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RUSSELL BAKER

author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning bestseller Growing Up



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RUSSELL BAKER's "Observer" column appears twice weekly in *The New York Times*. He and his wife, Mimi, live in Leesburg, Virginia.

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The Good Times

RUSSELL BAKER



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To Mimi

At the age of twenty-two I believed myself
to be unextinguishable.

—SIEGFRIED SASSOON, “Memoirs of a Fox-hunting Man”

I

Cousin Edwin

My mother, dead now to this world but still roaming free in my mind, wakes me some mornings before daybreak. "If there's one thing I can't stand, it's a quitter." I have heard her say that all my life. Now, lying in bed, coming awake in the dark, I feel the fury of her energy fighting the good-for-nothing idler within me who wants to go back to sleep instead of tackling the brave new day.

Silently I protest: I am not a child anymore. I have made something of myself. I am entitled to sleep late.

"Russell, you've got no more gumption than a bump on a log. Don't you want to amount to something?"

She has hounded me with these same battle cries since I was a boy in short pants back in the Depression.

"Amount to something!"

"Make something of yourself!"

"Don't be a quitter!"

On bad mornings, in the darkness, suspended between dreams and daybreak, with my mother racketing around in my head, I feel crushed by failure. I am a fool to think I amount to

anything. A man doesn't amount to something because he has been successful at a third-rate career like journalism. It is evidence, that's all: evidence that if he buckled down and worked hard, he might some day do something really worth doing.

It has always been like this between my mother and me. In 1954 I was assigned to cover the White House. For most reporters, being White House correspondent was as close to heaven as you could get. I was then twenty-nine years old and getting the White House job so young puffed me up with pride. I went over to Baltimore to see my mother's delight while telling her about it. I should have known better.

"Well, Russ," she said, "if you work hard at this White House job you might be able to make something of yourself."

Onward and upward was the course she set. Small progress was no excuse for feeling satisfied with yourself. Our world was poor, tough, and mean. People who stopped to pat themselves on the back didn't last long. Even if you got to the top you'd better not take it easy. "The bigger they come, the harder they fall" was one of the favorite maxims in her storehouse of folk wisdom.

Now, on bad mornings, I sense her anger at my contentment. "Have a little ambition, Buddy. You'll never get anywhere in this world unless you've got ambition."

The civilized man of the world within me despises her incessant demands for success. He has read the philosophers and social critics. He is no longer a country boy, he has been to town. He scoffs at materialism and strivers after success. He thinks it is vulgar and unworthy to spend your life pursuing money, power, fame, and—

"Sometimes you act like you're not worth the powder and shot it would take to blow you up with."

—and it's not true that newspapering is a third-rate career. It has helped him to understand humanity's dreams and sorrows.

"My God, Russell! You don't know any more about humanity's dreams and sorrows than a hog knows about holiday."

The mother-haunted son within me knows she is right. After all, he asks, what is a newspaperman? A peeper, an invader of privacy, a scandal peddler, a mischief-maker, a busybody, a man content to wear out his hams sitting in marble corridors waiting

for important people to lie to him, a comic-strip intellectual, a human pomposity dilating on his constitutional duty, a drum thumper on a demagogue's bandwagon, a member of the clique for this week's fashion, part of next week's goon squad that will destroy it.

She has no patience with talk like that, never did. "One trouble with you, Russell, is you always overdo things," she said whenever I yielded to my newspaperman's weakness for overstatement.

To her, newspapers were important and the work honorable. She had pushed me toward it almost from the start. She would have liked it better if I could have grown up to be president or a rich businessman, but much as she loved me, she did not deceive herself. Before I was out of grade school, she could see I lacked the gifts for either making millions or winning the love of crowds. After that she began nudging me toward working with words.

Words ran in her family. There seemed to be a word gene that passed down from her maternal grandfather. He was a schoolteacher before the Civil War in the Northern Neck of Virginia. His daughter Sallie became a schoolteacher, his daughter Lulie wrote poetry, and his son Charlie became New York correspondent for the *Baltimore Herald*. His granddaughter Lucy Elizabeth, who became my mother, was also a schoolteacher. Words ran in the family, all right. That was a rich inheritance in the turn-of-the-century South, still impoverished by the Civil War. Words were a way out. Look at Uncle Charlie. Words could take you all the way to New York City.

The most spectacular proof that words could be a gift of gold was my mother's first cousin Edwin. He was schoolteacher Sallie's son, and when he first entered my life he was managing editor of *The New York Times*. Before that, he had been to Paris, had traveled all over Europe, had known General "Black Jack" Pershing in the First World War, and had been there at the airport outside Paris the night Charles Lindbergh, "Lucky Lindy," landed *The Spirit of St. Louis* after flying solo across the Atlantic. Had not just been there, but had written about it in *The New York Times*, beginning his story with a three-word sentence: "Lindbergh did it."

Cousin Edwin proved that words could take you to places so glorious and so far from the Virginia sticks that your own kin could only gape in wonder and envy. When my mother saw that I might have the word gift she started trying to make it grow. She was desperately poor, but she found money to buy me magazine subscriptions to *Boy's Life* and *American Boy*, and later *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's*. She signed up for a book deal that supplied one volume of "World's Greatest Literature" every month at a cost of thirty-nine cents a book. Poe, Hawthorne, Shakespeare, Thackeray—the full panoply of English literature piled up unread, but treasured, under my bed.

I respected those great writers, but at the age of ten, eleven, twelve, my heart did not sing when I opened them to read. What I read with joy were newspapers. I lapped up every word in newspaper accounts of monstrous crimes, dreadful accidents, and hideous butcheries committed in faraway wars. Accounts of murderers dying in the electric chair fascinated me, and I kept close track of last meals ordered by condemned men.

Though I did not realize it at the time, I was preparing myself to challenge my mother's cousin Edwin in newspaper work. This was such a preposterous idea that I kept it secret even from myself during all the years of my growing up. What was oddest about this was that I had never met Edwin, that my mother had not seen him since before the First World War, that Edwin did not know I existed, and that he probably remembered my mother only as a little girl he had once liked to tease.

"Edwin James was the worst tease I ever knew in my life," she often said. This grievance, like most of the others, dated from their childhoods.

"Conceited," she called him.

"Mean."

"Gave himself airs."

"Always acted like he thought he was smarter than anybody else."

"Edwin James was no smarter than anybody else," she told me so often I believed it.

I had a glimpse into the depths of her anger when we first moved from New Jersey to Baltimore. That was in 1937. I was eleven. She was just a notch above abject poverty, unemployed,

but optimistic about finding a job soon. She had rented an apartment on West Lombard Street in working-class southwest Baltimore. Her younger sister Sally, married to a successful, five thousand dollars-a-year insurance man who owned a yellow Buick and had a telephone, visited immediately.

Aunt Sally charged up the steps—it was a second-floor apartment—burst through the door, and, with a wild and desperate expression, cried:

“Good Lord, Lucy, you’ve got to get out of this place right away.”

My mother dearly loved Aunt Sally, whose temperament was in the grand operatic style, but she considered her a ludicrous and shameless social climber.

“This is a terrible, terrible neighborhood, Lucy,” Aunt Sally went on, her dark eyes rolling in dismay, her voice quivering so intensely that she seemed about to cry.

“I cannot have my sister living in a place like this.”

My mother was amused at first. She was often amused by Aunt Sally’s melodramatic cries, gestures, and lectures on how to do things right in high society. Listening to Aunt Sally, I understood that my mother had made an awful mistake in not consulting her about where to live in Baltimore. This mistake had to be corrected right away or there would be ruin. We must get the mover back immediately and have everything trucked to a respectable neighborhood. North Baltimore was the only place for respectable people to live. Under no circumstances could we live another hour in southwest Baltimore, least of all on West Lombard Street. Didn’t my mother know anything? Didn’t she realize that West Lombard Street bordered on the section of Baltimore known as “Pigtown”?

My mother’s laughter at all this only inflamed Aunt Sally to louder argument. North Baltimore, she advised my mother, was where “the James girls” lived. The James girls were Edwin’s two sisters, who had moved to Baltimore years ago. I guessed from the way Aunt Sally spoke about them that they were high society.

My mother urged Aunt Sally to settle down and have a cup of coffee, but the idea of drinking coffee in the face of social cataclysm was too much for Aunt Sally. She arched her back,

threw her head back, clenched her fists, and cried, "What will the James girls think when they hear my sister is living on West Lombard Street?"

The fury of my mother's reply shocked me. Suddenly all her good-humored tolerance for Aunt Sally's performance was gone, and she seemed to lose control of herself.

"I don't care what the James girls think," she shouted. "The Jameses have nothing to be so high and mighty about. Who are the Jameses to be looking down their noses at other people? Their father was nothing but an old oyster pirate."

Long afterward, this scene helped me understand her dislike for Edwin. Edwin's father had been a financial success; her father had died in failure and bankruptcy. And she had loved her father so deeply.

"Papa was the only man I ever really loved," she told me once when she was furious with me and the whole masculine world, and probably overstating things a bit, but not too much. Dear "Papa's" death had devastated her. He was a lawyer and timber dealer who specialized in supplying walnut veneers for expensive gunstocks. In 1917 he died of a heart attack, leaving nothing but debts. The family house was lost, the children scattered. His wife, Lulie the poet, fatally ill with a tubercular infection that was slowly destroying her spine, fell into suicidal depression and was institutionalized. My mother, who had just started college, had to quit and look for work. Life had been hard ever since. After five years of marriage and three babies, her husband had died in 1930, leaving her so poor that she had to give up her baby Audrey for adoption and move to New Jersey to take shelter with her brother Allen.

Then, in 1932, important events: In April she heard Edwin had just become managing editor of the *Times*. A few weeks later, after two years of futile job hunting, she finally found work patching grocers' smocks at ten dollars a week in the A&P laundry in Belleville.

Belleville was situated just ten miles west of Manhattan, where Edwin stood at the top of the heap. She must have felt mocked by the irony. They had both started from the same Virginia backwater, and both had ended up in this faraway northern place separated by a scant ten miles of geography, except that geography

lied about their destinies. The true distance separating them could be better measured in light years: the conceited, arrogant, insufferable Edwin standing on top of the world; my impoverished mother passing her days among baskets of ragged aprons.

Life had always smiled on Edwin. His father had done well enough in the Chesapeake Bay's seafood trade to put his children into college and keep them there. As a child, my mother had felt Edwin patronizing her as well-to-do people so often patronize their threadbare relatives.

As I gradually absorbed her dislike for him, I decided that while famous Cousin Edwin might be a family hero, he was also my mother's enemy. This made him my enemy, for with my father dead and Audrey given away for adoption, my mother, my sister Doris, and I had to stick together in everything.

I had a special duty, because I was the man of the family. My mother started telling me so when I was eight years old, and I soon believed it, and believing it filled me with a sense of responsibility to serve my mother. When she said I had to "make something" of myself, I often thought of her cousin Edwin, who had made so much of himself. In her pep talks about what a great success I could be if I worked hard, lived a clean life, and never said die, she often used Edwin's example of how far a man could go without much talent.

"Edwin James was no smarter than anybody else, and look where he is today," she said, and said, and said again, so that I finally grew up thinking Edwin James was a dull clod who had got a lucky break. Maybe she felt that way about him, but she was saying something deeper that I was too young then to understand. She was telling me I didn't have to be brilliant to get where Edwin had got to, that the way to get to the top was to work, work, work.

"... and look where he is today."

She was giving me a way to channel my ambition when I was too young to know what success might be. She was giving me Edwin as a model, and in the process she was telling me that success for me would be to go where Edwin was.

Then I was no longer a child, and luck got me into college, and the war came and I left my mother for the first time and in the navy learned the pleasures of the company of men and of

the desire for women. The excitement of being grown up freed my mind of childishness. Whole years went by without my thinking or hearing of Cousin Edwin. He became just another hazy childhood memory, without weight or meaning.

In 1947, however, when I wandered into the newspaper business and found I liked it, the childhood memory revived. Edwin, mythic Cousin Edwin, whose success had galled my mother, again took up residence in my mind. I began to entertain childish revenge fantasies. Edwin was still managing editor of the *Times* then. Wouldn't it be delightful if I became such an outstanding reporter that the *Times* hired me without knowing I was related to the great Edwin? Wouldn't it be delicious if my work was so astounding that Edwin himself one day invited me into his huge office at the *Times*, offered me a cigar, and said, "Tell me something about yourself, young man"? What exquisite vengeance to reply, "I am the only son of the woman you once treated with contempt, though you were no smarter than she was: your poor cousin, Lucy Elizabeth Robinson."

This is the story of how I almost made that fantasy come true, and of the people I met along the way, and of the good times when a young man, shameless enough to want to make something of himself, could still go to faraway places on the gift of words, even though he was no smarter than anybody else.



Edwin James at the peak of his career. *New York Times*

2

Deems

My mother started me in newspaper work in 1937 right after my twelfth birthday. She would have started me younger, but there was a law against working before age twelve. She thought it was a silly law, and said so to Deems.

Deems was boss of a group of boys who worked home delivery routes for the *Baltimore News-Post*. She found out about him a few weeks after we got to Baltimore. She just went out on the street, stopped a paperboy, and asked how he'd got his job.

"There's this man Deems . . ."

Deems was short and plump and had curly brown hair. He owned a car and a light gray suit and always wore a necktie and white shirt. A real businessman, I thought the first time I saw him. My mother was talking to him on the sidewalk in front of the Union Square Methodist Church and I was standing as tall as I could, just out of earshot.

"Now, Buddy, when we get down there keep your shoulders

back and stand up real straight,” she had cautioned me after making sure my necktie was all right and my shirt clean.

Watching the two of them in conversation, with Deems glancing at me now and then, I kept my shoulders drawn back in the painful military style I’d seen in movies, trying to look a foot taller than I really was.

“Come over here, Russ, and meet Mister Deems,” she finally said, and I did, managing to answer his greeting by saying, “The pleasure’s all mine,” which I’d heard people say in the movies. I probably blushed while saying it, because meeting strangers was painfully embarrassing to me.

“If that’s the rule, it’s the rule,” my mother was telling Deems, “and we’ll just have to put up with it, but it still doesn’t make any sense to me.”

As we walked back to the house she said I couldn’t have a paper route until I was twelve. And all because of some foolish rule they had down here in Baltimore. You’d think if a boy wanted to work they would encourage him instead of making him stay idle so long that laziness got embedded in his bones.

That was April. We had barely finished the birthday cake in August before Deems came by the apartment and gave me the tools of the newspaper trade: an account book for keeping track of the customers’ bills and a long, brown web belt. Slung around one shoulder and across the chest, the belt made it easy to balance fifteen or twenty pounds of papers against the hip. I had to buy my own wire cutters for opening the newspaper bundles the trucks dropped at Wisengoff’s store on the corner of Stricker and West Lombard streets.

In February my mother had moved us down from New Jersey, where we had been living with her brother Allen ever since my father died in 1930. This move of hers to Baltimore was a step toward fulfilling a dream. More than almost anything else in the world, she wanted “a home of our own.” I’d heard her talk of that “home of our own” all through those endless Depression years when we lived as poor relatives dependent on Uncle Allen’s goodness. “A home of our own. One of these days, Buddy, we’ll have a home of our own.”

That winter she had finally saved just enough to make her move, and she came to Baltimore. There were several reasons