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WORKING HIS WAY UP

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From hotel houseman to soldier to teacher, Frank McCourt discusses the various jobs he held in America.

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MR. SMITH: You describe in the excerpt one of your early jobs which was at the Hotel Biltmore?

MR. McCOURT: The Biltmore; yeah.

MR. SMITH: Were you a bellhop?

MR. McCOURT: No, I wasn't even--I wasn't that high in the, in the hierarchy.

MR. SMITH: Too exalted

MR. McCOURT: I was, I was a houseman, the lowest. I was just above--in the hierarchy of jobs, I was just above the Puerto Rican dishwashers. Just above. So I felt superior to them. You always had to--

MR. SMITH: You were a houseman.

MR. McCOURT: A houseman. So I was the one who would go around in the lobby, which was a famous place--it's often mentioned in Scott Fitzgerald and writers like that. They, the--the Palm Court lobby of the Biltmore Hotel. Cheever, John Cheever talks about it. So I was the one. I had this drab black uniform, no tie or anything, just a collar and I'd go around with my, my dustpan and my broom, cleaning up where all these people would sit at these cocktail tables, and I'd empty the ashtrays. Well, it was a great gathering place for the--on, on Thursday afternoon, on Fridays, for the Ivy League. All those boys would come in from Princeton and Yale, and so on. The girls would come in from Radcliffe and Bryn Mawr and Smith, and so on. And it was a big meeting place, a big pickup place for the--

MR. SMITH: Sure

MR. McCOURT: --for the, for the exalted ones of the Ivy League and the Seven Sisters. And I--

MR. SMITH: And what did you think when you saw--

MR. McCOURT: Oh, well, I saw them. They--again, they were the "golden people" of the world. They were--they, they were--they were up--they were, they were like the English aristocracy to me, and I--and I envied them, and I lusted after them like, as they say in the Catholic Church, I "coveted" those girls, those long-legged Episcopalians with, with legs that went on forever, and, and those auburn curls tumbling down to their shoulders, and I--boy, I wanted one of them, and I got one, eventually, and that's another story.

[Laughter.]

MR. SMITH: Did you, did you talk to them?

MR. McCOURT: No.

MR. SMITH: Did they talk to you?

MR. McCOURT: Oh, no; you couldn't talk to them.

MR. SMITH: No?

MR. McCOURT: You were told you're not to talk to anybody. If somebody says anything to you, "Yes, sir," "No, sir," "Yes, ma'am," "No, ma'am." You said nothing. But I got into trouble because--and it wasn't of my own doing. There was a young, beautiful young woman from one of those colleges, and she let out a yelp one day, and this is a significant moment in my life, a turning point in my life when, when she let out this yelp. And the maitre d' went over, and there's a bit of a huddle. He says, "Mccourt, come over here. Did you, did you empty the ashtrays here?" I said, "I think I did." Because there was another houseman. "Well," he said, "where did you put it?" I said, "It's in the garbage," the, ashes and so on. Swizzle sticks and stuff. "Where is the garbage?" I said, "It's gone down to the kitchen." "Well, go--this young lady left, well, a number, a telephone number on a napkin, and it's from the boy from Yale and she wants that, and you'd better get it, because her father is president of the Traffic [ph] Club which rents most of the second floor of the Biltmore Hotel. This is the big writer. You'd better get that." So I said, "Uh-huh, all, all right." I went down to the kitchen. There were two huge garbage bins, and I looked in them. I said I don't know the hell I'm going to find a little wet paper napkin in all of this, with coffee grounds and egg shells and garbage from the kitchen.

[Laughter.]

MR. McCOURT: So I tipped over this huge bin and I had--the garbage was all over the floor, I'm down on my knees, poking around, looking for a paper napkin, and then I--and for some reason, the Puerto Rican dishwashers and cooks had something to do with this. They're over in the corner and --between meals, they would sing, and they're banging on pots, and, and they're going around very happy, and I said to myself I wish I could be like them. I wish I could

just go around singing songs, and not be worried all the time. And then I went over to the counter where they had paper napkins, and I took one of the paper napkins and wrote a number on it.

MR. SMITH: Any number.

MR. McCOURT: Any number. And I took it upstairs and handed it to the maitre d' and he gave it to the girl, and she was happy. And I--and she gave him a dollar. That was a big tip in those--

MR. SMITH: Not you.

MR. McCOURT: Not me. She gave him a dollar, and I was--the only thing I regret, I wasn't there when, when she called that number. [Laughter.]

MR. SMITH: Then you also tell the story, also at the Biltmore Hotel, of your other job there, which was caring for canaries in cages.

MR. McCOURT: Oh, the canaries. Yes. Canaries, yeah, on--in the lobby and on the 19th floor ballroom, which they used to turn into a restaurant in the summer time. They had--it was ringed with canary cages. There must have been 60 canaries there, and it was my job to climb up and feed them, water them, clean their cages, look for melancholy canaries. But my, my--my social life became so, so complicated at the time. I would--I'd stay out too late and in the morning, when I went in I, I wasn't too interested in taking care of the canaries. Instead of taking care of them, I would take naps. So then I, then I had a three-day--my first St. Patrick's Day in New York, I had three days, three days off. They, they were kind to me. In three days I came back, and there was a note on my time card, report to my--the superintendent's office, Mr. Carey, and he said, "Mccourt, what did you do to the canaries?" "What did you do to the birds?" I said, "What birds?" He said, "I'm not talking about the goddamn swallows of Capistrano. I'm talking about 39 canaries, dead in their cages." But be--but before, before this happened, I had found them dead in their cages, and I was worried, and so I, I climbed up and, and I glued them to their perches.

[Laughter.]

MR. McCOURT: And this is what he found a day--I was betrayed by another, by another houseman.

MR. SMITH: Dead birds.

MR. McCOURT: Dead birds.

MR. SMITH: Standing up, glued on-

MR. McCOURT: Glued to their perches. So--and I said I--I

said, "I don't know what happened to them." He said--I said, "Maybe, maybe--maybe they died while I was out," and he said, "Well, what'd they do? Get up and glue themselves to their perches."

[Laughter.]

MR. McCOURT: So that was the end of me in the bird department. Then they put me on--then they put me on banquets and I was building the, the daises, the podiums for these big conventions. So there was a lunch, one day, for an insurance man, big insurance companies, and the chairman got up to make his speech, and the platform--I had taken shortcuts with the, with the metal supports. The platform collapsed. He had a heart attack and he was taken up to the hospital and he died. I don't know if it was--nowadays, it would be an \$11 million suit. But he died, and, and Mr. Carey called me back, he said, "Mccourt, you know, you're a natural born killer." [Laughter.]

MR. McCOURT: "Why don't you get a job as an exterminator?" [Laughter.]

MR. McCOURT: Well, about that time, then, I was, I was lucky because I was rescued by the Chinese, because they had invaded Korea, and I was drafted. So then began a two-year vacation in the Army.

MR. SMITH: And since you had this fine experience with the canaries in the Hotel Biltmore, --they put you in the Canine Corps.

MR. McCOURT: Yeah. They put me--yeah, they had me training German shepherds in Germany. I didn't like dogs. I--because when I was a, a telegram boy in Limerick, they used to attack me, chewed up my ankles. So I did that anyway, and then I became a company clerk, came back here, and I had--and the other great thing was that I had the GI Bill. That was the luckiest thing that ever happened to me. That the Chinese attacked Korea--I'm very sorry about the people who died, and so on--but that attack enabled me to go to New York University and become a teacher. Otherwise, I might never have gone.

MR. SMITH: And you got your bachelor's--

MR. McCOURT: I got the bachelor's--

MR. SMITH: --and a master's

MR. McCOURT: And the master's, yeah.

MR. SMITH: At--through the GI Bill.

MR. McCOURT: Yeah; yeah.

MR. SMITH: So it was very important.

MR. McCOURT: Yeah. Then I--that, that was my career, then, 30 years, practically, as a teacher.

MR. SMITH: Tell me about teaching in a school like this. This is Stuyvesant. This, when you were here -- which was a--actually a magnet school, a very--

MR. McCOURT: This is the, the "jewel in the crown" of the New York City educational system. In order to get into Stuyvesant, you had to take an exam. There were 700 openings, and I believe 13- or 14,000 kids took the exam. So you skimmed the cream and you got--and, and the emphasis was on science and technology, although when I became an English teacher, I found they were equally, equally gifted in, in English. I would have kids enter poetry contests. They walked away with everything. They, the poets. There was extraordinary poets in the school. And of course they were winning the Westinghouse science talent awards every year.

MR. SMITH: But they could be tough, I take it, and, and--what did they think of you?

MR. McCOURT: Well, they, they wouldn't let you get away with anything. You could--there was no such thing. In other schools, you could give the kids busy work. "Okay, open to page 19 and do." Not here. They knew what you were up to. And when you--teaching is like being married, in a way. You come in and you have these kids, five classes a day, five days a week, and they see you every single day, and they're, they're--by now, at 16 and 17, they are professional psychologists the students of, of teachers. They know, and they, they have some instincts, and like heat-seeking missiles, that go for whatever is vulnerable in you, and they can find it, and they--and they can--they have driven teachers out of the school, not just here, but in, but in other schools. So you're dealing with that all the time, and the chemistry--now, the longer I'm away from teaching, the more I think about it. The chemistry of a class is fascinating. What's going on, what kind of man or woman the teacher is, or what the kids are, what kind of kids you have in the class, because I went from different schools and it was different in each school. McKey [ph] in Staten Island, Seward Park [ph] on the Lower East Side, and then here, at Stuyvesant. It was all different.

MR. SMITH: What did they think of you, your accent, your background

MR. McCOURT: Well, the accent was a, was a bridge, in a way, because I--as soon as I open my mouth they'd say, "Hey, yo, Teach, you Scotch or sumpin'?" And then I had to explain that I was Irish, and then they'd want to know what was Ireland then --especially the kids in other schools. And I had to--they'd want to know what it was like growing up in Ireland then, what kind of music I listened to, and so on. "Hey, do you like Elvis?" This was the old days. "No, I like Bing Crosby" -- "Who?" -- They didn't know who Bing

Crosby was at that time. So all, all of this--and I found I had, I had to divest myself of a few ideas or notions, no misconceptions about teaching. That I had to stop--I could not act like an Irish schoolmaster. I could not be like the teachers back in Ireland, and who ruled with the cane and the stick and the strap, and the bullying, and the fear and the threat. I couldn't do that. There were kids here who would break me in two --football players and so on. Or if not, not physically, they could do it verbally. Not really. They never would have to do that.

[Laughter.]

Finding a voice.

MR. SMITH: The tone of "Angela's Ashes", the voice was the voice of you as, as a boy, really, written in the first person --present tense. Now I can tell from the excerpt, the tone and the voice changes a bit.

MR. McCOURT: Well, I suppose it goes along with growing maturity and more--and increasing vocabulary. Maybe increasing sensitivity, or sensibility--or confusion in New York. That's what it was, because I had to express my confusion, and, and, and bewilderment and all of being in New York. That wasn't--I think that's the main thing about the immigrant experience, which I was, I was an immigrant, coming into New York, even though I had--I had the language. That's the gift that the English gave us--thank you. But there was bewilderment, how, how to proceed, what to do in certain situations, 'cause I was always making a fool of myself. I'd go to, I'd go to Horn & Hardert's [ph] automat, which, oh, they're long gone now--order a hot dog, and they'd say, "Well, what would you like on your hot dog?"

I'd, I said, "That." I'd point to some well, and it was gravy. "You want gravy?" And I'd say, "Yeah." I didn't, I didn't know you weren't supposed to have--and everybody would laugh and I'd blush, and I felt I got through the--but I tried to express all of this, and, and the way I had to ma--it was like a minefield, make my way through the Biltmore Hotel and through the Army, and then NYU, and then teaching. You had to make--I had to feel my way, and I suppose the language, or the tone would show this.

MR. SMITH: And in "'Tis," the new book,-- it'll be, again, in the first person,--present tense

MR. McCOURT: Yeah. Well, it's the first person, but--and I move in and out of the, the past and the present tense, depending I think on the urgency of the situation, because I, I just had a tendency to move into the present tense, depending on the intensity or the urgency of the situation.

MR. SMITH: Do you have any concern about whether this book will be as well-received as the first?

MR. McCOURT: I'd--I don't think it will be. It couldn't. It,

it won't, it won't have the, the exotic appeal, I think, if you want to call it that, of "Angela's Ashes"--a distant place and a distant time. There are people who are "on to me" now.

[Laughter.]

MR. McCOURT: Who were teaching with me, and--or drinking with me down at the Lion's Head. They're on to me. So --it's a minefield.

MR. SMITH: Right. The one event that I assume you deal with is your mother, Angela, coming to this country-

MR. McCOURT: Yeah.

MR. SMITH: --and her eventual death.

MR. McCOURT: Yeah. But, but she came--she came in 1959 for Christmas, for three weeks, and stayed for 22 years, til she died in 1981, and that's what I was writing--I'm ending the second book, "Tis," now, and that's what I was writing about today, her, her--her passing in New York.

MR. SMITH: You were writing about it today?

MR. McCOURT: Today; yeah. So that's--and I was--I was having a rough time with it because it's, --your mother dies, your father, and so on, and it's hard to knock 'em off again. It's hard to go through that whole process of, of recalling, going to the hospital where she was, in Lennox Hill Hospital here, and -- recalling the details. So that, that I, I don't think I give in easily to emotions, but that was--that--I said, "Why the hell am I putting myself through this?" Because if you're gonna write honestly, you have, you have to go through the details and show what it was like for her--not for me--what--her deterioration, and it was a deterioration. It wasn't sudden. It was wretched.

MR. SMITH: Right. You describe also in the new book two marriages

MR. McCOURT: Yeah. Well, no, not really. No; no. I describe one. Two would be too much. I've been married three times but I've only dealt with one, the first one, which--out of which my daughter, Maggie, came, and that's the main thing. But I, I--my wife was a, a New England Episcopalian, and there, there was attraction, but I think we didn't have much in common outside of each other.

[Laughter.]

MR. McCOURT: We, we didn't--we didn't agree on most things. There were cultural differences. You might call it incompatibility.

MR. SMITH: And she's still alive

MR. McCOURT: She's still alive; yeah.

MR. SMITH: And writing about it? Is that--

MR. McCOURT: Is she writing about it?

MR. SMITH: No. You--is that--

MR. McCOURT: Oh.

MR. SMITH: --embarrassing in any way.

MR. McCOURT: Well, I, I, I'm not in any--I'm not--I'm inclined to, to besmirch anyone. So I have to tell my side of the story and I have to give her credit for being the woman that she was and is, a teacher and a mother, the mother who produced this child that I love. So that's it, and I, I--I'm certainly not go--going to go into intimate details on the things we disagreed on a very domestic, and, and bedroom level. No.

MR. SMITH: The--you have talked, in the past, about writing as a way to make--and I think these are more or less your words--an insignificant life significant.

MR. McCOURT: Yeah; yeah.

MR. SMITH: What do you mean?

MR. McCOURT: Well, I used to say this to my, to my classes when I was teaching at Stuyvesant here, that nothing is significant till you make it significant. You could--I used to say to them--I used to say to them: "Well, what, what did you have for dinner last night?"

"Well. . ."

I said, "Last night. Can't you remember what--"

"Oh, yeah, chicken."

It was always chicken. Because there was always a sale on at the supermarket. And the--then I go through the routine: "Well, where did it come from?" "And they've gone--" "Where did it come from? My mother got it."

"Oh, yeah?" "Did she go and get it?" "Yeah." "And, and who cooked it?" "My mother." "And who set the table?" "My mother." "And who, who took the dishes--" "My mother."

"What were you doing, you great lump? What were you doing while your mother was--" "Well, you know, I had to do my homework." "And what was your father doing?" "He was reading the paper." So you get a--you get a sense of the roles of--and--but did anything happen at the dinner? And then I'd find out some families use dinner time to settle

their differences and yell at each other. Others took their plates and went off to separate rooms. Others watched television.

So--and, and then you get a--and I said that, "Well, what kind of plates were there?" "Did you use plastic or paper?" "Did you use plastic glasses?" "Did you serve wine?" "No.No wine." There was one kid who described how he had dinner alone because his parents were away, and they were quite wealthy. He had dinner alone, served by a maid, veal chops with a half bottle of wine, and the chandelier glistening above his head. And they all thought it was very--but that was one image, one moment that stuck in all their heads. They teased him a bit over it, but they never forgot it.

MR. SMITH: But your notion was, and is, that you could make such a--mundane--significant by writing about it.

MR. McCOURT: Yeah. Well, I re--read one time that Henry James said that for him, the turn of a head was more important than the 100 Years War. These little moments, these little--the body language. So I thought that, --the things were--the mundane things that we dismiss, usually, are sometime pregnant--pregnant with meaning, and you can--that you can make--like O'Henry and story--and Chekov--make a story out of practically any moment.

MR. SMITH: It sounds also, to me, Frank, as though, in a way, you grew up teaching in this high school.

MR. McCOURT: I did. Oh, yeah; this is where I grew up. This was my university. This, this--the--these classrooms, and I taught in a number of different classrooms. If--I was learning from the kids. I didn't know I was learning. They didn't know I was learning. I thought I was teaching. They thought I was teaching. But I was learning. I learned an awful lot about, not just about literature, and maybe about writing, but about myself, and about them. So as I was saying earlier, there was that chemistry between them and me.

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