



**Uncle George and my mother Jeannette**

## CHAPTER 1

---

# THE DEPRESSION

In 1929, when the stock market crashed, my mother's family, the Perlman's, moved into our apartment with us. According to the conversation I overheard in the kitchen, (I was four years old and listened to everything) my father had invested my grandmother's money and the savings of my aunt and two uncles in the stock market and he had lost it all.

My mother, standing at the stove cooking my father's eggs, turned to face him.

"What did you say?"

"Well, you know, everyone said buying on margin was safe and we'd all make money. I thought it was a good investment."

My father, dressed for work in his tie and suit coat, stared miserably at my mother. He looked so sad I wanted to run over and hug him but my mother, hands on her hips, was getting ready to tell him a thing or two. She never yelled. She didn't have to yell. One look, that was all.

She turned back to the stove and emptied the eggs onto a plate that she placed in front of him, her expression severe. A frown wrinkled her forehead. Watching from the other side of the table

## A PICTUREBOOK ON THE WALL: MEMOIR

where I was eating my cereal, her expression frightened me and tears started falling into my breakfast. Nobody noticed.

“Well, in that case,” my mother said, “I guess they’ll have to live with us. You, at least have a good salary. (My father worked as a lawyer at City Hall downtown.) We’ll be all right. But my mother, it was all the money she had. And my brothers and sister, they’re just starting out.”

Before he could answer, she added, “That’s the only solution,” giving my father a look that made him bend over with guilt.

Kitchen sounds, including me sobbing into my cereal, echoed from the stove with its clanking and fearsome smell of gas whenever someone turned it on, to the kitchen sink, dripping and groaning when the tap was opened. In the nearby pantry the icebox sang its usual ka-chink, ka-chink. All familiar sounds but to me that morning they were scary.

After breakfast I took refuge in my favorite hiding place, behind the grand piano in the living room, where I kept my picture books. I thought about what I had just seen and heard, my mother angry, my father sad, markets crashing, had anyone been hurt? People moving in. That was the best part. I felt better thinking about the people moving in.

I loved it when everyone arrived – Uncle George with his violin, Uncle Sammy with his quiet smile under the thin moustache he sported, and beautiful Aunt Bernice, always kind and sweet to me. It was crowded in our two-bedroom, one bathroom apartment, but I didn’t care. There was so much going on that my parents, for the most part, forgot to check on what I was doing. My aunt and uncles would pat me on the head, pick me up to kiss me, and sometimes give me candy when my mother wasn’t looking.

“Elaine? Look what I brought you.” Aunt Bernice would slip me a small doll or a forbidden candy bar.

Dinnertime was noisy, everyone gathered around the dining room table, my mother and grandmother and aunt bringing in the

food, my grandmother, red in the face from exertion, talking all the while as she went back and forth, “Here, put the meat next to the potatoes, no, move the salad there,” and on and on. My mother complained, “I don’t know if I can eat this. My stomach hurts. Maybe I’ll make some eggs.”

My aunt carried in the platters silently. I could tell she was upset at having to help after working hard all day. Even more upset at having to move in with us and give up her apartment. “Because,” as she said, “I couldn’t afford to keep it on just my salary.”

Everyone talked a lot about the Depression, how friends were out of work, and families were helping each other all over Chicago, all over the country.

Uncle George gave violin lessons to make extra money but there were few people who could afford them. Mostly, he traveled around the country with his string quartet, giving concerts.

“Bookings are slow. People aren’t interested in music when they haven’t enough to eat.” His head was bent over his plate, forehead creased with worry. Uncle George was tall with brown hair and a quick smile. People thought he was handsome. I thought he was wonderful, tall and straight and elegant, and he made the most beautiful music with his violin.

Aunt Bernice chimed in. “So far my job is safe but who knows for how long?” She was the beauty of the family with blonde hair and big blue eyes.

My grandmother finally sat down. “Do you ever think about getting married? What about that boy you’ve been going with? You should think about it. A husband would support you.”

My grandmother was small with a gray bun of hair at the back of her head. She always wanted everyone to eat, especially me, and told them what she thought they should do. She talked constantly, a new undercurrent of sound in the apartment.

“Oh, Ma! It’s a bad time to do that. People can’t support themselves, much less someone else.” Aunt Bernice liked to keep to herself. She didn’t like anyone telling her what to do, especially

when she was tired and hungry and not liking the dinner any better than the rest of us.

I was sitting next to my mother who was cutting up the meat I had already decided not to eat. She picked up my fork, put a bite of meat and some potato on it, she knew I liked potatoes, and held it to my mouth.

“Elaine, don’t be stubborn. You have to eat something.”

I turned my head away. “I don’t like that. It’s hard to chew.” My mother started to insist, but my father broke in.

“Let her alone, hon. The meat is a little tough. She can eat vegetables and salad.”

My mother started to object and then she saw my other uncle, Sammy, nodding his head and grinning in agreement as he diligently chewed a mouthful. She put down the fork and frowned.

I was more interested in what everyone was saying than in the food, which was usually tough, flavorless and looked as bad as it tasted. My mother, claiming an ulcer, made sure that everything was overcooked and underseasoned, and then ate something else. She and my grandmother had a constant tug of war over the cooking.

By that time I could read a little. My mother bought books with large pictures and large printed words that she pointed to as she read so I was able to follow her finger and hear the sounds of the words.

Because my mother and grandmother were so busy with their ongoing argument about who was going to cook and who was going to clean up (“Ma! It’s my kitchen,” my mother wailed. “What! I should sit on my hands all day?” my grandmother shot back) I was left alone with things I would never have been allowed to go near, such as the books in my parents’ bookcase where I tried to figure out the words. I slipped into the living room, hiding behind the grand piano next to the bookcases, and sat on the floor, a book open in my lap, my finger moving over the page.

I couldn’t really tell what the books said but I knew the sounds and I liked the rhythm of the sentences as they flowed past my pointing finger. I spent every minute I could behind the piano.

ELAINE MARGOLIS

When I wasn't trying to decipher the books, I made up stories, playing with my paper dolls. I would transport the dolls to faraway places, places I had never seen, places in my imagination, peopled with wondrous beasts and fabulous beings, sometimes acting out stories my mother had read to me. But mostly making everything up.

Behind the piano, which occupied most of the living room, I lived an imaginary life, peopled with children my age, children who did not exist in my real life. At the age of four or five, it didn't seem to matter much. In the dim light coming from the windows on either side of a permanently unlit fireplace, the contents of the bookshelves under the windows offered a ready source of enchantment, even though I couldn't make out what they said, not yet. And my imaginary friends liked everything I liked and did everything I did. I was safe and happy behind the piano, secure in my imaginary world.

The sleeping arrangements in our apartment were tight. I was about five years old then, still in the crib in my parents' bedroom. My grandmother took the second bedroom with my Aunt Bernice.

My aunt worked as a secretary to a lawyer downtown. She was always coming home from work and exclaiming as she walked in the door, "I can't stand working for that man one more minute!" But she would always go back to work the next day as if nothing had happened. I thought this was very puzzling.

Aunt Bernice's blonde hair puffed about her face, her blue eyes sparkled, and she was slim and shapely. Everybody in the family admired her looks and sweet nature. She went out with different men and I heard my mother say she would get married soon and move out and then I could sleep in the room with my grandmother and get out of my crib. I didn't know whether I liked that or not.

Uncle George made the sleeping porch his bedroom. He liked the privacy at the back of the apartment, where he could practice his violin for hours. When he wasn't on tour with his string quartet, he practiced almost non-stop and sometimes he let me sit in the room and listen if I was very quiet. He made wonderful sounds with his violin; it made me think of the music the sentences made in my secret reading

place behind the piano. He called his music sonatas, concertos, names I liked but whose meanings I couldn't figure out.

Since the sleeping porch was surrounded on three sides by drafty windows it was cold in there in the winter with the door shut. When my mother found me (she could never find me behind the piano) she made me leave so I wouldn't catch cold. She burst in, interrupting Uncle George, who frowned and stopped playing.

"It's freezing in here, Elaine. Look, your nose is running. You have to come with me." My mother wiped my nose with the tissue she always carried and pulled me out the door.

"She's not bothering me, you know," Uncle George muttered. "She can stay, you know, with a sweater."

"No, No. She can do something else. Where it's warm." She closed the door firmly and said, "Elaine, you don't want to get sick, do you?"

I shook my head. I was so angry I couldn't say anything. She was always afraid I would get sick, mostly when I was having fun. I did get sick a lot, only because my immune system never had a chance to build up since I was rarely close to anyone who had any germs. Germs, my mother's nemesis. She interrupted my times with my uncles and aunt, shouted for me when I was hiding behind the piano, upset my imaginary life. Otherwise she didn't pay attention to me, except when she was reading to me.

She hurried off to answer the telephone. I stayed where I was, listening outside the door.

Chicago in winter was so cold the windows were covered with frost in beautiful patterns. I liked to trace them with my finger as I listened to my uncle play in the sleeping porch when my mother wasn't home. He asked me if I would like to learn the violin. I said I wanted to learn to play the piano in the living room the way Aunt Bernice did. She made the whole house rumble and thunder when she pounded the keys. Her favorite piece (and mine too) was Enesco's "Roumanian Rhapsody No. 2." I would love to make the kind of giant noise she made when she played the piano.

To my mind what my uncle played was music, what my aunt played was beautiful noise. There was always music playing some-

ELAINE MARGOLIS

where in the house, especially on Sundays when Uncle George had the symphony on. It would put me to sleep, soft and hypnotic. As I grew older it made me impatient. I wanted to hear songs from the Hit Parade and other popular tunes. My family turned up their collective noses at the thought.