

God Bless' the Child

Them that's got shall get
 Them that's not shall lose
 So the Bible says,
 And it still is news.
 Mama may have, Papa may have,
 But God bless' the child that's got his own. . . .

Yes, the strong gets more, while the weak ones fade
 Empty pockets don't ever make the grade.
 Mama may have, Papa may have,
 But God bless' the child that's got his own. . . .

—Arthur Herzog, Jr. and Billie Holiday*

Jane Yoder

A house in Evanston. The green grass grows all around. "We're middle middle class. Not upper and not lower, either." Her husband is a junior executive in a large corporation. They have two sons: the elder, a lieutenant in the air force; the other, soon to be married, a graduate of Notre Dame.

"I love the trees. This house represents his struggle and mine. We bought this house on a shoestring. I'm terribly afraid of debt. If I have one fear, it's the rich get richer when you buy on time. All these things that are

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hidden costs—like with this house, we had to buy it up quickly, through a friend of my husband's father. So it was bought without the real estate commission.

"We've always paid our bills along the way. I have a real fear of being trapped into more than I need. I just turn away from it. Security to me is not what we have, but what we can do without. I don't want anything so badly that I can't wait for it. I think a second television set in our bedroom might be kind of nice. But I can dismiss it. We have one. How many can you watch?"

"We got married in July of 1940. This cocktail table is an early decision in those days. And that end table. So my brothers come in, and they say, 'It's amazing. Same stuff is here, and you've added to it. By God, how did you do it?'"

Her father was a blacksmith in a small central Illinois mining town. There were seven children. The mines closed "early, about '28 or '30." The men, among them her father, went to other towns, seeking jobs.

DURING THE DEPRESSION, my father took a great deal of psychological abuse. Oh, tremendous. This brother-in-law that was superintendent of the mine . . . I look at these two men. . . . I really think my father had a marvelous mind. I wonder what he had the potential to become. . . .

He's like something out of Dostoevsky. My father was, I think, terribly intelligent. He learned to speak English, a couple of languages, and prided himself on not being like the rest in our neighborhood. He was constantly giving us things from either the paper or some fiction and being dramatic about it . . . "down with these people that didn't want to think." Just as proud of his kids . . . but he was schizophrenic. He could look at himself a little bit, and then just run like hell. Because what he saw was painful.

We were struggling, just desperate to be warm. No blankets, no coats. At this time I was in fourth grade. Katie* went to Chicago and bought an Indian blanket coat. I remember this incident of that Indian blanket coat. (Gasps.) Oh, because Katie came home with it and had it in her clothes closet for quite a while. And I didn't have a coat. I can remember putting on that coat in Sue Pond's house. I thought, oh, this is marvelous, gee. I took that coat home, and I waited till Sunday and wore it to church. And then everybody laughed. I looked horrid. Here was this black-haired kid, with a tendency to be overweight. My God, when I think of that. . . . But I wore that coat, laugh or not. And I can remember thinking: the hell with it. I don't care what . . . it doesn't mean a thing. Laugh hard, you'll get it out of your system. I was warm.

Before that I had one coat. It must have been a terrible lightweight coat

* Her older sister.

or what, but I can remember being cold, just shivering. And came home, and nothing to do but go to bed, because if you went to bed, then you put the coat on the bed and you got warm.

The cold that I've known. I never had boots. I think when I got married, I had my first set of boots. In rainy weather, you just ran for it, you ran between the raindrops or whatever. This was luxuriating to have boots. You simply wore your old shoes if it was raining. Save the others. You always polished them and put shoe trees in them. You didn't have unlimited shoe trees, either. When the shoes are worn out, they're used around the house. And of the high heels, you cut the heels down and they're more comfortable.

We tell our boys: you have a black sweater, a white sweater, and a blue sweater. You can't wear ten sweaters at once, you can only wear one. What is this thing? . . . some of the people that I know have thirty blouses. Oh, my God, I have no desire to think where I'd hang them. For what? I can't even grasp it.

If we had a cold or we threw up, nobody ever took your temperature. We had no thermometer. But if you threw up and you were hot, my mother felt your head. She somehow felt that by bringing you oranges and bananas and these things you never had—there's nothing wrong with you, this is what she'd always say in Croatian; you'll be all right. Then she gave you all these good things. Oh, gee, you almost looked forward to the day you could throw up. I could remember dreaming about oranges and bananas, dreaming about them.

My oldest brother, terribly bright, wanted to go on to school to help pay those grocery bills that were back there. But my youngest brother, Frankie, didn't know. Oh, it just overwhelms me sometimes when I think of those two younger brothers, who would want to get some food and maybe go to the store. But they would see this \$900 grocery bill, and they just couldn't do it.

We all laugh now, because Frankie is now down in New Mexico, and superintendent of two mines. And we all say, "Remember, Frankie?" Frankie's "*To košta puno?*" That's "Did it cost a lot?" Everything that came into the house, he'd say, "*To košta puno?*"

Did it cost much? No matter what you brought in: bread and eggs and Karo syrup. Oh, Karo syrup was such a treat. I don't remember so much *my* going to the store and buying food. I must have been terribly proud and felt: I can't do it. How early we all stayed away from going to the store, because we sensed my father didn't have the money. So we stayed hungry. And we talked about it.

I can think of the WPA . . . my father immediately got employed in this WPA. This was a godsend. This was the greatest thing. It meant food, you know. Survival, just survival.

How stark it was for me to come into nurses' training and have the

girls—one of them, Susan Stewart, lived across the hall from me, her father was a doctor—their impressions of the WPA. How it struck me. Before I could ever say that my father was employed in the WPA, discussions in the bull sessions in our rooms immediately was: these lazy people, the shovel leaners. I'd just sit there and listen to them. I'd look around and realize: sure, Susan Stewart was talking this way, but her father was a doctor, and her mother was a nurse. Well, how nice. They had respectable employment. In my family, there was no respectable employment. I thought, you don't know what it's like.

How can I defend him? I was never a person who could control this. It just had to come out or I think I'd just blow up. So I would say, "I wonder how much we know until we go through it. Just like the patients we take care of. None of them are in that hospital by choice." I would relate it in abstractions. I think it saved me from just blowing up.

I would come back after that and I'd just say: Gee, these are just two separate, separate worlds.

Tom Yoder, Jane's Son

He had entered the room during my conversation with his mother. His fiancée accompanied him.

IT SEEMS just absolutely—it's almost in a black humorous sense—funny to me. To realize that a hundred miles from Chicago, about forty years ago, my mother's brothers, whom I know well now, were out with little rifles, hunting for food to live on. And if they didn't find it, there were truly some empty stomachs. I mean, this is just too much. I don't think my generation can really comprehend what all this means. I've never gone to bed hungry—I wish I had. I haven't, and I probably never will.

Whenever I've griped about my home life, Mother's always said, "I hope you always have it so good." And I'm the kind of person that will say, "Look, what do you mean you hope I always have it so good? I intend when I'm forty to be making \$25,000." But I understand what she means. I am grateful for what I have. But it's only human nature that we all want to go on and find something better.