



# Breakfast for Mrs. Roosevelt

by Patricia D'Angelo

“**D**RAT!” GRACIE PULLED her foot from the snowdrift, bent over, and scooped a handful of wet, white flakes from inside the top of her boot. “Drat! Drat! Drat!”

Not the kind of language Grandma Olsen would like to hear, but Gracie was as angry as a fourteen-year-old could be. Here she was, at half-past five in the morning, a cold snowy morning no less, trying to get to work, and her boots were filled with snow!

“Drat!” she repeated again for good measure.

Gracie sighed. Can't do much about it now, she thought. Snowflakes licked at her lips as she trudged along Curry Hollow Road. It was a mile walk from Grandma and Grandpap Olsen's to the Allegheny County Airport where Gracie was the morning set-up girl at the airport coffee shop. “Uphill, both ways,” Grandma Olsen would say whenever Gracie complained about her daily trek. Then she'd give Gracie a big hug and say, “You're a good girl, Gracie. A real good girl.”

Gracie lived with Grandma and Grandpap Olsen now. When the Great Depression struck the country in 1929, many people lost their jobs. Gracie's family was luckier than many because her father worked in a coal mine, and coal was necessary to operate the important steel mill industry in Pittsburgh. But in 1933, when Gracie was ten years old, he had to quit because “his health gave out,” according to Grandma Olsen.

Gracie was the third of six children in the Bumberger family. Her two older sisters, Lillian and Mary Jane, were old enough to hold small jobs to help the family. Lillian worked in a restaurant, and Mary Jane cleaned a schoolteacher's house. Gracie's two younger sisters, Thelma and Peggy, and baby brother, Buddy, were too young to do much of anything except get in everybody's way. “My three little terrors,” Mama would say.

Whenever someone asked Gracie why she lived with the Olsens, she'd say, “I was picked to live with Grandma and Grandpap Olsen because I couldn't earn

THE GREAT DEPRESSION OF THE 1930s WAS A TIME OF ECONOMIC HARDSHIP WHEN MANY BANKS, FACTORIES, AND STORES WENT OUT OF BUSINESS.



money like my older sisters, and I ate more than the younger ones.”

Gracie was very happy living with her grandparents. Sunday night was her favorite night of the week. After supper Grandma would add extra pieces of hickory and oak to the wood-burning stove and slip an apple cobbler into the oven. Soon the wonderful aroma of baking apples, cinnamon, and nutmeg would fill the kitchen. Grandma would make coffee in a pot that she never washed. “It would take the good out of it,” she once explained when Gracie offered to clean it. When the cobbler and coffee were ready, Grandpap, Grandma, and Gracie would gather around the radio in the parlor to listen to the latest world news as they ate the warm dessert.



If they were lucky, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt would be giving one of his Fireside Chats about work relief programs or the economic conditions of the country. “Haven’t missed a one of FDR’s chats since he talked about the New Deal in ‘33,” Grandpap would boast. “He’s a good man and he’s got good ideas for the country. Just give him time, and he’ll make it right.”

Sometimes Grandma, Grandpap, and Gracie would hold their own Fireside Chats. They talked about the chickens they raised or Grandpap’s job driving an oil truck. But most of the chats were about money.

The Depression was still affecting the country in 1937, and to help out at home, Gracie applied for a part-time job at the Allegheny County Airport. She was hired to work from 6:00 A.M. to 8:00 A.M., Monday through Friday, as a set-up girl. She earned fifty cents a week.

As Gracie approached the airport terminal, the night crew was busy shoveling the sidewalks around the buildings, and Gracie could hear the plows clearing snow off the runways behind the terminal. I guess the planes were grounded, she thought as she walked up the steps and into the terminal.

The coffee shop was in a small, separate area at the far end. Gracie barely noticed the few passengers in the waiting area as she rushed across the black-and-white tiled floor.



WORK  
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THE  
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WAS  
PRESIDENT  
ROOSEVELT'S  
PLAN TO  
PROVIDE  
FOOD,  
HOUSING,  
AND JOBS  
FOR PEOPLE  
AND TO  
HELP  
BUSINESSES  
GET BACK  
ON THEIR  
FEET.

Pulling off her gloves, Gracie reached into her pocket for the key to unlock the shop. She opened the door and switched on the light. The hands on the clock that hung over the long, white counter seemed to frown at her as though they knew she was late.

Gracie tossed her coat on the nearest chair and pulled off her boots. She found an old newspaper under the counter and stuffed it into the boots to help dry them out. Gracie relocked the door with the CLOSED sign over the glass pane. She would turn the sign to OPEN at seven o'clock when the coffee shop officially opened for the day.

"Twenty minutes late," Gracie muttered to herself as she reached for her

apron. She thought of the chores she had to complete before the morning cooks arrived at six-thirty. I'll put the coffee on first today, Gracie decided. Some of the night crew might need a cup to warm them up if they've been shoveling snow all night.

After making the coffee, Gracie busied herself setting the tables and filling the salt and pepper shakers. A sudden, sharp tapping on the door startled her. The pepper she was pouring spilled over the countertop. Sneezing, Gracie jumped off the red leather stool where she'd been sitting and walked toward the door. A fashionably dressed lady stood facing her.

"I'm sorry," Gracie began after unlocking and opening the door, "but the coffee shop doesn't begin service until seven o'clock."

"I'm Malvina Thompson," said the lady before Gracie could close the door. "I'm the personal assistant to Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt. I hope you can help us."

Gracie wasn't exactly sure what a personal assistant was, but she did know that Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt was the wife of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the president of the United States. Grandma

Olsen said Mrs. Roosevelt was even more important than the president because she spoke up for women's rights and for poor people and minorities. Grandma said she "had the president's ear" and would tell him about all the people who needed help.



"Our plane was grounded because of the weather," Miss Thompson continued. "We've been here all night, and Mrs. Roosevelt is hungry. Would it be possible for her to get something to eat?"

Gracie glanced past the door and saw the

First Lady sitting patiently in a worn seat in the waiting area. Gracie knew that some people called Mrs. Roosevelt "Eleanor Everywhere" because she flew all over the United States to talk to people and write about their problems. And now here she was, in Gracie's very own airport!

Gracie looked back at Malvina Thompson. "Of course," Gracie replied. "The cooks aren't here yet, but I'd be happy to fix breakfast for Mrs. Roosevelt, and you, too, if you'd like." The words poured from her lips before she had time to think about what she was saying.

"Thank you so very much. I'll inform Mrs. Roosevelt." Miss Thompson smiled and started back across the terminal.

Gracie wiped her hands nervously on her apron as she went back to the kitchen area. What am I going to do? she wondered. Panic began to set in. I don't know how to make breakfast for the wife of the president.

If Grandma Olsen were here, she'd probably put the bacon on first, Gracie thought. Having decided on a first step, she put her shoulders back, took a deep breath, and opened the refrigerator door.

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Within a few minutes, the smell of frying bacon drifted into the dining area. Gracie cracked four eggs and scrambled them. Just as she was about to plop them into the grease she had heating in a pan, she heard a light tap on the door of the restaurant.

Gracie hurried out to open it and found herself looking up into the face of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt. She swallowed hard as she stared at the First Lady and tried to think of something intelligent to say. Mrs. Roosevelt was quite tall, Gracie noticed, and had a friendly face. She wore a long dark coat with a fur around the collar. To Gracie, the fur looked like a fox that had caught its own tail in its mouth and would race round and round Mrs. Roosevelt's neck forever and ever. A narrow-brimmed hat covered most of the First Lady's head, but here and there a strand of hair had managed to escape and curled around her face in little squiggles that looked like question marks.

"Thank you for having us," Mrs. Roosevelt said as Gracie led the two ladies to the table she had set for them. Gracie thought it was the best table in the whole coffee shop because it had a view of the airport runways. From the table, diners could watch planes take off and land. This morning, however, the only activity came from the snowplows.

"It looks as though the snow has finally stopped," Mrs. Roosevelt noted as she took her seat.

Gracie swallowed again and was finally able to speak. "Yes, it has," she said as the two ladies unfolded their napkins. "I've left you a pot of tea and I'll have breakfast ready in just a few minutes." With that, Gracie scurried behind the long counter and back into the kitchen.

While the bacon and eggs were cooking, Gracie poured two large glasses of orange juice and brought them to the table where Mrs. Roosevelt and her assistant were sitting. Juice spilled over the rim of the glasses as Gracie placed them on the table. Flustered, she pulled a towel from her apron pocket and wiped it up.

"Don't worry about the juice, young lady," Mrs. Roosevelt said. "I've spilled quite a bit in my time, too. Now, tell me, what is your name?"

"Gracie. Gracie Bumbarger."

"Well, Gracie Bumbarger. I imagine you are a very fine cook. I'm looking forward to my breakfast."

Smiling, and feeling much calmer, Gracie returned to the kitchen where she arranged the crisp bacon and softly scrambled eggs on two plates. When four slices of toast popped up, she placed them in a

breadbasket with pats of butter. Putting everything on a large tray, Gracie carried the meal to the dining area.

"This looks wonderful, my dear," Mrs. Roosevelt declared as Gracie set the plates before the ladies. "Thank you so much."

"You're very welcome, Mrs. Roosevelt," Gracie replied, remembering her manners. She poured more hot tea for the two ladies before returning to the kitchen. She needed to clean up the dishes and skillets she had used before the morning shift of cooks arrived.

While she worked, Gracie watched as the two ladies ate and chatted. Every once in a while, Gracie would refill a water glass or place another pot of tea on the table.

As Eleanor Roosevelt and Malvina Thompson enjoyed their private breakfast, Gracie completed her morning chores. Usually, Gracie would leave the coffee shop as soon as her work was finished, but today she needed to take care of Mrs. Roosevelt and her companion. Finally, just as the morning staff was arriving, a man dressed in a dark uniform appeared. He approached the table where the First Lady was dining.



"Your plane is ready to depart, Mrs. Roosevelt," he said.

As an amazed kitchen staff looked on, the wife of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt got up from the table and walked over to Gracie. She took Gracie's trembling hand in hers and pressed a dime tip—a full morning's wage—into Gracie's palm. "My dear," said Mrs. Roosevelt, patting Gracie's



hand, "those were the finest eggs I've ever had."

"Thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt," Gracie replied. "My grandma Olsen says you're the finest First Lady our country has ever had."

Gracie clutched her dime and watched as Mrs. Roosevelt made her way through the airport terminal. "Wait till I tell Grandma and Grandpap," Gracie said. "Just wait till I tell them!"

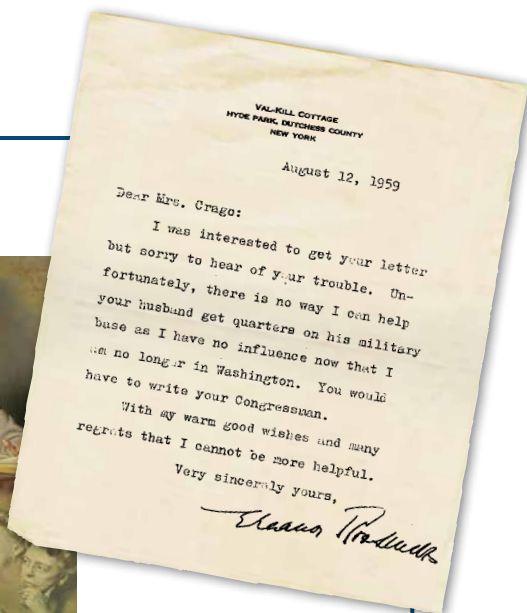
## Author's Note

*"Breakfast for Mrs. Roosevelt" is based on an actual incident related to me by Mary Ann Crago Bradshaw, the daughter of Gracie Bumbarger.*

*Grace was born in 1923, the third of six children, and, for economic reasons, was sent to live with her grandparents during the Depression. In the mid-1930s, Gracie worked at the Allegheny County Airport as a set-up girl. One night, most likely due to weather conditions or mechanical problems, Mrs. Roosevelt's plane landed at the airport. The First Lady spent the night in the terminal, and the following morning, Gracie made breakfast for her.*

*Gracie told the story of her encounter with Mrs. Roosevelt over and over. She was especially proud of the dime tip and that the First Lady had said to her, "Those were the finest eggs I've ever had."*

*When Gracie grew up, she and her husband, who was in the military, were unable to obtain base housing at Westover Air Force Base in Massachusetts because regulations stated that*



*their family of five was too large for a two-bedroom house. Grace decided to write to Mrs. Roosevelt. The day after she received the above reply from Eleanor Roosevelt, the Cragos were told that they could, despite base rules, move their family into a two-bedroom home. Until she died, Grace Bumbarger Crago believed that Mrs. Roosevelt was instrumental in their sudden relocation.*