold hair, really of fine texture, was straight except for the ends which held the frizzly remains of a [narrow-wave?] permanent, and straggled uncombed

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about her face. Her features were irregular, the face quite broad, yet with high cheek bones and [?] contours which tapered to an almost pointed chin. [A?] peculiar fullness of the eyelids produced the illusion of a [slant?] which made her appear just a bit oriental despite her [?] blondness. The fullness of her lips suggested a voluptuousness which was further implied by the plumpness of her body. [When?] she laughed, which she often did through embarrassment rather than humor, she instinctively covered her mouth with her hand, a pathetic gesture which unfailingly attracted one's attention to the broken tooth she was trying to hide.

She was wearing a cheap yellow cotton print, much too tight and badly torn. The neck and sleeves were trimmed with narrow lace, so frayed as to appear cobwebby. A white cotton slip hung several inches below her dress and she was continually pulling both garments down in an effort to cover as much as possible of her bare legs. Her feet were thrust into shapeless blue slippers, the upper part of which had torn away from the soles, revealing her stubby toes.

The children had kept up a constant [din?]. For some time they had been trying violently to beat one another's brains out with folded magazines. [These?] had been sent slithering across the floor and they were [now?] engaged in a desperate tug of war with a remnant of an old sheet serving as a rope. Their mother had made several ineffectual attempts to quiet them, but they ignored her completely and their continued yells and squalls made any serious attempt toward interviewing extremely difficult. This being so, I decided to discuss the children, [as?] they were the only possible subject under the circumstances. The result was magical. As soon as their names were mentioned they declared a truce. They set there gasping and sniffing and regarding me with great [?] eyes. The little boy achieved an added note of preoccupied [solemnity?] by the simple process of picking his nose, just as an old scholar seems [?] profoundly involved in his studies when unconsciously scratching his head. "They both been sick, Mrs. Brown was saying. "They

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vomited all 4 all over the house this morning. I don't know what was the matter with 'em.” Then she added naively, “Unless it was them rotten apples I gave 'em.

“That's Cecilia”, said Mrs. Brown, indicating the little girl. She's two years old.” Cecilia took this as her [cue?] t climb upon her mother's lap whereupon Mrs. Brown redoubled her efforts to keep her skirts down. “And that's John. He's four.” John was no less prompt to act, climbing up with all the assurance of masculine superiority and sitting squarely upon his sister, from which perch he evidenced every intention of continuing his calm study of me. But it was not to be. Cecilia emitted an immediate shrill and piercing shriek of displeasure, and the two engaged in a violent struggle for supremacy. Mrs. Brown was seemingly unconcerned at the struggle taking place in her lap. True, she attempted to calm the children, but her commands were almost apologetic, as though she feared to offend them. Her only action was to free herself of John's legs, which he had locked about her neck. Thus anchored he had swung in [lavalier-fashion?] down his mother's bosom and, with wildly flailing arms, was pummeling his sister who had managed to sit upon his face. Ducking a flying fist or foot, Mrs. Brown went on talking, easily enough.

“They fight all the time. Just all the time.” Her voice rose to a sustained falsetto on the last word and she held it, not in [?], but as though she had made a singularly amazing discovery. “I don't believe all children do this way but they do. Now Theresa's just as different. She's as quiet. Sometimes I tel Bill she's like an old lady. She's six years old and goes to [parcenial?] school. I wish you could see her.

“No, I'm not Catholic, but Bill is. I'm a Baptist, but we don't have no trouble about that. [We?] was married by a priest, you know.

A Catholic won't marry unless a priest does it. Bill's very devout. We been married seven years and he's never missed church yet. He gives somethin' ever Sunday; 5 maybe jest twenty-five or fifty cents ... but he always puts somethin' in. It don't sound like a lot, but twenty-five cents it to us what a hundred dollars would be to some rich people. [Theresa?]

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never missed church neither. She goes ever Sunday. You know, she puts a penny in the box ever day at school and they give her a gold star. She's that proud of 'em too. I try to get the others to Sunday School as often as I can, but I can't always make it. I had to sign a paper when I married Bill saying if there was any children they'd be raised Catholic.

“Absolutely not. I don't want no more children. I love 'em all right, but we jest can't afford no more of 'em. I been married seven years and had three children and never had a maid. Done all my [washin'?] and everything. I think I done my share. And we had a hard enough time as it is.

“Yes, we married here. I was born in Cobb County, but Bill comes from Dakota ... South Dakota. He's been in Atlanta — Oh, I don't know exactly how many years ... eight or nine I guess. He went through high school in Dakota and then took one correspondence course in law. And then a friend taught him law too ... jest taught him free. And then he and this man went into practicing. That was here in Atlanta jest before I married him. He come to Atlanta because Georgia is the easiest state in the Union to pass the bar. Well they practiced about eighteen months.

Didn't make much money. Worked mostly for niggers. Sometimes they paid him in chickens; that was all they had. Then he went to work on [?] Lane ... you know, down there at the produce houses. His job was truckin'. He'd go all over Georgia. He, never out of the State. It was hard on him. He'd have to go out in the winter time and he'd have to sleep in the woods along 'side the road sometimes. It's be so cold he'd have to hand blankets around to keep off the wind, y'know. After that... oh no, I forgot to tell you. It didn't exactly fall through.

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You see, Bill had [??] the money, and him and a partner was runnin' the business. [Well?] one night when he was at home here — I don't mean here in this place, but here in Atlanta

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— the man stole the truck and all the money and ran off. It was the meanest trick I ever heard of.

["Well after?] that he got himself jest a wholesale stand down there, no truckin' or nothin'. [We?] bottled [morgham?] syrup; I helped him. And one funny thing — would you believe it? — in the winter time that old house we lived in got so cold the syrup wouldn't run. Jest wouldn't run at all — froze stiff — and [I had?] to heat it over the stove to make it pour. [?] it did. Naw, he didn't make any money. Jest made a livin', if you could call it that. Well then he got a job sellin' correspondence courses, y'know. Oh I forgot what the company was, ['I.C.'?] or somethin' like that. But that [was?] in 1930, you know, and nobody had any money for that kind of thing then. When the company closed the office he tried to get on the [?]. Well he got some kind of a job on it, I don't know jest what now, but it only paid eight dollars a week. But we saved two dollars of it ever week. I don't know how we did it, but we did. John was on the way then and we had to save somethin'. After a little while he was raised to fifteen dollars a wee. [?] then he [got?] on the [Writers'?] Project. I think he mad seventy-five dollars a month there — somethin' like that. And then after workin' there all day he'd go back to the library at night and work for three more hours. [They?] paid him nineteen dollars a month for that. Lord, we thought we as settin' pretty then, after all we'd been through. Well the people at the library took a interest in him and they got him a full time job makin' ninety dollars a month. That's the [way?] people are with Bill. They [always?] want to help him. He's got a nice personality, lots more so than I have. [Well?], as I say, he went to work full time for them, but pretty soon the 7 the city started cuttin' salaries. They kept cuttin' and cuttin' and finally he wasn't gettin' but sixty-five dollars. Then he went to work for the oil company. Yes, that's where he's workin' now — the Paramount Oil Company. One of the librarians got him that job too.

"Well, I can't say exactly how much he makes 'cause he works on a commission, y'know. You might say he's a travellin' salesman. And he has to pay his own expenses — hotels, meals, gas and oil, and the upkeep on the car. No, he has to furnish his own car. He's got a brand new [38'?] Ford. We did have a brand new '37 Ford, but he wrecked it. It wasn't

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his fault. We finished payin' for it out of the insurance money, y'know, and what was left over we put on the new car. No, it ain't ours yet, we're still payin' for it. It was sure bad. He'd almost paid up for the '37 one and would of been free now. It was so hopeful. We don't like to be in debt, and then somethin' like that has to go and happen. He could tell you more about all this than I could, but he only gets in town for the weekends. He sells to the farmers and those little fillin' stations along the road. Yes, and he also sell grease and oil to the furniture companies for their machinery and stuff. The county buys grease from him too, for their tractors.

“But let me see — you ast me about how much he made, didn't you? Well, as I say, it's different ever week. He never knows what it's gonna be till he goet his pay. But he gives me nineteen dollars regular ever week and then he gives me fifteen dollars extra ever month. I shore do have to stretch that nineteen dollars, I tell you I do. The children always need new shoes, jest one pair after another. Yes sir, it takes it all. Our rent's thirty-four fifty-five a month. Well, it includes lights and water and heat. That is, it's supposed to; but I have to pay a dollar-and-a-half extra on the lights ever month. They say it's somethin' about us using' more kilowatts then we're allowed to, I don't know exactly what.

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“My mother lives here with us too. She works in a laundry. She's a sorter — sorts the clothes, y'know. She boards — pays four dollars a week. It sounds like a lot when I name it all separate that-away, but it ain't much when I come to spend it. We jest make out, I'd say.

We don't have nothin' nice, but we have what things we have to have. I jest do the best I can. I tell you, I've learned to stretch a penny if anybody has. Grocery bill? Well I try to hold it down to a dollar a day, but I can't always. You're always runnin' out of lard or sugar or somethin' that ain't separate eatin' food. We may not have good food, but we have lots of it as they say. I do try to give the children a well-balanced diet ... lots of vegetables. I can't get 'em all the milk they need though.”

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All during the interview the children, back on the floor, had constantly interrupted with cried of ["Mama?], I want a egg." It had begun as a plea from the little girl, but it was quickly taken up by the boy and converted into a command. At first they had mad their demands in alternate turn, but they had now evolved a sort of gave out of it whereby they chanted in unison, each trying to outshout the other. The boy in particular was achieving some spectacular vocal effects, not unlike variations on the theme. First he would start high on the "Mama" and slide his voice down skillfully, but in undiminishing volume, to a low not on the "egg". Then he would reverse the process, starting with a low "Mama" and rising with the shrill shriek of a siren to a high "egg". His sister, never lessening her own efforts, regarded him with frank admiration. "Mama" dismissed the situation with an occasional and indulgent "Now, now, John" or "Be nice, Cecilia." Not until John, finally spurred to desperate action, socked her on the legs several times with a determined fist did she bestir herself.

I asked if we might go along to the kitchen with her and thereby see more of the apartment. We went into the dining room. The furniture was inexpensive, 9 but fairly nice. [?] one corner was a large white kitchen cabinet which reflected the sunlight streaming in the two windows and brightened the entire room with its glare. In the opposite corner was a sewing machine. "Nobody uses it", said Mrs. Brown. "Bill bought it and wanted me to learn to sew, but I'm too nervous. I jest [nearly?] go to pieces when I sit down and try to sew somethin' I don't even sew up holes in my dresses; jest let 'em rip until ..." She dismissed the subject with a shrug of her shoulders, leaving us to carry the inference as far as we liked. We thought to remind her of the [couch and ?] covers she'd made. "Oh well", she said, "that was big stuff and it didn't make me nervous.

I can do big things like that."

The children had proceeded us into the kitchen and, perhaps feeling that the desired eggs were in the offing, had ceased to plague us.

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Through the doorway I could see John amusing himself by attempting to squirt water, thumb-step fashion from the sink faucet, over his sister.

From her almost hysterical laughter I judged that because of some perverseness this displeased her not at all. Mrs. Brown sat on one corner of the drop-leaf breakfast table and went on talking. "I tell everybody I made one thing, though, but I really didn't. That's a tailored suit I got. I got a man's suit from a friend of Bill's - he jest gave it to me - and me and a friend of mind made me a suit out of it. She really did most of the work, but I'm so proud of it. I jest feel like 'Mrs. Astorbilt' when I wear it."

Her face brightened almost pathetically and I realized how big an event this new made-over garment was in her life. For a moment she became the personification of all the lower economic classes, leading obscure [?] and being pitifully grateful for small things. She had seen object poverty and would probably see other equally troublous times, but I felt that she would never admit defeat, would always manage to fight her way back up to a 10 measure of security. She gave me, however, little time for such heroic visualizings. Now on a subject dear to every woman's heart, she [??] on rapidly, her voice alternately maddening with just a trace of understandable self-pity and rising enthusiastically on more hopeful theme.

"I don't hardly never go nowhere. Its not because I don't want to, but I jest never have anything to wear. You may not believe it, but I don't go out but two times a week. On Sunday afternoon I go the show with Bill and on Monday night me and a friend go to the bowling alley.

We don't play none, me and her, we jest sit and watch 'em. It don't cost nothin'. I like to [?], but Bill don't. That's always been a bone of contention between us. But even if he did I couldn't [?], because like I said I never had nothin' to wear. And then I can't get a way from the children. No, my mother jest won't keep 'em she gets awful nervous. No matter if

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I jest go across the street she starts [swellin'?] up and I have to come back. She's with the children like I am about sewin' — jest goes all to pieces.

“If we could save some money I could get to goin' out more. But we ain't savin' a thing now. But we don't owe nothin' neither, except on the car like I told you. Our furniture's all paid for. I get a perfect horror about owing money. I jest can't stand to owe somebody somethin'. That's the way it was about the doctor. I'd been goin' to the doctor but I stopped. We didn't have the money to spare and I told Bill I'd jest as well be dead as to be starvin' to death, and like I said I wasn't gonna owe him nothin'. If I need any treatin' now I go to the [??]. Yes, all three of the children were born at Hardy. That's one thing I certainly do believe in.”

[She?] sat for a few minutes with a far away meditative look in her eyes and then abruptly changed the subject. “Look here at my new curtain-[?].

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I'm so thrilled over 'em.” It had indeed been impossible not to look at the contraption, for, leaning against the door jamb between the living and dining room, it projected about five feet of its length into each. Two pairs of dotted marqinette curtains were stretched [?] over the frame. “My curtains would get all out of shape ever time I washed 'em and ironed 'em, but they come out jest perfect now.”

We went on into the kitchen. It was small, but bright and clean. Even the water which John had sprayed over the floor seemed but to have lest added freshness. All the fixture and furnishings were a glistening white: the four-doored groceries cabinets above the sink, the floor cabinets for pots and pans, and the smart electric stove,. The walls were a smooth [?] white, making the room seem larger than it actually was.

“I wash 'em myself”, said Mrs. Brown. “They say you can do the other walls that way, but you can't.”

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There was only one touch of [?] in the kitchen, but it was a brilliant one: the gay red-checked curtains at the small windows. Mrs.

Brown grabbed my arm enthusiastically. "Oh! I did make these. That's one thing I made by myself." She drew back suddenly as if embarrassed at the unintentional familiarity, but went on talking. "I sat up one night till one o'clock finishin' 'em. I jest couldn't wait, I wanted to see so bad what they'd look like."

While she shelled the children's eggs which had been boiled earlier in the morning I stepped out the back door into the tiny yard. It was an attractive little fenced-in plot, still thickly carpeted in grass although it was late November. A gravel walk-way led to the gate opening on an alley from which, along the left edge of the yard, a row of late-blooming [?] and pinks run back to the building. On each side and across the alley were other yards, equally attractive and varying only slightly in size.

Back in the apartment, Mrs. Brown took me upstairs. Three doors opened here off the tiny hallway. At the back was a compact little bathroom. The 12 tub looked ridiculously small. "But you can spread out in it", said Mrs. Brown. The walls were of a tile [?], the upper part being smooth white plaster similar to that in the kitchen. At a right angle to, and immediately adjoining, the bathroom was the mother's room which was also shared by Theresa. It, too, was small, and the few furnishings, bed, wardrobe, bureau and chair, left but little room for movement. "I have to pull the bed away from the wall to make it up", Mrs. Brown explained. The sun shone brightly in the two windows and everything was scrupulously alone. There were no pictures or other ornaments on the white walls, a happy circumstances which gave the room an illusion of spaciousness where space was lacking.

But what the room lacked generally in color and ornament of small detail was more than offset by an amazing floor-lamp standing by the back window. It was of the [?] possible taste and appeared to have been won — in parts — from several county fairs. The shade was quite startling, a huge canopy of pale green silk stretched tightly in three tiers over

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a wire frame, and ornamented with several large roses and as inexplicable cottage [?] in thick slabs of a peculiar opaque paint. Added horror was applied in the form of a five-inch fringe of red, yellow, and green beads which rose and dipped in conformity with the scalloped edges of the shade. All this burst like an appalling [?] from a disproportionately thin nickel-plated stand which, about a foot from the top, developed ambitions of its own and bulged to accommodate a whirring electric clock inset in the stand. For another foot or so it shrunk to its normal size, but here a final splurge was made in an effort to balance the ever-bearing top by the attachment of an 18-inch metal shelf, completely outfitted to accommodate the contented smoker with two depressed ashtrays, a pipe-holder, a cigarette box, and a chunky black-enameled lighter. After this the flare of the base [?] but an anticlimax. The effect 14 of the whole was a monstrous combination of the worst in oriental and surrealistic art. "That's Mama's prize [?]", said Mrs. Brown in [?] which implied she shared the sentiment. "...she wouldn't part with it for anything."

We went to the front bedroom. "This is Bill's and mine's room ... when he's in town. The suite of furniture was quite nice, consisting of a large double bed, a highboy, and a bureau with small drawers [?] in its top. It was all finished in a rich burnished walnut. There was a cedar chest flush against the foot of the bed and to the right of its head stood a [?] floor-model radio. "It looks like we got all sorts of money to spend", said Mrs. Brown, "but that radio was a payment for a boy who owed Bill some money. He couldn't pay it and so he asked Bill if he'd take the radio, and he said he would. It's like when the niggers would pay him in chickens." In two corners of the room were white-enameled baby beds. Obviously the four of them slept in the one room, and yet there was no element of squalor, for it was a large room and bright, and its neatness attested to the thoroughness of Mrs. Brown's housekeeping. "This furniture's mine", she was saying. "My father bought it for me before I was married. Daddy used to have plenty of money before natural gas came in. He was a foreman, you know, down at the gas plant and he made good money until they started piping in the natural gas from somewhere. He was my real father I'm talkin' about. Yes see, my mother's been married again. Her name ain't the same as mine was before I

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married. She's divorced now, though. But I want twin beds', she went on, with no [?] lapse between unrelated subjects. "I tell Bill I hope we [?] get 'em sometime soon. It's all right sleepin' together in the winter time, but in the summer — oof! — it's too hot!"

I felt I had taken enough of Mrs. Browns' time, so, back in the living room, I piled her hurriedly with a few last-minute questions.

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"I'm jest twenty-five. Bill's only thirty. We've had a whole life time of trouble though. Mama's forty-one, but she looks almost as young as I do. No, I didn't got as far though school as Bill did, I only went as far as junior high. Bill [?] to take some sort of college training some day; he's got a keen mind. [Ye-e-s?], sir — I want the children to have all the education they can get; jest as far as they can go, 'cause I didn't. No, I don't know anything about my people, except my grandfather, and he was the meanest old man that ever lived. After all, I'm daddy's child, I always say, and [??] left him and everthing we jest don't talk about 'em any. And I can't tell you a thing about Bill's people. Nothin' that would matter anyhow.

"Naw, I don't care nothin' about politics, not a thing. "Course I think Mr. Roosevelt is a good president and all that, but I don't care none about it. Bill jest agrees with whoever he's with. You know he sells to the farmers, and if a farmer says he's a Republican, why Bill says he's a Republican too. But Bill'll jest have to tell you about himself. You come back some Saturday or Sunday when he's here. You'll like him and he'll talk.

"Well, goodbye. But you back, hear? You come back when I can dress up and have the house all clean and everthing. Goodbye, goodbye."

She was most gracious. Even I looked back from the sidewalk she was standing in the doorway and still saying, "Goodbye. You come back."