

Poverty: Personal Experiences

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CHAPTER 1: MY MOTHER

Poverty is not a good thing to experience, but poverty exists and we ought to know about it.

The word “poor” has two meanings: 1) lacking money (impoverished), and 2) lacking quality. I will be writing about poor people, by which I mean people who lack money. I think we all know that some high-quality people don’t have a lot of money.

My mother grew up poor in Georgia. She and her brothers and sisters ate a lot of lard sandwiches. A lard sandwich is a slice of bread, spread with lard, and sprinkled with a little sugar, if your family could afford sugar. Often, my mother’s parents couldn’t afford sugar, and their lard sandwiches were sprinkled with salt.

We would not call this nutritious food, but fat fills the belly, and lard is 100 percent fat — and it was cheap.

Sometimes, my mother and her siblings would steal vegetables from the next-door neighbor’s garden. He knew they were stealing vegetables, but he never said anything about it.

For a time, my mother had one dress and one pair of underwear. Once a week, she would stand behind the door, as she called it, take off her dress and underwear and wait until her mother hand-washed them and then let the sun dry them on a clothesline.

Georgia is hot, and in the days before air conditioning — and my mother’s family could not have afforded air conditioning even if it had been invented back then — every door and every window was open.

One day when my mother was standing behind the door, her boyfriend came to visit. How old was my mother? Old enough to be embarrassed.

As an adult, one of my mother's first jobs was working in a store that sold clothes, including baby clothes. One day, a woman walked in with a baby. The woman was not well dressed, and the baby was wearing rags. The woman set the baby down on a table displaying baby clothes, stripped the baby, and started putting new clothes on the baby. My mother looked at the woman and knew that she would not be able to pay for the clothing. But my mother helped her dress the baby and then watched as the woman carried the baby out of the store without paying for the new clothing.

One way out of poverty is to marry someone with a job, and my mother got out of poverty by marrying my father.

CHAPTER 2: MY UNCLE

My mother's brother wanted to escape from poverty, so he tried to run away from it. He stole a car so he could drive up north where he hoped to find opportunity, but he got caught and ended up on a Georgia chain gang for several months. In a chain gang, prisoners are shackled every few feet by the ankles to a long length of chain to keep them from escaping. They work in the hot sun while shackled to the chain, and when they sleep, they are shackled to the bed. No freedom, hard work, hot sun, no pay, bad food, and some mean guards.

When my uncle got released from the chain gang, he hitchhiked up north. He did what a lot of people trying to escape from poverty do: He drifted. He drifted from town to town, seeking opportunity and not finding it. He worked when he could, but the jobs were temporary and low pay. My uncle slept rough often, and he was hungry often. Once, when he was completely broke and completely hungry, he saw a restaurant with a buffet and went inside and asked to speak to the manager. He said, "I am very hungry, I don't have any money, and I would appreciate it very much if you would give me any food that the restaurant is going to throw away. I will be happy to wait by the rear entrance until you are ready to throw away food."

The manager told him to sit down at a table, and then the manager went to the buffet, loaded a big plate high with food, and gave it to him free of charge.

One way out of poverty is to get a good job, and my uncle got out of poverty by getting a job working with sheet metal.

My uncle's work ethic helped him. His employer sent him to California to do some special sheet-metal work, and the

people in California wanted to keep him there. They explained that their California employees liked to come to work late, leave early, and take many days off. It was difficult to get someone who would show up and do the work they were supposed to do and were paid to do.

My uncle was also good with money. He got married, bought a house, and raised six children. Each time he made a mortgage payment, he paid extra money so he could pay off the mortgage faster.

If there was a sale on food, he bought lots of it. He had a large pantry, and if there was a sale on peanut butter, two jars for the price of one, he would buy twelve jars and sometimes go back the next day and buy six more jars.

If you went in his pantry — a closet set aside to store food — you saw that it was packed with food. If you went in his kitchen, you saw that he had taken off the doors of the high cabinets in which he stored food so that he could see the food. If you went in his bedroom, you saw that he had all the regular bedroom furniture, but he also had lots of shelves he had installed. The shelves were loaded with things that he had bought on sale that he knew his family could use: food (of course), light bulbs, toothpaste, toilet paper, etc. His bedroom looked like a warehouse.

Once he made a bad purchase: he bought a case of baked beans. Beans are beans, but the sauce they came in can taste good or bad, and the sauce these beans came in tasted bad. His kids told him, “Dad, throw those beans away! They’re awful!”

But when you grow up poor, you don’t throw beans away. For a long time, whenever my uncle and his family ate baked beans, they ate a mixture of one can of good baked beans and one can of bad baked beans.

My uncle's kids never had to eat lard sandwiches, and neither did I.

CHAPTER 3: MYSELF AND MY STUDENTS

I was never the kind of poor that my mother and uncle were, but I did have times when I worked low-wage jobs and could have eaten better. That happens to a lot of people, including college students and people pursuing creative careers. Sometimes, people want to be independent and not ask Mom and Dad for help. This can make it hard to both eat good food AND pay the rent.

For a while it seems like I lived on peanut butter-and-jelly cracker sandwiches except that I couldn't afford jelly. I was like my uncle and stocked up on peanut and crackers when they were on sale. I also got bags of apples and bags of carrots occasionally.

Don't think I was hungry. For a while, I worked at a place where I could eat all the doughnuts I wanted, so I weighed 40 pounds more than I do now and resembled the Pillsbury Doughboy.

Once, I was looking forward to getting my paycheck. I like doughnuts and peanut butter and crackers, but eating them every day gets old. I was looking forward to getting my paycheck and eating something good.

I was going to get a sub, and not just any sub — I was going to get a 12-inch sub.

I even wrote a song — songwriters, take note. It goes like this: "I'm going to eat tonight! I'm going to eat tonight!" Repeat 10 or 11 times.

I got my paycheck and it was exactly two cents more than my rent, which was due. So I went to my landlord and signed my paycheck over to him and got two cents back.

My landlord was a nice guy and offered to wait a few more days for the rent, but I turned him down. I didn't have any

more money coming in and if I spent my paycheck on food, I wouldn't be able to pay my rent. I did not want to sleep rough.

After paying my rent, I went to my one-room apartment with bath and ate peanut butter and crackers.

Two weeks later, I got another paycheck and ate a 12-inch sub.

I got out of that kind of poverty — which a lot of people go through — by earning my degrees and getting a good job in the OU English Department teaching composition.

Many of my assignments were practical writing because I wanted my students to get jobs when they graduated. My assignments gave students things to talk about at job interviews and papers to add to their writing portfolio.

For example, I assigned a problem-solving letter in which students would write someone and make a recommendation about solving a problem. No one was allowed to write their roommate and recommend that he or she take more showers, but they could write a former manager about ways of increasing profits, raising employee morale, and improving customer satisfaction.

I learned some things from students by reading their assignments, some of which were autobiographical essays. Sometimes I could read between the lines and realize some things that the student may not have realized.

Some of my students wrote about special nights when everyone would eat pancakes for supper. Kids like pancakes with syrup or sprinkled with sugar or spread with peanut butter, so these were really special nights.

If this happens once, then Mom and Dad are probably tired and don't feel like cooking, but sometimes they happened a few nights in a row.

When and where I was growing up, it wasn't unusual for a mother to send a kid over to borrow a cup of flour or a cup of sugar or a couple of eggs. The family was having a special-pancake supper because it was the end of the month and money and food were running low.

Parents really do take special care of their kids. Jerry Clower, a country comedian, remembers that when he was young whenever his mother made chicken, she would tell her kids, "Save the back for me! That's my favorite part!"

Of course, a chicken back is not good eating, and when he got older, he realized that his mother loved her kids and wanted them to eat the best parts of the chicken.

Kids often realize later in life what their parents did for them when the kids were growing up. Sometimes a single mother would sit her kids down at the dinner table, feed them, and not eat. Later, the kids would see her eating peanut butter and crackers. When they got older, they would realize that there wasn't enough good food to go around, so the mother would feed the kids first, eat what they left behind, and then fill up on peanut butter and crackers.

One of my students wrote about one of the best weeks in her life. She was in elementary school, and one day she got off the school bus and went inside her home. The electric lights were off, and her mother and father were wearing jackets inside the house.

Her parents told her that they had a special treat for her: They were going to go camping — in the living room.

They used candles because you don't have electric lights when you go camping, her parents made a tent out of a rope and blankets, and her mother cooked on a tiny portable camp stove that was normally used by backpackers. The "campfire" was twelve tealights (small candles) on plates in the middle of the living room; they cooked marshmallows over those tealights. Her parents sang camp songs and told scary camp stories, and they told family stories about how Mommy and Daddy met and what their little girl was like as a baby. My student had a really fun time camping out in the living room because her parents made it a fun time: She had lots of quantity time and quality time with her parents.

Then one day she came home from school, walked inside her home, and the electric lights were on and the house was warm.

My father made good money as a power lineman, but before he went to lineman school, his job was turning off people's electricity if they couldn't pay their bill. Sometimes, he would knock on the door of a run-down trailer, and a poorly dressed pregnant woman, or a poorly dressed woman holding a baby, or a poorly dressed woman with a couple of toddlers standing behind her would answer the door. Often, the poorly dressed woman wouldn't have the money to pay the electric bill, so my father would tell her that she needed to pay it quickly or her electricity would be cut off. He would then mark on a form that no one was home at the trailer because if no one was home he wasn't allowed to cut off the electricity. He always had to give them a chance to pay their overdue bill, and if they weren't home, they didn't have that chance.

Make no mistake. It's good not to experience poverty, but I think it's good to know what poverty is as long as poverty exists.

APPENDIX A : ABOUT THE AUTHOR

It was a dark and stormy night. Suddenly a cry rang out, and on a hot summer night in 1954, Josephine, wife of Carl Bruce, gave birth to a boy — me. Unfortunately, this young married couple allowed Reuben Saturday, Josephine's brother, to name their first-born. Reuben, aka "The Joker," decided that Bruce was a nice name, so he decided to name me Bruce Bruce. I have gone by my middle name — David — ever since.

Being named Bruce David Bruce hasn't been all bad. Bank tellers remember me very quickly, so I don't often have to show an ID. It can be fun in charades, also. When I was a counselor as a teenager at Camp Echoing Hills in Warsaw, Ohio, a fellow counselor gave the signs for "sounds like" and "two words," then she pointed to a bruise on her leg twice. Bruise Bruise? Oh yeah, Bruce Bruce is the answer!

Uncle Reuben, by the way, gave me a haircut when I was in kindergarten. He cut my hair short and shaved a small bald spot on the back of my head. My mother wouldn't let me go to school until the bald spot grew out again.

Of all my brothers and sisters (six in all), I am the only transplant to Athens, Ohio. I was born in Newark, Ohio, and have lived all around Southeastern Ohio. However, I moved to Athens to go to Ohio University and have never left.

At Ohio U, I never could make up my mind whether to major in English or Philosophy, so I got a bachelor's degree with a double major in both areas, then I added a Master of Arts degree in English and a Master of Arts degree in Philosophy. Yes, I have my MAMA degree.

Currently, and for a long time to come (I eat fruits and veggies), I am spending my retirement writing books such as *Nadia Comaneci: Perfect 10*, *The Funniest People in*

Dance, Homer's Iliad: A Retelling in Prose, and William Shakespeare's Othello: A Retelling in Prose.

APPENDIX B: SOME BOOKS BY DAVID BRUCE

Retellings of a Classic Work of Literature

Ben Jonson's The Alchemist: A Retelling

Ben Jonson's Bartholomew Fair: A Retelling

Ben Jonson's The Case is Altered: A Retelling

Ben Jonson's Catiline's Conspiracy: A Retelling

Ben Jonson's The Devil is an Ass: A Retelling

Ben Jonson's Epicene: A Retelling

Ben Jonson's Every Man in His Humor: A Retelling

Ben Jonson's Every Man Out of His Humor: A Retelling

Ben Jonson's The Fountain of Self-Love, or Cynthia's Revels: A Retelling

Ben Jonson's The New Inn: A Retelling

Ben Jonson's Sejanus: A Retelling

Ben Jonson's The Staple of News: A Retelling

Ben Jonson's Volpone, or the Fox: A Retelling

Christopher Marlowe's Complete Plays: Retellings

Christopher Marlowe's Dido, Queen of Carthage: A Retelling

Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus: Retellings of the 1604 A-Text and of the 1616 B-Text

Christopher Marlowe's Edward II: A Retelling

Christopher Marlowe's The Massacre at Paris: A Retelling

Christopher Marlowe's The Rich Jew of Malta: A Retelling

Christopher Marlowe's Tamburlaine, Parts 1 and 2: Retellings

Dante's Divine Comedy: A Retelling in Prose

Dante's Inferno: A Retelling in Prose

Dante's Purgatory: A Retelling in Prose

Dante's Paradise: A Retelling in Prose

The Famous Victories of Henry V: A Retelling

From the Iliad to the Odyssey: A Retelling in Prose of Quintus of Smyrna's Posthomerica

George Peele: Five Plays Retold in Modern English

George Peele's The Arraignment of Paris: A Retelling

George Peele's The Battle of Alcazar: A Retelling

George's Peele's David and Bathsheba, and the Tragedy of Absalom: A Retelling

George's Peele's Edward I: A Retelling

George Peele's The Old Wives' Tale: A Retelling

George-A-Greene, The Pinner of Wakefield: A Retelling

The History of King Leir: A Retelling

Homer's Iliad: A Retelling in Prose

Homer's Odyssey: A Retelling in Prose

Jason and the Argonauts: A Retelling in Prose of Apollonius of Rhodes' Argonautica

The Jests of George Peele: A Retelling

John Ford: Eight Plays Translated into Modern English

John Ford's The Broken Heart: A Retelling

John Ford's The Fancies, Chaste and Noble: A Retelling

John Ford's The Lady's Trial: A Retelling

John Ford's The Lover's Melancholy: A Retelling

John Ford's Love's Sacrifice: A Retelling

John Ford's Perkin Warbeck: A Retelling

John Ford's The Queen: A Retelling

John Ford's 'Tis Pity She's a Whore: A Retelling

John Webster's The White Devil: A Retelling

King Edward III: A Retelling

The Merry Devil of Edmonton: A Retelling

Robert Greene's Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay: A Retelling

The Taming of a Shrew: A Retelling

Tarlton's Jests: A Retelling

The Trojan War and Its Aftermath: Four Ancient Epic Poems

Virgil's Aeneid: A Retelling in Prose

William Shakespeare's 5 Late Romances: Retellings in Prose

William Shakespeare's 10 Histories: Retellings in Prose

William Shakespeare's 11 Tragedies: Retellings in Prose

William Shakespeare's 12 Comedies: Retellings in Prose

William Shakespeare's 38 Plays: Retellings in Prose

William Shakespeare's 1 Henry IV, aka Henry IV, Part 1: A Retelling in Prose

William Shakespeare's 2 Henry IV, aka Henry IV, Part 2: A Retelling in Prose

William Shakespeare's 1 Henry VI, aka Henry VI, Part 1: A Retelling in Prose

William Shakespeare's 2 Henry VI, aka Henry VI, Part 2: A Retelling in Prose

William Shakespeare's 3 Henry VI, aka Henry VI, Part 3: A Retelling in Prose

William Shakespeare's All's Well that Ends Well: A Retelling in Prose

William Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra: A Retelling in Prose

William Shakespeare's As You Like It: A Retelling in Prose

William Shakespeare's The Comedy of Errors: A Retelling in Prose

William Shakespeare's Coriolanus: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's Cymbeline: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's Hamlet: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's Henry V: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's Henry VIII: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's Julius Caesar: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's King John: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's King Lear: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's Love's Labor's Lost: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's Macbeth: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's Measure for Measure: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's The Merry Wives of Windsor: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's Othello: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's Pericles, Prince of Tyre: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's Richard II: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's Richard III: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's The Taming of the Shrew: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's The Tempest: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's Timon of Athens: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus: A Retelling in Prose
William Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida: A Retelling in Prose

William Shakespeare's Twelfth Night: A Retelling in Prose

William Shakespeare's The Two Gentlemen of Verona: A Retelling in Prose

William Shakespeare's The Two Noble Kinsmen: A Retelling in Prose

William Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale: A Retelling in Prose

Other Fiction

Candide's Two Girlfriends (Adult)

Honey Badger Goes to Hell — and Heaven

I Want to Die — Or Fight Back

The Erotic Adventures of Candide (Adult)

Children's Biography

Nadia Comaneci: Perfect Ten

Personal Finance

How to Manage Your Money: A Guide for the Non-Rich

Anecdote Collections

250 Anecdotes About Opera

250 Anecdotes About Religion

250 Anecdotes About Religion: Volume 2

250 Music Anecdotes

Be a Work of Art: 250 Anecdotes and Stories

Boredom is Anti-Life: 250 Anecdotes and Stories

The Coolest People in Art: 250 Anecdotes

The Coolest People in the Arts: 250 Anecdotes

The Coolest People in Books: 250 Anecdotes

The Coolest People in Comedy: 250 Anecdotes

Create, Then Take a Break: 250 Anecdotes

Don't Fear the Reaper: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Art: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Books: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Books, Volume 2: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Books, Volume 3: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Comedy: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Dance: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Families: 250 Anecdotes

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The Funniest People in Families, Volume 4: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Families, Volume 5: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Families, Volume 6: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Movies: 250 Anecdotes

The Funniest People in Music: 250 Anecdotes

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The Kindest People Who Do Good Deeds, Volume 2: 250 Anecdotes

Maximum Cool: 250 Anecdotes

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Seize the Day: 250 Anecdotes and Stories

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Jonathan Swift's "A Modest Proposal": A Discussion Guide

Lloyd Alexander's The Black Cauldron: A Discussion Guide

Lloyd Alexander's The Book of Three: A Discussion Guide

Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Discussion Guide

Mark Twain's The Adventures of Tom Sawyer: A Discussion Guide

Mark Twain's A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court: A Discussion Guide

Mark Twain's The Prince and the Pauper: A Discussion Guide

Nancy Garden's Annie on My Mind: A Discussion Guide

Nicholas Sparks' A Walk to Remember: A Discussion Guide

Virgil's Aeneid: A Discussion Guide

Virgil's "The Fall of Troy": A Discussion Guide

Voltaire's Candide: A Discussion Guide

William Shakespeare's 1 Henry IV: A Discussion Guide

William Shakespeare's Macbeth: A Discussion Guide

William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream: A Discussion Guide

William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet: A Discussion Guide

William Sleator's Oddballs: A Discussion Guide