

Rubbish

THE NINETEEN TWENTIES

*During which yachtsman C. S. Vanderbilt
invents contract bridge while on a Caribbean cruise*

Turning left on Forest Street and leaving behind the Boston & Albany railroad tracks, one soon comes to Seaver Street, a melancholy Wellesley neighborhood. Its houses, built on high foundations, are both too close together and too far apart, and the small stream running nearby, through the Boston Metropolitan Water Commission right-of-way, is too far below to be heard. A hill on the south side shades the street, and an occasional hydrangea with pendulous, yellowing blossoms does not lessen the gloom.

Here I came at the age of less than two, and in this landscape all the unlikely events of my early childhood took place. These have little to do with the year—1923, the year of *Who's Sorry Now* and *Yes, We Have No Bananas*—or with the everyday life of our family. Instead they are set in 19th-century Europe's Romantic Age and are dominated by the immense figure of Puss-in-Boots. He stands on his hind paws, has a plumed hat, a wide belt, and a necklace of mice. Prostrate on the ground, with their scythes laid down, are the Seaver Street peasants who must declare that the vast properties which lie about belong to his false master, the Marquis of Carabas. Crouched quite naked in the Boston Metropolitan Water Commission stream is his true master, the miller's son.

Some way down the street, in a mouldering ruin, Beauty searches for the Beast, judging him not for his look, but for "his heart alone."

*"But, where is my poor beast? I want him and nobody else!"
"I am he," replies the Prince.*

And in a palace which, like all Seaver Street dwellings, is both too near and too far, a queen with raven locks sits before her looking glass ever asking,

The Nineteen Twenties

*Mirror, mirror on the wall,
Who is the fairest of them all?*

The answer probably is, “*You are she*”.

Seaver Street’s most imposing real building is the Kingsbury Primary School, it too set on a high concrete foundation, and here at a later time I sought to enter kindergarten. This was not an easy matter, as to enter one had to know one’s name (that is, to enter at four; at five the school had to take you even though you didn’t know your name), and on the path through the woods to the school the name could quite easily slip away. One had also to know one’s right from one’s left, a problem so abstract that I was saved only by the fifty-percent chance I had of getting it right.

I did enter kindergarten in 1925—year of the *Desert Song* (“One alone, to call my own”)—and it does not surprise me now that my first concern was fashion. At that time girls wore dreadful, clinical garments called “waists,” which buttoned up the front with rubber buttons and had garters to hold up long stockings. In early spring most children were allowed to take these off, but not I. When May came I was still wearing long stockings. So I hit on a solution which I could just as well have thought of in April—on the way to school I climbed into a high tree, took off my stockings and put on pretty, pale, pastel-colored socks instead. My mother’s friend, Gwennie Drew, whose tree it was, said she sympathized with the change but wondered why I climbed into such a high tree to make it.

Perhaps because of my embarrassing stockings (children who discover that another child is suffering always try to make him suffer more), I was regularly, on the path through the woods, tied to a tree by some boys from first grade.

My second fashion trouble can readily be discerned in photographs from the period. Each spring and fall a dressmaker named Jackie came to our house to make our clothes on a treadle sewing machine. She had red hair, a mouthful of pins, and a kind nature, but for each dress of mine she always made matching

bloomers. These gave me a detestable, homemade look, one of purely specious Boston innocence, which everyone noticed. My own mother at that time wore silk knickers, flapper skirts, celluloid bracelets, and Houbigant perfume. She also used a cigarette holder and kept her cigarettes in a slim, compartmented, sandalwood box.

I always thought my mother very beautiful and modern, and we had an English nursemaid who, while perhaps not modern, was also beautiful. Her name was Edith, and she had black hair and rosy cheeks. Soon after coming to us, she embarked on a reward system for Ted and me in which at the end of the day we would get a gold star if we had been good. My goodness was unsurpassed—it shone above me like a halo—but Ted was never good. Yet he always got a gold star. He got two gold stars on the day he fell over the sandbox and broke his leg.

Otherwise kindergarten went quite smoothly with much beating of cymbals and quarreling over dolls' tea sets. It was in first grade that the social and cultural reckoning came. In the social strata Bill Traver and Marshall Perrin were top-dog because each had a large Parker fountain pen which he wore clipped to the neck of his sweater so that it would hang outside. Then came the criminal element, who were so often sent down to kindergarten to stand in disgrace in the corner that they were rarely with us. Beneath them were the pale and characterless masses who could be heard pledging allegiance. Few of these, in the reading groups of Bluebirds, Robins and Sparrows, rose to be Bluebirds. I remained a Sparrow and was always grateful to see the word SQUIRREL because I could recognize it. At the bottom were the recent immigrant Italian children. Their clothes were never properly put on, and their sense of bewilderment was very great. Their community, just next to the school, must have been the only sunny place on Seaver Street, because they grew grapes on arbors over their entryways.

I have forgotten to say that Edith knew a lot about vampires, undead beings who can only be destroyed by a stake through the heart. Count Dracula was noted for his pallor and pointed ears, but he was, for all that, a modern vampire with more razzle-dazzle than

The Nineteen Twenties

his Transylvanian predecessor. He wore evening dress, looked like John Gilbert, and came through the window, probably singing *Bye, Bye Blues*. If he sucked one's blood one immediately became a vampire, and I sincerely hoped that he would come through my window.

In my memory the year is now 1927, and Charles Lindbergh has made his solo flight across the Atlantic, navigating by dead reckoning and so heavily laden with 451 gallons of gas that he barely clears the telephone wires on take-off. I am asked by another child how many songs I know about Lindbergh and am chagrined to realize that I know only one:

*Lucky Lindy, up in the sky,
Farewell, Lindy, you're flying high.*

I do know *All Alone By the Telephone* and *I Found a Million Dollar Baby at the Five-and-Ten-Cents Store* but realize these will cut no ice.

We are now living on Forest Street, a cheerful neighborhood when compared with Seaver's—almost too cheerful, with my parent's frequent revels at the Maugus Club, trips to Bermuda and "Side-Cars" made with bootleg alcohol—but it is immensely enjoyable. My time is chiefly spent in the maids' room on the third floor. The room faces west, and the evening light streams in on their pretty Irish faces. With the light, steady and soft, come the strains of *Ramona* and *Ain't She Sweet*. The 1920's are remembered by me for the beauty and nostalgia of their evening light. At this time of day you can,

*Smile, though your heart is aching,
Smile, even though it's breaking.
When there are clouds in the sky, you'll get by
If you smile through your fear and sorrow.
Smile and maybe tomorrow*

Theme song from *Modern Times*
(sung softly and with modulation)

The Nineteen Twenties

I know now that in the years 1926 and 1927 the Austrian physicist, Erwin Schrödinger, described a wave model of the atom; the Englishman, Paul Dirac, published, as his doctoral thesis, the first quantum mechanic equations, leading later to the prediction of negative matter; and the German, Werner Heisenberg, proposed the Uncertainty Principle (nothing can be known exactly). I did not then know that I was destined nearly to understand these theories and to hear in them the voice of God, for at the time we were still singing *Baby Face*.

The Depression is coming, but not quite yet. Pretty Boy Floyd robs thirty mid-western banks; Al Capone has an income of \$105 million from bootleg liquor; the Boston Ritz is opened; Louis Gardiner calls Ted "Wastebasket Willie" because he rummages not only in our wastebaskets but also in the Gardiners' (one could say that he is today a gifted rummager); Red is born, a beautiful child with an air of innocence, the deceptiveness of which is not yet known; and we move to 44 Elm Street. Ted and I sing *Bye, Bye Blackbird* for the Bridge Club; his voice is true, mine only deeply felt.

When we move I know that I will not miss the Forest Street neighborhood children who are haughty, pampered, rowdy, and cross-eyed. I will miss only the sidewalk, often covered with small, hard, blue-black, deadly-poison berries. It leads to two, tall decorative stone pillars which stand on either side of Miss Hewins' driveway. At the top these have spaces into which I can crawl and sit like an eagle or large crow. Below I see cows in a field and the links of the Wellesley Country Club—formerly a Poor House—across which stride the golf set, whose names are Jess, Roz, Doc, Gwennie, Wanda and Dottie Bun. Behind them come their caddies, who generally look like Mickey Rooney. In the evening the cows lie down, and the searchlight from Babson Park Airfield sends a tremendous, pulsing beam which lights me in my rooks' nest.

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