



# Waiting for the Train

## Journal Entry 1

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# Chapter 1: New York City

There is a time in the course of every individual's life when they experience what may be called their darkest hour or time of utter despair. It may be occasioned by the loss of some beloved one, or some failure in business, or perhaps being forced to leave those dearest to them or the surroundings held sacred and necessary to their happiness and success in life. And so, like any other mortal, I had mine when that period of Depression had fully set in back in the year of 19--<sup>1</sup>.

Up and until that year, I had enjoyed to the fullest almost everything a working man could expect according to his salary and station in life: A car, good clothes, a good time when I cared to have it, and never [being] without money, shelter, or a meal.

I was always carefree, with no worries for the future. In fact, I can never remember when I really ever had cause to worry about having to give thought to any impending trouble ahead; in other words, I enjoyed to the fullest a sense of security to the effect that in my old age I would be independent and self-sufficient and not beholden to anyone.

If any of my friends even hinted at the possibility that at some time I would be classed among the needy or on the verge of hunger or without a roof over my head, forced to walk the streets looking for a few hours' work for a meal and the price of a night's lodging, I

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1 The author intentionally leaves the date blank here. Based on internal references, the journal probably starts in late 1933 or early 1934.

would have undoubtedly judged them as being somewhat light in the head or else losing control of their imaginations.

No one realizes until they go through the experience what havoc it causes to anyone's mental or moral equilibrium, or the change in their views or opinions towards their fellowman and things in general. Especially when things go topsy-turvy through no fault of your own.

That Depression was one of those depressions that hit everybody, so that made it still more difficult to get at least enough work to eke out a mere existence.

There was only one consolation in regards to the whole situation, and that was [that] you yourself were not the only one up against it. In my own case, I was perhaps not so bad off, for I had no immediate responsibilities like a great many had. But when you are hungry and without shelter, you feel these things personally and start to turn against the fates, and [against] those whom you feel could have found some way to avert such conditions.

Any sudden or drastic change is bound to have its reactions. For some, it was a tragedy and [they] thought suicide the only way out, while in the case of others, they clung on to life and worried it out, and trudged along in their suffering and mental anguish, sometimes to the point of insanity. For the latter class, those that clung on hoping and worrying, I have the greatest sympathy, for not even on the battlefields of France did I worry or go through so much mental anguish as I did in the early part of the upheaval caused by the Depression.

It was not until I took a little time off from thinking how bad things were, that I realized how foolish it was to worry and fret over

something no one seemed to have any control over. After summing up my own situation as compared to others, I began to think in a more hopeful train of thought, and thereby came to the conclusion that about the only way out was to sort of float along with the tide and pray for an early return to normalcy.

I don't know how it affected some people, but I started to miss some of the good things of life. I start[ed] to hark back to all the years of good living and some of the fun I used to get out of life, and some of the things I wanted to do but never got around to, either because I never had the time or didn't have the guts or couldn't or wouldn't give up a life of comfort and ease.

Now there was many a time when [although] things were going at their best with me, I had often wished for a complete respite from the humdrum existence one has to go through while living in a city as large as New York. Every day I went to work, I used to give thought [to] how great it would be to get away from the great canyons of buildings that made me feel I was walking between great walls of stone that had no color. Always the same drabness whichever way you looked. And, too, how great it would be to get away from the monotony of having to get up at the same time every morning and take the same old route to work, and finally, when you arrived at the shop, to have to punch a clock and then have to hear the same old voices and look upon the same old faces day in and day out<sup>2</sup>. And worst of all, [to] have to listen to a bellyaching Boss and his demand for just a little more production caused (as he claimed) by the keen competition of other firms. All this and a lot of other irritating occurrences that go to spoil the even tenor of a day's existence while working for your bread and butter.

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<sup>2</sup> John MacDonald's death certificate listed his occupation as cook. However, his description here suggests a manufacturing job.

Yes, I often was on the point of chucking up the whole damn business and tak[ing] up some other type of business or packing my things and go[ing] to the places I had read about in travel books of far off places, and see[ing] the things that some of my friends had told me about.

So here it was as though out of a clear sky: An opportunity had presented itself to fulfill all those past desires to get away from it all, if only I took advantage of it.

Now for some reason, it is hard to break away from your own hometown and your friends of many years standing. But here was a situation in which your own hometown or your friends couldn't help much in the way of getting anyone a job, for they too were perhaps walking the streets. So summing up and going over every angle of my troubles, I decided I would take a chance and go to it and leave the rest to "Lady Luck", for I had nothing to lose one way or another. I couldn't be any worse off in one place or another and, too, my room rent was due and from all indications when the day came to pay it, I wouldn't have it, and that meant eviction [for] sure.

So thus it was [that] after exhausting every effort in trying to find work or some way to hang on a little longer in New York, I called on a few friends and said goodbye and started to prepare for what turned out to be the greatest time and experience of my life.

I was really happy in the thought that at least I would be free of a great many of my troubles, for there is nothing in this world like having your mind occupied to help you forget your troubles and those about you.

I gave thought to the fact that I ought to be more thankful that I was really free (or would be soon) of that stuffy existence in a city

and, too, that I was free of all those disagreeable things I had longed to be free of these many years; really free to go do what I pleased, and go where I pleased, with no questions to be answered to nobody.

Let it not be said that I didn't still have my own opinions concerning the mess the country was in, for I am still not so sure but that conditions could have been alleviated somewhat if those who had the means to help only had tried a little harder than they did. Or perhaps if those who didn't help had only been a little more liberal and sympathetic in their attitude and treatment of the most unfortunate. At least it would have helped to keep up their courage.

Perhaps I have too much faith in what humanity can do for one another; perhaps I expect too much from my fellow man, and it may be that I have the wrong slant on life in general. But it seems to me that there is considerable lack of civil pride in those who deliberately stand by and see people suffering unnecessarily, for one would naturally think that, by a combined effort on the part of those who were able to help, [they] would know that to keep up the health and morals of the unfortunate and unemployed would only make them more of an asset instead of a burden on the general public. I cannot help but believe that a great deal of our many taxes have been brought about by this very indifference to the welfare of others.

I have heard many of those who were getting along nicely snarl at others who were walking the streets with not even a place to lay their head or [knowing] where their next meal was to come from when they appealed to them for even a cup of coffee,, saying to them with a sneer on their faces, "No, we can't help how hungry you are, that is nothing to us. Why should we worry? Why don't you go to the Government - they should take care of you people who are in such need."

I often thought when I heard people talk like that to a hungry man or woman who had a couple of kids at home (who were perhaps hungrier) just which of the two parties were in the greatest need, for I would far rather be hungry than have such a mental attitude towards anybody's misfortune. In fact, I would rather be a little bit more inclined to give what I had and go without myself, even if it were the last grain of coffee. And so, by such an attitude on the part of those who would turn down an unfortunate or an unemployed fellow, the Government had to step in and see to it that all did their share through public support of a relief program. So it followed that those who could and wouldn't lift a finger for their fellow man were paying double and forced to do their share.

By way of experience I have found that there are certain reactions to certain attitudes one takes in regards life and their obligations to others, especially in times of distress., For I have found that as a rule the "Law of Averages" finally catches up with you one way or another and retaliation does at times come swift and sure, so you get good for good or, if you are inclined the other way, well, you will by the same token get the same in return.

I feel I can truthfully state that most of our troubles are brought about through the unfairness of others and that a great deal of our sufferings are of our own fault or making. You must play the game on the square or take the consequences. Life is too much in earnest and she casts aside those who try to make a fool of her. She will have none of those who play traitor to her precepts.

Such were the conditions around and about me and, with that knowledge, in respect to hoping for any improvement in conditions in or around New York City, I could see none for some time to come. So, having informed my landlady I could no longer afford paying for

a room I was leaving, as a result I left there absolutely destitute. With what I thought I could use, I started out to God knows where.

I didn't even have the price of a subway fare to downtown New York. All I had were the clothes on my back, what little I had in a small bundle, my self-respect and, best of all, my health, and that was something really to be thankful for, under the circumstances.

*And now I am, or can consider myself an indigent and subject to the whims and fancies of all my brothers and the public in general. They can ask questions if they want to, for am I not just one more burden on them? But rest assured, I won't dwell long on that angle of the situation, for if I am to get anywhere or have a place to sleep and something to eat, I will have to get a move on, and at this particular moment I am well in need of my breakfast.*

So, as I stood on a corner of Broadway and one of the cross streets in Washington Heights not many blocks from my old room that I had occupied for almost five years, trying to sort of get myself together and take a last fond look at the old scenes, I hadn't the least idea when I would ever see them again, if ever.

Somehow or other, I just couldn't decide in which direction I should go in my first lap on what proved to be a wandering life of six years<sup>3</sup>.

Whether it was by force of habit or some guiding hand, I don't know which (and at [the] time I had other and more important things on my mind), I suddenly woke up to the fact [that] I was walking slowly down Broadway towards downtown New York. After finding I had really walked almost ten blocks, it suddenly dawned on me

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<sup>3</sup> The journal documents a span of ten years. John didn't spend all that time traveling.

that from now on, if I didn't want to wear myself out, I should begin to save steps and mileage as best I could. So, instead of taking Broadway any further, I turned to the right and walked as far as Riverside Drive and then went down as far as 72nd Street and thus so returned on down Broadway. When I got as far as 59th Street, I began to feel somewhat hungry and that of course called for action of some sort if I cared to appease it.

The first place I stopped in was one of those "Hamburger Joints" as some call them. "Hamburger Joint" or not, that made no difference to me, so I boldly walked in and offered my services for something to eat or a meal.

The man behind the counter looked me over from head to foot and then finally shook his head signifying there was nothing doing. So I backed out feeling somewhat disappointed in having no success on my first bid for a meal.

That first refusal did discourage me a little, but the more I thought of it the more determined I became that somewhere along the line I would finally find some place that would be glad to let me work out a good meal. So I sauntered on down 7th Avenue until I finally reached 73rd Street, and there I decided this would be as far as I would venture downtown.

As I stood on the corner, I took a survey of all the restaurants and stores, giving them a close observation as to the likelihood of a possibility of obtaining an hour or two of work. None of them appealed to me as being any too prosperous looking, so I walked back a block or two [to] where I thought (when passing it) was a pretty busy restaurant. So instead of hesitating, I walked right in and sat down close to the cash register as though I were able to buy the best meal on their menu.

The man looked up from what he was doing and politely asked me what I would have, so I put the question to him point blank and told him I was willing to work out a meal if he would be so kind as to let me. That was one of those times I got sat on as never before.

Said he: “You get the hell out of here you lousy bum and go to work! You only think you want to work for a meal. Why, you big bum, you wouldn’t work and besides, you haven’t the nerve to ask right out for it. Every one of you bums is too lazy to work very long, so get the hell out of here, and be damn quick about it!”

Having finished his tirade against me and those who would dare enter his place for any form of aid, he started for the end of the counter, no doubt to see to it I did get out as he ordered. I really believed he would have done me bodily harm if I had tarried much longer, so bitter did he seem.

It would be hard to describe the extent of my feelings and the thoughts that went coursing through my mind as I once more found myself out on the street. I only know I felt like a whipped cur, or like some innocent school boy who had just been chastised for something he hadn’t been guilty of while in full view of his classmates.

Rest assured it was a few days before I could muster up enough nerve and courage to offer my services for anything in a restaurant.

After I left that restaurant I continued on down 21st Street more or less unmindful of what direction I was going. My one thought seemed to be to get as far away from the vicinity of that restaurant as I could.

I must have had somewhat of a defeated look about me as I shuffled on down the sidewalk trying to keep more or less in the shadows of the buildings, for I still felt the sting of that bawling out.

I was awakened out of my aimless steps by someone bumping into me and near knocking me off my feet, [all] the while growling at me something to the effect of: *Did I know where I was going and what the hell was the matter with me.*

I gave no notice and took no offense, but it did wake me out of my thoughts and none too soon, for I was in the middle of a crossing and against the traffic lights.

After just escaping being run down by a truck and being bawled out by the traffic officer, I finally reached the opposite sidewalk to find I was pretty well over on the western extremity of 73rd Street.

It was only a few months back that I had been working not so far from the very spot I now found I had arrived at, so, naturally, familiar scenes and places conjured up more pleasant times, which as a rule, bring with them former friends and acquaintances. Among those acquaintances was a restaurant worker, but for some unknown reason I couldn't for the life of me remember his name. However, I did know where he was last working, so, recalling a remark he had made on our last meeting, I finally decided to take him up on it.

Said he on that last meeting: "Now, if ever you get up against it, be sure to come around and see me."

I had only a few blocks to go but for every step I took on my way to that restaurant, my fears grew that he either had left his job there or was finished for the day and had gone home.

I finally reached the restaurant and, being somewhat agitated from the past hour's experience, and somewhat worried, I fairly lunged into the place. As I did, his name came to me. So I asked the young lady behind the counter if such a person still worked there and if he did, could I please speak to him. Instead of answering my

question, she called out his name, and when I heard him answer I felt as though a ton had been lifted from my shoulders, for by that time, I was hungry and ready to do most anything for a cup of coffee.

Much to my relief, my friend seemed more than pleased to see me. After a few words of salutation I explained to him some of my past difficulties in making things meet and then he asked me had I eaten anything that day. And believe me those words were the sweetest words that I had heard in days.

After a long talk about things in general, a good meal, and the loan of a one-dollar bill, I left feeling like a new man and a human being once again.

Let me pause for just a few moments from the events and happenings of my first day of real destitution to jot down a few hints on how it feels to be really good and hungry. For I don't know of anything that will get a man down in spirits more than hunger, yet it spurs a person on and on to find food to appease it.

I thought of more schemes and ways I might be able to get a meal and don't think for one moment [that] I didn't go to some extremes in my thoughts, [even] on to stiffing someone or stepping into some eating place and demanding it. At one moment I gave thought to stepping into another place I saw hundreds eating [at] to put up a fight for it. The only thing that stopped me was that I was afraid of being clapped in jail, or suffering some other dire consequence.

Yes sir, hunger does really set you thinking along queer channels of thought, and will likely as not cause anyone to commit acts that one would never think of doing under normal conditions.

After this first day's experience, I made a resolution that I would never turn down another hungry being for a bite to eat [even] if it was

to take the last nickel I had in my pocket and I had to walk twenty miles to my home from work.

Well now that I had a substantial meal under my belt and a one dollar bill in my pocket, my worries as regards eating and shelter were over, at least for the next twenty four hours. Now I had only [one] other worry, and that was: *Will it pay to stay on in New York City, or shall I follow out my original intention of leaving it for other fields and pastures?*

I was now within a stone's throw of a ferry which takes you over to New Jersey and for some reason or other I just couldn't resist the temptation to get on it and get going.

While watching one or two ferry boats come and go, I was reminded of the last time I used them on a trip I took a few years ago, but that was in better circumstances and there was no need for hesitation and no need to give any thought as to whether I should take it or not.

Something kept telling me to go and then some other thought would raise a doubt as to the gain of continuing. Again would come that little voice egging me on until finally I succumbed and, first thing I knew, I was on the ferry boat and soon on my way to New Jersey.

*Well, I am off. Where to I couldn't say, but I am on my way, and, funny thing about it, I feel a thrill and I am not afraid and in fact, I feel very much relieved and pleased to be moving, and all these things bring me to one conclusion: That it would make no difference one way or another whether to stay in one place, or wander here and there until I find something to do.*

# Thank you for reading!

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