

THREE TENANT FAMILIES

LET US NOW  
PRAISE  
FAMOUS MEN

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James Agee • Walker Evans



A MARINER BOOK  
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## II. THE REAR BEDROOM

### *General*

**I**t is half as bright and opened-seeming (and seems more so) as the room we left was and remains dark: all but the window of the side wall, whose shutter is laid back flat, and which is nailed over with a square of fresh gray screening: yet after a minute it seems somewhat somber too; or thus: the floor from the window in a wide fan and all the opposite wall is clearly lighted, none of it in direct sun: but the rear wall and the corner to the right are much less lighted.

There are two beds here, both three-quarter size, set parallel, their heads near the rear wall, their sides near the two side walls. One is directly opposite this partition door, its foot frame comes just short of the kitchen door: the other is directly opposite the door of a very shallow closet built out from the partition. The fireplace, in the partition wall, faces the closed rear shutter down the bare aisle of transverse planks between them: and the two of them together almost fill their side of the room. These beds are both sheeted in tightly drawn white sheets, and at the central head of each, a hard thin white-cased pillow is slightly tilted from the mattress case. On each of these surfaces is a thin constellation of perhaps a dozen black flies. Once in a while sev-

eral at once will move a sharp inch or two in straight lines, or one will suddenly spiral off and butt the window screen: but for minutes on end they all stand still together. Both these beds are iron. This one we face, which is George's bed, and his wife's, the iron is dark and smooth and the pattern is plain, a few round verticals, and taller verticals at the head: the other is of more slender, white rods, bent into balanced curves.

Above the head of this nearer bed, suspended on two forked sticks nailed to the wall, is a light-gauged shotgun.

On a nail just beside the window hangs the white summer union suit George sleeps in.

There is a trunk beneath the side window, very similar to the trunk in the front room.

### *The fireplace*

All the frame and mantel of the fireplace and the rather dark, blank wall, to a squared-off height of perhaps five and a half feet, and some of the wall beyond the frame, are whitewashed, long enough ago that the wash is scarred with matches and the grain is strong through it, yet a very cold and fine white, the edges of the work carefully labored and inexpert. Up by the right of the fireplace, and not balanced on the other side, is a wide vertical board, creating between its structural dominance and the centrality of the fireplace a not wide yet sharp dilemma of symmetries. The whitewash, with bold and fine instinct, is applied to follow the symmetry of the wood, so that the fireplace is sprung a few inches off center within its large white framing; yet, since it still has so strong a central focus in its wall, a powerful vibration is set up between the two centers.

*The mantel*

On the mantel above this fireplace:

A small round cardboard box:  
(on its front:)

Cashmere Bouquet Face Powder  
Light Rachel

(on its back:)

The Aristocrat of Face Powders.  
Same quality as 50¢ size.

Inside the box, a small puff. The bottom of the box and the bottom face of the puff carry a light dust of fragrant softly tinted powder.

A jar of menthol salve, smallest size, two thirds gone.

A small spool of number 50 white cotton thread, about half gone and half unwound.

A cracked roseflowered china shaving mug, broken along the edge. A much worn, inchwide varnish brush stands in it. Also in the mug are eleven rusty nails, one blue composition button, one pearl headed pin (imitation), three dirty kitchen matches, a lump of toilet soap.

A pink crescent celluloid comb: twenty-seven teeth, of which three are missing; sixteen imitation diamonds.

A nailfile.

A small bright mirror in a wire stand.

Hung from a nail at the side of the fireplace: a poker bent out of an auto part.

Hung from another nail, by one corner: a square pincushion. Stuck into it, several common pins, two large safety-pins, three or four pins with heads of white or colored glass; a small brooch of green glass in gilded tin; a needle trailing eighteen inches of coarse white thread.

Above the mantel, right of center, a calendar: a picture in red-brown shadows, and in red and yellow lights from a comfortable fireplace. A young darkhaired mother in a big chair by the fire: a little girl in a long white nightgown kneels between her knees with her palms together: the mother's look is blended of doting and teaching. The title is *Just a Prayer at Twilight*.

### *The closet*

On nails on the inside of the door of the shallow closet:

A short homesewn shift of coarse white cotton, square beneath the arms and across the chest and back: a knot in the right shoulderstrap.

A baby's dress, homemade. The top is gray denim; the collar is trimmed in pink; the skirt, in a thinner material, is small yellow-and-white checks.

A long homemade shift of coarse white cotton, same rectilinear design as above. A tincture of perspiration and of sex.

On the closet floor, to the left, a heap of overalls, dresses, shirts, bedding, etc., ready for laundering.

On a shelf above, three or four patchwork quilts of various degrees of elaborateness and inventiveness of pattern, and in various degrees of raggedness, age, discoloration, dirt absorption, and sense-of-vermin, stuffed with cotton and giving off a strong odor.

On nails along the wall, overalls, dresses, children's clothing; the overalls holding the shape of the knee and thigh; an odor of sweated cloth.

On the floor to the right, folded one on the other, two homemade pallets for children: flat rectangular sacks of thin white cloth thinly padded with cotton.

On the floor at center, two by two, toes to the wall, a pair of women's black slippers, run-over at the low heels. A pair of workshoes, very old, molded to the shape of the feet. A pair of girl's slippers, whit-

ed over scrubbed clay and streaked again with clay. A pair of little-boy's high black shoes, broken at the toes and worn through the soles, the toes curled up sharply; looped straps at the heels: thick clay scrubbed off. A pair of little-girl's slightly narrower and softer high tan button shoes, similarly worn and curled, similarly scrubbed. A pair of little-boy's high black button shoes, similarly worn, curled, and scrubbed. One infant's brown sandal. These shoes, particularly those of the children, are somewhat gnawn, and there are rat turds on the floor.

### *The beds*

The children's bed in the rear room has a worn-out and rusted mesh spring; the springs of the other two beds are wire net, likewise rusty and exhausted. Aside from this and from details formerly mentioned, the beds may be described as one. There are two mattresses on each, both very thin, padded, I would judge, one with raw cotton and one with cornshucks. They smell old, stale, and moist, and are morbid with bedbugs, with fleas, and, I believe, with lice. They are homemade. The sheaths are not ticking, but rather weak unbleached cotton. Though the padding is sewn through, to secure it, it has become uncomfortably lumpy in some places, nothing but cloth in others. The sheeting is of a coarse and beautiful unbleached but nearly white cotton, home-sewn down the length of each center with a seam either ridged or drawn apart. It is cloth of a sort that takes and holds body heat rapidly, and which is humid with whatever moisture may be in the air, and the fabric is sharp against the skin. The pillows are store-bought, the cheapest obtainable: thin, hard, crackling under any motion of the head; and seem, like the mattresses, to carry vermin. The pillowcases are homemade, of the sheeting; one is a washed, soft, fifty-pound floursack. The striped ticking shows strongly through the cloth. The beds are insecure enough in their joints that motions of the body must be gentle, balanced, and to some extent thought out beforehand. The mattresses and



springs are loud, each in a different way, to any motion. The springs sag so deeply that two or more, sleeping here, fall together at the middle almost as in a hammock. The sheets are drawn tight in making the bed, in part out of housework ritual, in part, I believe, in the wish to make the chronically sagged beds look level. Sometimes this succeeds. At other times the bed, neatly made though it is, looks like an unlucky cake.

Very often, Burt cannot get to sleep except in his mother's arms. During nearly all the year, the whole family sleeps in this one room. The youngest of them never sleeps elsewhere. Even when they are in the next room, the partition is very thin. Even if there were no children, such parents are limited enough that they are deeply embarrassed and disturbed by noises coming of any sexual context and betraying it. Even if there were no noises, the bed frames are insecure, the springs sag weakly, the mattresses are thin and lumpy, the sheets are not very pleasant.

On these beds, however, and among their children, they get whatever sexual good they ever have of each other, as noiselessly and with as little movement as possible; and on these beds, after spending two thirds of their life in hard wearying work and in conscious living in every way hurtful and distortive of the 'mind,' 'emotions,' and 'nerves,' they spend a third of their lives getting the refreshment and rest of sleep.

## NOTES

**T**hese notes, which might well be the proper device for any amount of expansion, redefinition and linkage, must be just as brief as I can make them. It will probably be necessary to make unsupported statements, and to raise problems rather than to try to answer them. Of the unsupported statements, please know that I have considered their backgrounds as scrupulously as I am able; and of the problems, that I want to 'answer' or at least to consider them as fully as possible in the course of time.

### *Beauty*

It is my belief that such houses as these approximate, or at times by chance achieve, an extraordinary 'beauty.' In part because this is ordinarily neglected or even misrepresented in favor of their shortcomings as shelters; and in part because their esthetic success seems to me even more important than their functional failure; and finally out of the uncontrollable effort to be faithful to my personal predilections, I have neglected function in favor of esthetics. I will try after a little to rectify this (not by denial); but at present, a few more remarks on the 'beauty' itself, and on the moral problems involved in evaluating it.



The houses are built in the 'stinginess,' carelessness, and traditions of an unpersonal agency; they are of the order of 'company' houses. They are furnished, decorated and used in the starved needs, traditions and naiveties of profoundly simple individuals. Thus there are conveyed here two kinds of classicism, essentially different yet related and beautifully euphonious. These classicisms are created of economic need, of local availability, and of local-primitive tradition: and in their purity they are the exclusive property and privilege of the people at the bottom of that world. To those who own and create it this 'beauty' is, however, irrelevant and undiscernible. It is best discernible to those who by economic advantages of training have only a shameful and thief's right to it: and it might be said that they have any 'rights' whatever only in proportion as they recognize the ugliness and disgrace implicit in their privilege of perception. The usual solution, non-perception, or apologetic perception, or contempt for those who perceive and value it, seems to me at least unwise. In fact it seems to me necessary to insist that the beauty of a house, inextricably shaped as it is in an economic and human abomination, is at least as important a part of the fact as the abomination itself: but that one is qualified to insist on this only in proportion as one faces the brunt of his own 'sin' in so doing and the brunt of the meanings, against human beings, of the abomination itself.

But consider this merely as a question raised: for I am in pain and uncertainty as to the answers, and can write no more of it here. \*

Another question comes up, of course: are things 'beautiful' which are not intended as such, but which are created in convergences of chance, need, innocence or ignorance, and for entirely irrelevant purposes? I can only answer flatly here: first, that intended beauty is far more a matter of chance and need than the power of intention, and that 'chance' beauty of 'irrelevances' is deeply formed by instincts and needs popularly held to be the property of 'art' alone: second, that matters of

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\* The 'sin,' in my present opinion, is in feeling in the least apologetic for perceiving the beauty of the houses.

'chance' and 'nonintention' can be and are 'beautiful' and are a whole universe to themselves. Or: the Beethoven piano concerto #4 *IS* importantly, among other things, a 'blind' work of 'nature,' of the world and of the human race; and the partition wall of the Gudgers' front bedroom *IS* importantly, among other things, a great tragic poem.

### *Relations and averages*

Briefly again, I want to relate these houses to 'the tenant average' (or averages), so far as I know it, and to other relevant southern houses.

By location or setting in the land, the Gudgers' house is far false to the average: the land is much too uneven, the house is too remote, the cultivated land of one farm is closely walled in by thick woods. By all this appearance it better suggests a frontier house in 1800 in newly cleared country, or a 'mountaineer's' home, than a tenant's.

The Woods' and Ricketts' setting is better. A lonely two miles of low hill road, among a dozen used and three or four abandoned houses, it meets very well one important 'average': that of the inhabitants of the little back roads in the rarely traveled, deeply populated and huge country which lies between the inconceivably narrow horizons of the highways. Yet I must emphatically mention that by still another and perhaps more common 'average,' tenants live in nearly flat and much less timbered country, enough houses in sight of one another to give a sense of a world: so that there is, in a two-mile horizon, or the fledging of a lonely road, the 'feeling' of seeing a large yet little part of an enormously populated yet as enormously attenuated one-trade and monotone city: i.e. a city of nine million, stretched thin against a cottonfield which in turn is drawn over earth three hundred miles one way and sixteen hundred the other.

Again, in certain respects of outward frame and appearance, none of these houses meets an average.

The 'averages' might briefly be described thus: