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Wasn't It Great?

Absolutely Not. But Oddly Enough, It's Comforting to Think About.

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At first, people will go where they always went in times of disaster or need. Not to the Red Cross shelter, but to Wal-Mart.

For a year or so, people won't like to describe themselves as homeless. But after a while it will be impossible not to notice, in the box store parking lots, a phenomenon that will look like a 24/7 tailgate party that keeps growing: Coleman grills, ice chests, portable DVD players, hamburger buns and Special K breakfast bars. The American campout. In the Great Depression, Roosevelt saw a third of a nation *ill-housed.* Here you are, in an alternate reality, in the Second Great Depression, ill-housed yourself.

After a while, the 18-wheelers won't arrive on time, or at all. Supply will be seriously out of whack with demand. Prices make no sense at all. You'll feel swept up in something out of control, and the only consolation will be that it's happening to everybody you know.

One skill you'll already have is the art of organized anticipation -- lining up for hours on end to get bottled water, which you'd done in the past to get the new iPhone, or get the "Harry Potter" novels, or doorbust the Black Friday sales. But the lines will get longer, and people will become more angry for reasons they insist qualify as special cases -- because their child has a gluten allergy and no one in the bread line would seem to care about that anymore.

People will go off their meds. There will be folksy, hip-hoppish ballads on the radio (free radio, not satellite subscription radio) about lost 401(k) fortunes. Your brother-in-law, who used to brew his own beer, will become one of those kooks who talk about printing their own scrip. (Their $10 bill will nobly feature Chuck Norris; Chewbacca's on the 20; Benjamin is still on the benjamins.)

The roots start showing through your highlights, and one night you'll go over to your church with a friend, to use the sink and share a bottle of Garnier Nutrisse Nourishing Multi-Lights ("golden blonde toffee swirl"), your last personal extravagance for a decade.

Your favorite neighbors will hit the road in search of work or an upbeat sense of spiritual self-determinism. Pretty soon you'll pack up and leave too, but the gas will cost too much to get wherever you think you're going, and the car will break down. Husband will set off in search of a timing belt and there you'll be, with the kids and your Verizon service down to its final minutes. You will be camped in a strange parking lot, in front of an old Best Buy.

A woman will then approach you with a digital camera.

You won't even hear the soft click.

You will become the miserable -- yet iconic! -- subject of what the shooter will tell you is a "documentary photograph," about to be posted to the now federally operated Flickr.

The president, meanwhile, will unveil a New-New Deal. *Time to get the nation back to work,* you will read on the Fireside Blog, with only one small problem: The majority of the unemployed labor force will not know how to do anything but sit at a computer. We will leave future generations marveling at the stark beauty of the Depression-era video games we've constructed.

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There you have a protracted example of something we are never, ever supposed to do. Our parents and grandparents would throttle us for fetishizing or re-imagining any of the Great Depression, except to admire the strength and character of those who faced it. It's the forbidden fantasy of utter upheaval, whenever the economy gets wobbly and moves to the top of our worry list.

And here you have a confession: It felt exciting to write it.

It is loosely based on the somewhat disputed back story of Florence Owens Thompson, who, in 1936 at the age of 32, was stranded with her children at a muddy fieldworker's encampment near San Luis Obispo, Calif., waiting for her male companion and son to return with parts for their broken car. She was photographed by Farm Security Administration photographer Dorothea Lange. She became "Migrant Mother," forever famous for her suffering, a permanent image of the 20th century.

(What's disputed is whether Lange promised Florence that the picture would never be published. Florence's grandson keeps a Web site -- http://migrantgrandson.com-- in honor of the photograph. According to the site, he will come explain the impact and legacy of "Migrant Mother" to your class or social group, for a $200 fee. The Web site also sells T-shirts for $19.36 each, tax included. Florence died in 1983.)

To skip over the concept of "recession" and conceive of a new Depression is illogical, irresponsible and ignorant of key facts. Just enough of our grandparents are around, however, to reach out and touch that irresistibly literary, romantic, tragically forlorn era. It is one thing for Cormac McCarthy to win a Pulitzer last year for a deeply depressing novel ("The Road") about nuclear winter. It's another thing entirely -- bad juju -- to envision or talk about the ruin of our economy.

Yet isn't that the point of fretting -- imagining the worst?

Here's a secret about loving the past too much: A longing to know what it felt like gives way to a slight sense of envy. In any exploration of the Great Depression -- whether taught by the history or humanities department, or across campus at the biz school, or thoughtfully curated at a museum -- the take-away is that it can never happen again, that there are federal safeguards in place, however flawed, that keep things from getting that bad.

We don't envy the suffering. What we marvel at is the togetherness. The idea (propaganda or otherwise) that people cooperated, persevered and figured out a way to cope. The business news in the last month has been about the hesitation of the consumer. It's about an economic pause, holding still, listening for trouble. In this century, when people have bought houses for no money, where the answer to any economic stumble is to buy more retail merchandise to put into those houses, wouldn't a little bit of

Great Depression be just the medicine we need?

Wasn't it always?

Isn't that the voice of your own grandfather, in Heaven now and with full access to your credit report, clucking in disapproval?

* * *

There was that exhibit a few years ago of Great Depression photos taken with color film, near the end of the 1930s. The filling station billboards suddenly became yellow and red. Little girls stood in pink and yellow dresses on green farms under blue skies.

"And they're totally wrong!" Char Miller says, chuckling. "The world of the Depression is supposed to be black and white. . . . We think of the world then only happening in black and white. Dorothy goes from black-and-white Kansas into Technicolor Oz. The Kansas part is the Great Depression that we know."

Miller is a history professor at Trinity University in San Antonio, currently a visiting professor at Pomona College in California. The students get younger all the time, and the Depression gets further away in memory, more beautifully black and white, and if he's lucky, when it's time to teach the 1930s in America, Miller can still assign the kids to interview an elderly relative about what it was like back then. The students, he says, come back understanding a little better why their grandmother saves so many rubber bands, thumbtacks, empty spaghetti sauce jars.

And if they're looking for any 21st-century analogue to the suffering Americans endured in the 1930s, Miller will helpfully suggest the many avenues of abundant gloom in environmental disaster.

"Global warming is the Great Depression," he says. (Perhaps you'd like to audit his class on water and the West?)

Bruce Jackson also teaches the Great Depression, a graduate seminar, at the University at Buffalo (SUNY), and his focus is on literature and art. The syllabus makes it clear: The American creative output in the disastrous '30s is probably some of our finest -- from Steinbeck to Shirley Temple, from "Let Us Now Praise Famous Men" to the work of John Dos Passos, from the best of Faulkner to "We're in the Money." You could spend all semester talking about the FSA photographs *alone,* and *then* wish you'd talked more about the buildings, the bridges, the murals, and then realize you barely got into what was going on in the movies. Even in the darkest times, 75 million Americans a week were finding a way to go to the movies, Jackson points out.

(A 15-cent movie ticket in 1933, adjusted for inflation, should cost only $2.40 now. Tell us again how everything's okay?)

And what you're studying the whole time is a profound pain, which no longer hurts. "We don't feel old pain," Jackson says. "What we remember are the narratives . . . what survives are the memories."

The visuals and language of the Depression can be so compelling that even the most checked-out undergrads find themselves briefly absorbed in it.

"Nothing is quite so riveting as the lecture you give on the great crash [of the stock market in 1929] and

what followed," says Georgetown history prof Joseph A. McCartin, and he's talking about an 18- to 22-year-old audience that easily zones out on much of history. "There's this hunger in this generation for discussing collective purpose," he says. "There's a spiritual hunger for something larger to be a part of. They remember 9/11 and being urged to continue shopping. It's so different from anything they know, and they're fascinated."

We love stories of being broke, broker, brokest, *broken*. "It's a fantasy we reenact in a lot of ways," McCartin says. "What is 'Survivor' about, after all? What happens when you don't have anything left? It's a deep trope in society."

And did we mention the art?

"What happens," Jackson asks, "when something so horrible is so beautiful?"

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If you can lure them away from the International Spy Museum, the new Madame Tussauds and the West Elm store, a great place to dump your visiting tourists -- even on a bracingly cold afternoon, even when the fountains are switched off for winter -- is the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial, just to watch what they do.

Does it strike them as a sobering, noble monument to ideas and words? Or is it a huge, bleak bore?

Do they race through its contemplative maze, glancing at the sculptures and somber stone, or do they take time to read its many all-caps inscriptions of some of the words Roosevelt spoke during the country's most calamitous economic times?

No country, however rich, can afford the waste of its human resources. That's FDR talking in his second Fireside Chat on Government and Modern Capitalism, in September 1934. *Demoralization caused by vast unemployment is our greatest extravagance. Morally, it is the greatest menace to our social order.*

By now you know what your visitors are up to instead: They are over by the sculptor George Segal's life-size "Depression Bread Line," where five cast-bronze, downtrodden men in hats and rumpled overcoats wait by a door for government assistance.

Tourists like to stand be*hi*nd the last man and make a goofy face while they have their pictures taken. Look at me, I'm in the bread line! (*Everybody's* done it -- it's poverty as hi-larious sight gag, devoid of any hubris. The more plump the tourist, the better the contrast.) Other tourists prefer to stand by and take enormous pleasure in disapproving of the insensitivity, in a tone of voice not entirely unlike Bart Simpson's grandpa:

Why, in my day . . .

* * *

Let's cheer you up a bit, maybe. Let's drive to Arthurdale, W.Va., 220 miles northwest of Washington.

In 1934, Arthurdale was a social experiment -- a town built from scratch by the government, to lift unemployed miners and their families out of the some of the worst living conditions the Depression had to offer.

As you drive on a recent Friday afternoon down Route 7 along Deckers Creek, the talk-radio station from Pittsburgh fades in and out, with some dude on a tear about the House approving the president's stimulus package, about government interference with free markets. The sky above is gray, releasing a soft spittle of icy rain. The world is black and white again.

Arthurdale was Eleanor Roosevelt's pet project in socialism, and she busied herself with the details -- how the houses would look, where the streets went, what sort of curtains should hang in the living rooms, where the school would be, what sort of Wall Street tycoons should be persuaded to open cooperative factories. She insisted on plumbing and electricity in every home. Hundreds of families applied. The questionnaire made sure you had the right style of ambition. It asked the men what sort of farm work they liked or disliked, and if they'd ever borrowed tools from neighbors or swapped labor for food, and what games they liked to play in their free time.

It was nicknamed "Eleanor's Little Village," as if it were her own collection of Department 56 porcelain houses. There was a community center, a blacksmith forge, a co-op store, an Esso service station.

Eventually, 165 homes were built. (To Eleanor's disappointment, the government decided to keep the town segregated for whites only, because the schools already were.) Seeing it now, you get the exact sort of Great Depression authenticity and spirit you might be looking for, the sense of making do. If you call ahead, you can find the exact sort of people, too -- people who saw it, lived it. Not a lot of people -- perhaps a few hundred a year -- visit Arthurdale's museum, in the refurbished administration building. Most of them come because of the Roosevelt connection.

Here are Joe and Mary Wolfe, in the Arthurdale gift shop, only too happy to show you around the buildings restored by the Arthurdale Heritage Society.

Both Joe and Mary were born here in the 1930s to original homesteaders. Her family, with 11 kids, lived on the Q Road. His family -- they had three kids -- lived on F Road. (Of the grown-ups who were the original homesteaders, only one is left, and she just celebrated her 95th birthday.)

On one of her many trips to Arthurdale, Eleanor Roosevelt visited Mary's family's house during World War II, when Mary was about 5, "and I remember my mother saying, 'You kids sit on that sofa and don't move, not a word,' " Mary, now 70, says.

Joe and Mary grew up here. She married and moved to Ohio and raised her kids. He married and moved to Maryland and raised a family. They met again decades later, at one of the town reunions. They married each other in 2004 and live nearby in Reedsville. There's a New Deal festival here every July. You should go. Anyone should go who loves old houses and stories about furniture-making and wants to know about the fruit cellars and the restored tractor in the garage bay behind the old Esso station. Anyone should go who loves the Great Depression.

Because there's nothing wrong with feeling fond of strife.

We're in a room of the old administration building, and Joe and Mary are pointing to people in each of the high school classes. "I would say there's at least 20 millionaires who grew up in Arthurdale," Mary ventures.

"I don't know about that," Joe says.

"Millionaire," Mary says, pointing toward one handsome young man in the class of '39, then others.

"Millionaire, millionaire . . . Hmm. Who else," she says, scanning each tiny class of seniors. "Don't know where she is -- some of them we couldn't ever track down."

Across the way from the town's Center Hall, Arthurdale has restored one of its Wagner model two-story homes, with the same furnishings, icebox, coal furnace, kitchen stove. The government got out of Arthurdale's operations in the late 1940s, and the social experimenting was over.

Mary's class was the last to graduate from the high school, in 1956. Joe graduated a year earlier. When they tore down the school, someone threw the basketball team's 1955 regional trophy away, but the lunch lady found it, and it resurfaced five decades later. They polished it, put it in the museum. That's Arthurdale. Eleanor's perfect little Depression town.

What happens when something so horrible is so beautiful?

"It didn't work," Mary observes. (The experiment, she means. Overall. The subsistence farming worked, but the co-ops and factories never turned a profit. Everyone eventually went back to work in the mines, or off to war, then out to the world.)

It didn't work and yet somehow it does, as a reminder of how bad it got. Mary remembers being a happy little girl. She says what they always say, that generation: "We didn't know we were poor." The bad was somehow good. There's the undeniable urge to return, go back, survive. Come what may.

The afternoon light dims across the hills, and the loveliest sort of silence takes over. Later, in the Wal-Mart parking lot in Morgantown, snow begins to fall.