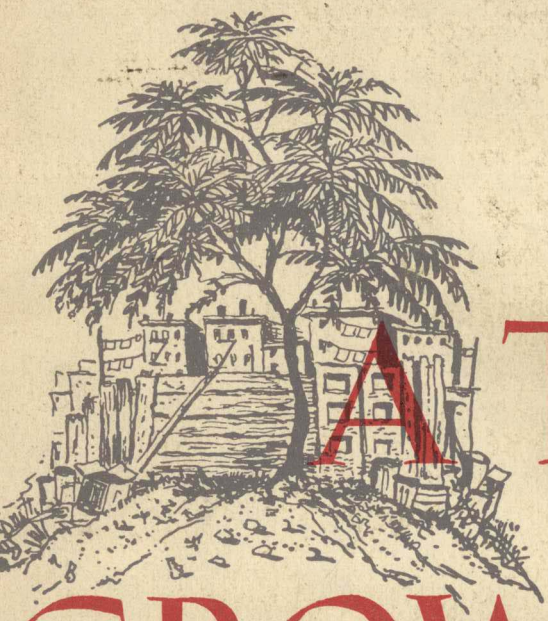
BETTY SMITH



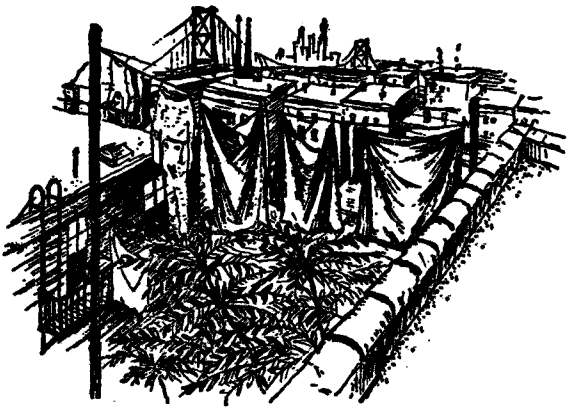
A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

ILLUSTRATED EDITION *with*
drawings by RICHARD BERGERE

HARPER & ROW · PUBLISHERS

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

A Novel by BETTY SMITH



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HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

AN OBSCURE PERSON WHO BECOMES A PUBLIC FIGURE overnight sometimes has minor legends grow up about his unknown years. It has been so with me. It is told that I had an eerie habit of walking through the dark village streets each night at midnight in the company of a big, black, spooky dog. It is said I worked up inspiration that way to write *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn.*

I did walk through the village each midnight with a black dog. But I was only going to the post office to see if I had a letter in the last mail. The dog, a gentle Labrador retriever, was a friend who nightly waited for me at the corner because he enjoyed a companionable walk to town.

I was lonesome in that time before I had a book published. Like Thomas Wolfe, who as an undergraduate here hung around this same Chapel Hill post office wishing he'd get some mail, I, too, went down to watch them put up the midnight mail hoping someone had written to me. There were seldom any letters—only bills.

I don't take that walk any more because now, any time of the day, Box 405 is filled with letters from people who have read my book. The letters come in from the cities, towns, villages, and rural districts of America. They used to come from foxholes, battleships, hospitals, recreational centers, and from training camps. They still come from the zones of occupation. One came from a notorious gangster's death cell saying that my book was the last he was destined to read in this world. One came from a woman who had just given birth to a child; she wrote she was very poor but her newborn would not lack wealth of tenderness and understanding if she could help it.

Most letters begin: "This is my first fan letter. I've just read your book and I must tell you . . ." They tell me: "I was a girl like Francie Nolan." Or: "My family had the same kind of

struggle. My mother was like Katie." Or: "I've never lived in Brooklyn but someone must have told you the story of my life because that's what you wrote." And even: "I'm boiling mad. You wrote my book before I had a chance to get round to it."

I shouldn't, really, answer all the letters. It takes the time I should be putting in on the next book. But I remember how once as a child I read a book which appealed to me deeply and I wrote my heart out in a letter to the famous author. He never answered. I was hurt and ashamed that my heart had been rejected. I vowed then to try to write a better book than he when I grew up and to answer any letters I got about it. So I answer each letter if only to say; "Thanks!" Sometimes it gets to be a chore and I want to give it up but then I worry that I may hurt someone the way this long-ago author did me. So I keep on answering the letters.

My book wasn't dedicated to anyone because I couldn't decide which person was most helpful to me in the writing of it. I thought of the mother who gave me life. I owe a lot to her—and to my sister and brother who made my childhood a magical time. I am grateful to my children whose baby years made a life of pleasant contentment for me. There is something owing to a beloved friend and to an understanding husband; there is a debt to a loved teacher. The grocer who gave me affectionate credit during the lean writing years cannot be forgotten, nor the veterinarian who set my dog's broken leg and brushed aside my promise to "pay sometime," with a gallant, "Oh, forget it!"

I am indebted to chance acquaintances on trains and in bus stations for exchanged confidences about the everlasting verities of life. I am deeply obligated to a person who caused me much anguish because the grief made me grow up emotionally and gave me a little more understanding. I am tenderly grateful to an employer of long ago who on a hot August afternoon told me that the job I was applying for had been filled but who urged me to sit down and rest a minute before I went on to answer the next ad. He brought me a paper cup of iced water. My cup flowed over, literally, when I added a couple of tired tears to the water.

All of these people—hundreds more—in fact, everyone who

touched my life for good or bad helped in the writing of my book. I could not dedicate it to one without being disloyal to the others.

But I do want to dedicate this special edition—the edition gotten out solely because so many people were kind about *The Tree*. I want to dedicate it to you. I want to dedicate to all of you who've read it and to *you* who are reading it now. And I want to say: "Thanks! Thanks a *whole* lot."

BETTY SMITH

Chapel Hill, North Carolina
June 1947

A TREE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

THERE'S a tree that grows in Brooklyn. Some people call it the Tree of Heaven. No matter where its seed falls, it makes a tree which struggles to reach the sky. It grows in boarded-up lots and out of neglected rubbish heaps. It grows up out of cellar gratings. It is the only tree that grows out of cement. It grows lushly . . . survives without sun, water, and seemingly without earth. It would be considered beautiful except that there are too many of it.

BOOK ONE

I

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 tenement 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 he 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 hair-cut: 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 penwiper.

"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 horse-

played 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-awhile 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 floorwalker 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 wonder-