

THE DEPRESSION

In 1929 Jerry is born, a large, beautiful baby who looks about him discerningly. At the same time, with signs of drought in the West and to the strains of *Pagan Love Song*, the Great Depression begins. We have moved to a large brown-shingled house, 44 Elm Street, and are once again above the Boston Water Commission right-of-way, but in this more spacious neighborhood it is a covered aqueduct—a long, raised, grassy avenue leading to the Wellesley Hills town dump. Along it are neo-classic stone temples which hold the pumping machinery. While not rivalling those in New York's Central Park, they have a certain mystery. Above the aqueduct are the henhouses, an important feature of 44 Elm. In the early days these have no hens, so there we produce plays, generally tragic. Children in the neighborhood are allowed to play supporting roles in which most often they die.

In fourth grade I fail the Rapid Promotion test. I don't know what Rapid Promotion is but think it has a good sound, a kind of airborne rapid transit through sixth grade. I am quite ashamed to fail, so come down with scarlet fever and have to be quarantined in a ward at Newton Hospital. I may not read, and the boredom is terrible, so great that I divert myself by ringing for the nurse and asking the time; then, after she goes, counting seconds to three minutes and calling again to ask if her watch agrees with my counting. Otherwise I am allowed to wrap up the ward toys in newspaper to give to other patients.

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My parents now talk about taking me out of the Selden L. Brown public school and sending me to Winsor, but it is after the stock market crash, and the Depression has begun. Bill has always wondered how it was that we continued to have cars and maids when we were so close to destitution, and I have

trouble understanding this myself. I think it may have been the perception that cars, maids, and family should all go under together. There were no other jobs, wages were cut from seven to six dollars a week, and who would buy a yellow Chrysler roadster, vestige of the twenties, that had one door taken off by the side of the garage, or a Ford that had gone through the fence behind the A&P? (We all liked the drama of the A&P fence. The sight of children playing on the opposite side of the fence caused Mother to forget how to stop the car. So she crashed through the fence and only just in time, with great heroism, remembered how to brake.)

Another question is why did we survive? And why were we not despondent? My mother told me that we might have to give our house to the bank, and my father each week had to go to the bank for another loan to meet his payroll. (This financial distress continued through 1945 when, after my father's heart attack, my cousin had the unenviable job of having to go to Maine, where my father was recovering, to ask him to put more of his own money into the business.) One answer is that my father scarcely did survive. In our monster house lived nine people: six of us, two maids, my uncle, and my grandmother. Not only we but all my father's pressmen and linotype operators depended on his efforts to keep the business intact at a time when no one bought or sold anything.

Uncle Keith, my mother's handsome brother, called by us "Uncle Dump" because he took the trash to the dump each week, had to give up his house in New Canaan and move his family to an unheated summer cottage in Lovell, Maine (home of Rudy Vallee). So he spent the week in our guestroom, made very good jokes, and washed his own socks. (No one else in our family ever washed anything himself. Laundry was thrown down the back stairs and done in an ancient Sears washer with hand-wringer by our cook, who also cleaned the downstairs, ironed, got three meals a day, and washed the dishes, for seven dollars a week. It is painful to write.)

My Grandfather Warren, who was a charming and successful man, died suddenly in 1928 of a circulatory problem, and my Grandmother then moved from the Hotel Vendome to a new house which she built at the end of our property. She lived there only a few years with a young housemaid named Easter, who wore daffodil-yellow uniforms.

Like all our family, Grandmother was supported by Warren Publications, a business which her husband had founded, so when the Depression came she had to sell her house and move to our third floor. She accepted her changed situation with composure and may possibly not have minded too much, as her greatest interest was politics, particularly Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. She approved of the establishment of unions and deficit financing and voted always—to my father's disgust—for Roosevelt. She had a cold bath every morning, and was fond of ridding herself of possessions. My mother said that when she died at age ninety-two in a Portland, Maine, hotel she had only a few photographs and her desk blotter left.

So we were not at all depressed but quite cheerful, even heedless, and the Bridge Club dinners were served with a new set of etched, blue, Fostoria glass. One could perhaps notice that the strains of *Yes, Sir, That's My Baby* were growing faint.

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My status at the Brown School is better than at Kingsbury because five of the boys in fourth grade live just in my neighborhood, and I go to school with strong support. I receive valentines, accept bribes for kisses, and win at marbles. In fifth grade all this changes because the sex queens, Mary Weeks and Mary Ann Waite, step forward, and I'm left behind. With unaccustomed arrogance I tell Curtis Eastman that if he doesn't stop cutting his toenails with a penknife I won't dance with him at the next winter's dancing school, and he replies that he hadn't planned to dance with me anyway.

I am recklessly taken out of public school and sent to Winsor, which with my new lowered status I don't mind very much, but I am sorry later to learn that I have missed the most challenging event of sixth grade when the entire class at recess climbed into a tree and refused to come down. School until that time has been mostly devoted to *Weekly Reader* and to skills—Palmer Method, fractions and long division—and I like none of these. The only excitement comes when Miss Butterworth, our fifth-grade teacher, hits Barbara Briggs on the knuckles with a ruler, forgetting that her father is on the Board of Education.

Next door to us live Mollie and Charlie Jensen. Charlie always wears golf knickers and cleated golf shoes. Mollie is very beautiful and fond of my mother. She takes charge of our linen closet, persuading Mother to edge the shelves with ruffled lavender crepe paper and to furnish it with lavender towels. These are my brothers' everyday towels, and they become very thin and frayed but remain lavender, mocking the seriousness of the Depression.

My friend Beverly Pratt and I set up a doctor's office in a henhouse and send for free samples of Ipana, Nujol, Listerine, and Argerol, which come addressed to Dr. Peggy Ann Cross. I have a blue Elgin bicycle. (Bob says that he had a Pierce Arrow, on which in Iowa he rode miles out of town. When I asked him if there was much traffic, he said, "Just cattle trucks.") I ride especially to the Wellesley Hills Public Library where the librarians are so fierce that you have to be brave to take out books. Red is unlucky enough to have a Sears balloon-tire bike, and Jerry has no bike at all until finally one day Mother says that since he has waited so long she is going to see to it that he gets a good bicycle, a Raleigh. They will put dollars into a box regularly until there is enough. Well, there are emergencies, and the level of dollars seems sometimes to go down. So Jerry decides he'd better help out and have a lemonade stand on Croton Street. He figures he can get the lemons out of our refrigerator, so it won't cost much. He says that he set up the stand, but mostly there were truck drivers coming by who

shouted, "Hey kid, don't you have any beer?" So he went home and got my father's beer.

My brothers chiefly play baseball, make bombs, and read Big Little Books. I go to the dump and take bottles back to the store. When I first go to Winsor I'm invited to visit another girl who lives in a Palladian villa in Milton. We are supervised throughout the day by her governess. When she comes to visit me we take bottles back to the First National. (I don't know why I didn't take her to the dump.)

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And so the Depression went on. We were aware of the Dust Bowl (Bob says that dust storms regularly blew into Iowa) and the terrible suffering of people who lost their jobs, homes, and savings, but we thought things would get better, which they didn't. And the worse they became, the more of us went to private school. Why did these good schools take us raffish children? Largely, I think, because my mother persuaded them that despite appearances—failure to pass Rapid Promotion and be College Material—we might turn out all right. Why she believed this is another question. I remember my father helping me with arithmetic and saying sadly, "You would be so much better off if you kept your figures in columns."

I always thought that Jerry minded the Depression most, so called to ask. "Did I mind the Depression?" he said, "I don't remember anything since the Depression! My mind wasn't very agile then, and the Depression seemed like a box that I couldn't get out of. Once I was sick with a fever and had to stay in bed. We'd had a fire in the house, and painters were repairing the damage. I could smell the paint, and as they stayed on day after day I became more and more worried. Each day I thought, 'We'd better get those men out of the house.' Finally I went to Mother and said, 'Who's going to pay for this?!"'

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I would like to find a talisman for the Depression. It is not the lavender towels, Mae, the china-dog set, nor is it Penty, Tigger, or Chick. It is not the *Chicken Song*, Stewie Briggs' name written in the sidewalk concrete, nor the etched blue glass. It is, I think, Jerry's fifth birthday. He was asked to pass slices of his cake to Mother's friends. When he had, there was none left for him. About this he says, "It's one of life's lessons. You don't complain, but you write it down." He often calls to remind me that it was coconut cake, his favorite.

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