

Daisy Singer

A photographer.

I WAS SIX when the Crash came. Of classic, upper middle-class Jewish, you know, second-generation American. My father was sort of self-made.

He was something of a phony. He could always appear to be richer than he was. A lot of his friends were richer than he was, but he was the most flamboyant. He made what he had go a long way. Like he wasn't terribly intelligent, but he was fantastic at giving advice. People would come to him when they were contemplating suicide.

Headwaiters instantly knew he was someone to contend with. Like if he was on a transatlantic voyage, he would meet, at one time, Cardinal Spellman and, at another time, Al Capone. He was that kind of man.

We lived on Park Avenue before the Depression, like in eleven or fourteen rooms. One of those big apartments which are essentially very dreary. But they're what people hoped to achieve. After the Crash, we moved to Central Park West which wasn't such a terrible come-down. Except my grandparents moved in with us: keep up appearances and double in brass.

I remember vaguely family conferences, which took place behind closed doors. Like loans negotiated and things like that. The front would have to be maintained because I've learned that in business if people smell failure in you, you've had it.

I always had governesses. I had one I really loved when I was young, until I was seven. Then I had a succession of ones I loathed.

I remember going to the park with the one I really liked. There was a shanty town. Like a Hooverville. It was for me the palpable memory of the other side of the tracks. Ever since, when I encounter poverty, it is this memory . . . holding the hand of one's governess. For years, I felt exempt. I grew up feeling immune and exempt from circumstance. One of the things I suffered from was that I never felt adversity. I was confirmed in a sense of unreality. I never saw a real bread line. I saw it in the movies.

The outside world was so far from us, one didn't expect to encounter it. The doors were shut, as if there were some kind of contagion out there. I guess it was innocence, but I don't think of it as anything pretty as all: the less you experience, the better.

When my father was dying of cancer, he would hallucinate. Some of them were businessmen's hallucinations. He had an imaginary pocket with imaginary papers. He kept stashing them away. In a gesture that was familiar to him. Important papers. He always had a brief case or something and he had millions of papers. . . .

Robin Langston

He is a social worker by day, a jazz musician by night. He is forty-three years old. He lived in Hot Springs, Arkansas, until he was seventeen.

" . . . there are so many places that would have been worse. Suppose I had come up, say in Mississippi . . . ?"

I KNEW the Depression had really hit when the electric lights went out. My parents could no longer pay the \$1 electric bill. The kerosene lamps went up in the home. And in the business. My father had a restaurant. This did something to me, because it let me know that my father was not the greatest cat in the world. I always thought he was.

My father couldn't read or write. If an airplane wrote his name in the sky, he wouldn't be able to read it. But he had a thirst for knowledge. It was our task, my sister and I, to read to him. He was the type of cat who would keep the radio on all day, just to listen to the news.

I remember that kerosene lamp, because for Christmas, '30, around in there, I got a little book that pictured Lindbergh's flight. My mother was telling me how great Lindbergh was. She told me I would fly a plane like that. But she didn't tell me about my chances of flying. That was the point, you see. 'Cause they were trying to shield me.

My mother was a teacher. She never did teach, because my father never did want her to work. He was the person to wear the pants in the family. He wanted to be the strong one. I was exposed to a lot of books: Pushkin, Frederick Douglass, Raymond Moley, *Time Magazine*. No Booker T. Washington. He was anathema in my home.

My father taught us how to adjust to situations. We were fortunate compared to others. We always had food. Very little money, but there was so much spiritual guidance. I don't mean this Billy Graham type. I mean this thing that develops in a family where you anticipate the other's needs. I can kiss my father and not feel ashamed that I kissed a man. This is the type of thing we had going.

One time, my father and I tore a wall down to enlarge the business. I must have been around eight or nine. I could see blood coming from his hands, from using the crowbar, and I kissed his hand.

The restaurant was in the black community. But we made as much money off white people as we did off blacks. White people wanted to come in and get fried chicken. He had them fooled that there was something mystical about the batter he used. Another device he would use: they say that colored people like watermelon. Well, he raised the price of watermelon when white folks came in. All these survival techniques. . . .

I started washing dishes in the restaurant about five. My father didn't start me, I insisted. I'd get up on a Coca-Cola box to bend over the dish trough. My mother worked the cash register, and my sister was the waitress. It was a family type.

During the Depression, my father bought most things cash. The biggest thing we bought was a car and a refrigerator. I remember distinctly he paid on this in cash, because he didn't want to keep going back up to the store and taking this white man money and receipt book. My father did not like hat-in-hand situations.

My family always had a lot of white friends because there was always some food. A white friend would forget his supposedly superior attitude if there's food involved. They were going to get some of my father's mystical fried chicken.

There was a unique thing about this black community. It wasn't like Chicago. There were Caucasians in the community. The police chief lived right in the heart of it. I guess there must have been ten white families within fifty feet of us. I remember feeding snotty-nosed white kids. It was the Depression because no white and no blacks were working. The whites not working made it official. Father and Mother did that thing out of the goodness of their hearts.

I remember when times got so hard, this sheriff pawned a radio to my father for \$10. He had come to the black man to get \$10. He really needed the ten. He had some people out of town, he wanted to bring them there to eat some chicken. So he told my father he didn't have the money. Dad told him he had to have some collateral. So he brought the radio.

My father carried black people on the tab during the Depression. We had a basement in our home and people who would come there, down and out, my father let them live there as long as they would keep it up, work around the garden, keeping up the roses and things. This is how I learned to gamble and shoot dice, from these guys. We got in a couple of boxers there. One of them became a champ.

The schools were segregated. I doubt if we had one teacher who had a bachelor's degree. These were tremendous people, black people. One lady's been teaching there over fifty years. I doubt if she's finished tenth grade. You'd go to a sandbox, she'd show you how to make a pond in the sandbox by taking a mirror, putting it in the sand and letting the mirror shine through.

It might have been in eighth or ninth grade. It was in one of the English classes. We didn't have a library in the black school. We depended on what people who came in would give us. We were reading *Time Magazine*. There was an article on Raymond Moley on economics. We were supposed to get this article and make a report on it. I had to go to the white high school.

A frowsy Caucasian woman opened a crack in the door and threw the

book on the floor. I tried to determine what's more important: this affront or getting Raymond Moley? My immediate thing was to get Raymond Moley. But my father always told me never to stoop. So I left the book on the floor. It hurt. I cried because I wanted the article so bad.

Hot Springs was a unique place. It was a health resort. It depended on rich people coming in. They came to the race track with their women. There was a sort of sophistication. A sort of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* attitude. It was cosmopolitan and yet semi-rural. A rurban area.

They had one mayor. It seemed like he stayed in office a million years. He would ride around in his carriage with two black ponies. He lived in the black ghetto. Only he was on top of the hill. He would visit all the gambling places in the community. White people came down and shot dice. They'd come down looking for women, too. The red-light district was always in the black area. The only white prostitutes you would find would be in the hotels. They would be the high-priced ones. They would go with the Negro bellhop. Say, if the bellhop caught a politician, maybe she made a couple of hundred bucks. She'd give him some money, plus she'd go to bed with him.

The church I knew was controlled by City Hall: "Every Christmas we'll get these niggers some turkeys. We'll send somebody from the white school board to talk to them. We might let one of you come to our church, sing." To keep us quiet like that. It was easy to control the black community in Hot Springs, because everything was geared toward money. "O.K., you don't give us any problems, we'll let your gambling houses stay. We'll let you play policy. We'll let the black racketeer who's in charge of everything, we'll let him get the nigger out of jail on Saturday night. You can fight and whip your woman on Saturday night, just don't bother us over here. We'll give you a break, a suspended thirty-day sentence. We'll let you go home and be a good boy."

We'd get the Chicago *Defender*. They had one edition for the North and another for the South. That's how we heard about the Scottsboro case. One of the people defending the boys came and spoke at the black church there. Oh yes, we knew about this case and this white woman, Ruby Something—

Ruby Bates.

This was during the time when a lot of young people wanted to get a job and venture out and go places, and they were afraid to hobo because they didn't want to get caught up in a Scottsboro case.

The *Defender* was read openly. It was brought down on a white railroad and thrown off a white boxcar. It was sold in the black community on the newsstands.

During the Depression, they had a transient bureau in my home town. Poor whites and poor blacks. This bureau would have them do work in the

mountain area, say, cutting vines or shrubbery. This was in Roosevelt's time. They would go down and show people how to farm this no-good land. They would also give them a dole. I would see a line waiting to get beans. Boll weevils in them. It's almost an impossibility that some people lived through. Eating those beans and separating the bugs from the beans.

Roosevelt touched the temper of the black community. You did not look upon him as being white, black, blue or green. He was President Roosevelt. He had tremendous support through his wife. Yet the immediate image is "Great White Father."

The WPA and other projects introduced black people to handicrafts and trades. It gave Negroes a chance to have an office to work out of with a typewriter. It made us feel like there was something we could do in the scheme of things. I don't remember any serious black opposition to Roosevelt. When you see a blithe spirit, naturally you're attracted to it.

I think the powers-that-be missed the boat, during the Depression. There was a kind of integration of poverty. But even though everybody was poor, we still had this stiff-collar, white-shirted Puritanical Wilson thing going. So even though we were all in the same boat, I'm still white and you're still black, and so we don't need to get together. Things are going to get better for the white folks, and you black folks will have to . . .

Do you think a Depression of that depth could come again?

I think it could. But it would behoove the Federal Government not to let it come. Because you're dealing with a different breed of cat now. If they really want anarchy, let a Depression come now. My sixteen-year-old son is not the person I was when I was sixteen. He has manly responsibilities. And he doesn't want any shit. When I was sixteen, I wasn't afraid to die. But the kid, sixteen now, is not afraid to kill.

Dynamite Garland

In the old hotel, once elegant, where she is the most popular guest, from whom elderly widows and male pensioners ask advice and solace, her apartment flows over with paperbacks, art work, her own and others', oddments, indicative of varied and passing interests. . . .

She is an attractive forty-five-year-old waitress at an Italian-style restaurant in Chicago's Loop.

She comes from Cleveland, "a working-class family." Her father, before

the Depression, had been a railroad man. "He's now seventy-eight and one of the roller skating experts in the country. He and my mother used to dunce in marathons."

I REMEMBER all of a sudden we had to move. My father lost his job and we moved into a double-garage. The landlord didn't charge us rent for seven years. We had a coal stove, and we had to each take turns, the three of us kids, to warm our legs. It was awfully cold when you opened those garage doors. We would sleep with rugs and blankets over the top of us. Dress under the sheets.

In the morning, we'd get out and get some snow and put it on the stove and melt it and wash around our faces. Never the neck or anything. Put on our two pairs of socks on each hand and two pairs of socks on our feet, and long underwear and lace it up with Goodwill shoes. Off we'd walk, three, four miles to school.

My father had owned three or four homes. His father left them to him. He lost these one by one. One family couldn't pay the rent. They owned a bakery shop. They used to pay him off half in money, half in cookies. We lived on cracked cookies and those little bread things. So my father was pretty sharp in a way.

He always could get something to feed us kids. We lived about three months on candy cods, they're little chocolate square things. We had these melted in milk. And he had a part-time job in a Chinese restaurant. We lived on those fried noodles. I can't stand 'em today. He went to delivering Corn Flake samples. We lived on Corn Flake balls, Rice Krispies, they used to come out of our ears. Can't eat 'em today either. Can't stand 'em. My mother used to make the bread, put it under a blanket to raise. Oh, that was tasty. I never tasted such good bread since.

Every Sunday we used to go house hunting. That was a recreation during the Depression. You'd get in the Model A with the family and go look at the houses. They were all for sale or rent. You'd go look and see where you could put this and where you could put that, and this is gonna be my room. I knew where I was gonna have my horse in the barn. My mother'd go down in the basement, saying, "Oh, this is well constructed. This is where we're gonna put the potato bin, this is where we're gonna put the onions." We knew just where everyone was gonna be. (Laughs.)

My mother was raised in a lace curtain Irish family and went to a finishing school. We had our napkin rings even during the Depression. My mother'd set up everything just so and so. I used to go to my girl friend's to eat. They used to have a pile of Italian food on the table. She'd come over to my place to eat, because she liked the way everything was set up.

Some of the kids seemed a little better off at the Catholic school. I used to spend most of my time under the desk, lookin' at the nun's black-top