

Dear Mother

A war mother's monologue of love and remembrance*

**Based on the letters of the Brown family of Massillon, Ohio*

By Sandra Perlman

Character

Lena Brown...mother of Charles Vernon, her only son who has joined the United States Marine's to fight in World War I. Lena is the mother of four in Massillon, Ohio, a working steel town.

Time

1918 and beyond

Place

Massillon, Ohio, United States of America**

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Playwrights note: Sandra Perlman has been granted permission to quote from the actual Brown family letters in the collection of the Massillon, Museum.

AT RISE:

Lena Brown, is the MOTHER of Charles Vernon Brown, her only son who has joined the United States Marines to fight in World War I. Lena is the mother of four in Massillon, Ohio, a working steel town.

MOTHER

There's going to be a party here tonight. You see our son Vernon's joined the Marines. He's off to camp at midnight and then across to France to fight the Huns. That's him dancing over there with Grace Hering. Dad and I think he's sweet on her, but you won't hear me say a word. There's Ethel, our oldest, serving cookies. She's twenty-five and wants to teach art. The young girl next to her with the bow in her hair, well that's our middle girl daughter Dorothy, but we've always called her Dofe. Our youngest is Helen, she's the one eating all the cookies. She's almost sixteen so I guess we'll have to stop calling her our baby soon enough. Dad and I call our son Vernon to keep from mixing him up with Dad, who's always been Charles, Senior. The girls and his friends like to call him Chas, and that's fine with us. There's Dad now bringing in the punch, but don't expect to find a drop of liquor in it. Oh, I almost forgot to introduce myself. My name is Lena Brown and I must admit I'm not used to giving such a big party. Our social life usually revolves around the Wesley Methodist Church. But tonight is special. You see that boy walking back and forth in the corner looking at his watch? That's Vernon's best friend Chester Potts - Chet to his friends. He was the one who got Vernon all fired up to join the Marines, though Vernon did oversleep the morning they were going to sign up. Ended up having to take the streetcar all the way up to Cleveland by himself. Helen says if his train wasn't leaving at midnight, he'd probably oversleep again.

(Sound of a clock chiming))

Oh, so soon. Well, it's time for them to go. We'll be looking for your letters, son and no, I promise I won't worry. I know everything will be just fine till you come home again.

April 21, 1918.

Dear Vernon, we're happy to hear you're finally settled into a place that's so comfortable. Grace stopped by the other day to show us the post cards you sent her too. She's such a nice girl and I know she liked hearing from you so soon. Dofe's gone off to Brady Lake for her summer studies at the college. They're up and out by seven in the morning. They have all their music and lessons done by noon and then they're free to swim and picnic. You have such a good voice son, maybe when you come home you could think about becoming a music teacher too!

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MOTHER (cont'd)

May 15

A squad leader already! We're so proud of you son. With Ethel working and Dofe away at school, our Helen has taken a great interest in your soldiering. And weren't you excited to get to hear the Secretary of the Navy himself. Surely they'll give you one pass before you leave. You just can't go overseas without seeing our new electric lights! Yes, we did understand about the money for the souvenirs, and no, the telegram didn't scare us, but these days, no one is ever quite so pleased to that doorbell ring. You must be getting so tired waiting and never knowing exactly when you'll go. Your father and I know you'd come home if you could.

June 18

There were eight children baptized week in church last week. What a sight and what a sound! I wonder if you're already on your way? Sometimes I think we'll never catch up with your letters. The flag looks quite wonderful in the window. And Dad and I wear our service pins wherever we go. P.S. Dad says to tell you we didn't know anything about the government giving us any life insurance on you and we don't want any of it either!

July 11

By this time you know what a trip across the ocean means which is more than I imagine we will ever know. We waited all week hoping to get some word that you had crossed safely. Then the card and the letter you wrote both came on the same day. Mrs. Breckel received word from Charlie. They were fourteen days going over and every soldier got seasick. At least that's what Mrs. Breckel said. What do you say? We finally received your company picture yesterday which is very good. The girls picked you out right away. We all think they were a mighty fine looking bunch. I suppose you being among them makes them look so good to me.

July 18

We see by the papers that the big drive started already. I guess things will be getting even tougher now. Don't forget to write unless you think they'll black it all out. Each time I think of you son, which are many, I breathe a short prayer that God will keep you from evil and harm. I suppose by now you're talking like a regular Frenchmen. Ethel says if you want to write something in French she'll be glad to try to translate it. And Vernon, if you are in the trenches or have been, I surely ought to be able to stand knowing it. I would rather know it from you than from others. P.S. I am enclosing a dollar in this letter for some sweets. Tell me if you have gotten all those other dollars I've sent before.

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MOTHER (cont'd)

August 5

The American boys are surely fighting hard. Cousin Norman Long has been called up and Leon Carey hopes to leave with the next bunch from here. That makes 126 boys shipped out of Massillon just this month. Dofe's goes back tomorrow to have her tonsils taken out again. She dreads the operation, but it must be done now since the Doctor's to be shipped out the first of September. Lt. Murray Spidle has been missing in action since July 25th. It was his twenty-first birthday.

August 17

Just a few lines to tell you what a nice day we had at Turkey Foot Lake Sunday. Johnson's took us up in their new little driving machine and we brought dinner and supper with us both. It was pretty warm, but there was a nice breeze blowing off the water. With all the war work, Dad's been on the job pretty steady lately, so we're very happy for days like this. I know you would have liked it, too. Oh, Mrs. Jones came by with little Henry. She thought you looked very handsome in your pictures but so much older than when you left home.

August 29

The temperature registered 107 on Tuesday and today it's 95 in the kitchen, but this evening we're having showers for which we are all so very grateful. We heard all about that fire you had on your trip over from Chester's people. Seems he wrote a good bit about it to his family. Wouldn't you like to tell us something about your experiences, too?

September 3

There was lots of mail from France this week. Moses Feinberg wrote his mother he saw three submarines on his trip over. Helen wanted me to ask if you saw any submarines on your trip? I'm sorry to say that your wrist watch finally came back this week. It's never been farther than New York, but your father did fix it up and it seems to be running all right. I'll put it in your room. Little Henry Jones wanted to see your picture. He says you've been gone so long he'd forgotten what you looked like.

October 5

Our Helen's sixteenth birthday was yesterday so you see our baby is really growing up. Fred Heyman's been gassed. He'd been over the top thirteen times. They think they can still save his eyes, thank God. Mrs. Potts said she had a letter from Chet that said he'd seen you just before you went into the fight. Are you all right? Uncle Mortimer wrote they had such a hard trip through those French mountains they had to use horses to pull their trucks. He said the boys were so tired when they got to the end of their trip they just laid down in their wet clothes and slept in the road. The Massillon schools have been closed for the past two weeks on account of that Spanish flu and the City hospital's all filled up, too.

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MOTHER (cont'd)

Chester Archibald wrote his Mother that you and he were in the same battle and you were all right then. That was the first letter she'd gotten from Chester in eleven weeks. What do you suppose happens to your mail?

October 24

After a long and anxious wait, your letter arrived this morning telling of your being wounded. It was a shock, and then I began to be glad that it wasn't worse. I was so glad to see the words in your own writing and I only wish I could help take care of you son. It would be such a pleasure to me after all your hardships, but if what they say about the nurses over there is true, you are in good hands. Grace had just called to see if I was going to send you a Christmas box. She wanted to put a little package in for you. And then this letter came and Dofe called her right back. Sleep well son.

November 2nd

Dofe is making herself a blue silk dress for Christmas and Ethel's making new hats for the whole Brown family. Are you healed up yet? Edna Johnson has brought home a new baby. Uncle Mortimer wrote he had a bad cold and Aunt Emma's foot isn't well enough for her to come here for Thanksgiving. Why don't we hear from you, son? Sara Jones is expecting to go to France any day now and Pauline Harrison, too. Are the nurses there good to you? Ralph Bowers has been made a Sergeant. Have you heard from him yet? Why don't we hear from you? Everyone says peace is near. What do you think? Chester Archibald had a finger hit with shrapnel and John Evans was killed. Leda Albright got a letter from Chester Potts this week saying he'd come out of his second fight all right. We have our holiday house cleaning done now. It's been five weeks since I've had a letter.

November 11

The Armistice has finally come! News of the signing reached us early this morning. Whistles were blowing and bells ringing for more than an hour. By noon there was a big parade downtown and we'd never seen such big crowds of people. It's evening now and even from here you can still hear them celebrating. It's a wonderful sound, Vernon. At last, it's the sound of peace. Dad has missed you so much, son. Sometimes it seemed as if he would never get over your going away. But now peace has come, and he's looking forward to the time when you'll come home. He talks about you all the time. Little Henry Jones called to me the other day, "The war's over, Mrs. Brown," he says, "and now Vernon will be coming home." He is some sweet boy, all right, some sweet boy. Tell me, son, have you gotten all my letters. I've sent twenty seven - one every week since you've been gone and this is the 6th dollar I've put in, too.

(Doorbells rings.)

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MOTHER (cont'd)

There is a long pause and then
MOTHER opens an envelope)

November 16, 1918, Lena M. Brown, 1202 Duncan Street,
Massillon Ohio. Deeply Regret to inform you Message from
Abroad states Private Charles V. Brown died on October twenty-
fourth from wounds received in action. Particulars to follow.
Accept my heartfelt sympathy in your loss of one who nobly
gave his life in the service of his country. Charles G. Long,
Brigadier General.

There is the sound of a clock chiming.
LENA has grown older before our eyes.
She now stoops with the weight of time
passing.

Vernon's best friend Chester Potts came back alive, though
sometimes it seems he almost felt responsible for Vernon's
dying. He even named his son Chester Vernon Potts as a
tribute, but you can see the pain in his eyes whenever he
brings the boy to visit. It seems to happen to the ones left
behind. So much to ask for boys so young. The girls are going
on with school, and we're very proud, but all the electric
lights of the world could never brighten that dark spot
Vernon left behind. I fought to bring our boy home and
finally the telegram arrived. January 10, 1921, nine-thirty-
five p.m. the American Railway Express leaving New York on
train number ninety-five, Pennsylvania Railroad, Charles
should arrive destination, Massillon, Ohio ten am January 11,
1921" We had a fine service, the minister spoke and the choir
sang. On that cold winter morning we buried the casket in our
family plot, just a few miles from our home. And even though
they told us we could never be quite sure it was our boy in
that box, it just seemed like the right thing to do.

(Holding a small box)

A box of letters came marked, "Deceased, return to family",
pins, flags and even those bullets Vernon sent home. Our boy
fought that Great War thinking his going then would somehow
keep others from ever having to go again - but he died and
now there's already talk of a new war so far away from home.
Today it seems only a few of us can even remember those
months or the sound of our boy's voice coming in the front
door. (Pause) But now you've heard his letters -- and
perhaps, just for today, you'll remember him, too.

BLACKOUT