

## The Way Things Used To Be, Part 1

What started me writing was watching things disappear. The flowers on the dining table disappeared fast; the rubber plant on the radiator cover, more slowly. The gaunt woman in the black bonnet and black dress down to her ankles who came every Wednesday, ate one boiled egg, one boiled potato, and washed our laundry on the scrubbing board in the laundry sink next to the kitchen sink disappeared.

My grandmother and my grandfather disappeared. So did one of my aunts. The curly-haired teen-ager who taught me how to throw a spiral and who joined the Army Air Force the day after Pearl Harbor disappeared. My baseball bat, my skates, my baseball cards, my marbles and my cousin who flew the Hump to Burma.

My father disappeared and then my mother. Everything I have ever owned, everyone I have ever known—even my children. The babies turned into toddlers and the toddlers turned into teenagers trying to prove that they didn't need me. Then the teenagers disappeared and turned into adults who truly do not need me and now it's happening even to them.

We try to stop things from disappearing. We keep rings, bracelets, articles of clothing; we preserve old letters written in ink that slowly fades until you can no longer make out the characters. The paper turns yellow, then brown, then it cracks at the folds, and then it crumbles into a powder and the powder disappears. We mount photographs in albums using glue that dries and cracks and the photographs fall out and disappear.

My father made black and white films of my brother and me taking tobacco out of his humidor and eating it, of us dunking for apples at our Halloween party, of me squirting my brother with water from the concrete drinking fountain in Riverside Park, back before the WPA built the concourse to hide the railroad tracks down there. I even remember a little zoo, with sheep and goats and a pony you could ride. Not only are the zoo and the animals gone, but now people try to tell me that they were never there.

When the images on my father's black and white films began to fade, my brother converted them to videotape and after my brother was gone I put the videotapes on the shelf next to my VCR. But the images on the videotapes have begun to fade and soon they too will disappear.

How shall summer's honey breath hold out against the wrackful siege of batt'ring days when rocks impregnable are not so stout, nor gates of steel so strong but time decays? Unless this miracle have might, says Shakespeare, that in black ink my love may still shine bright. Garrison, the main character in *Succession* tries to use that power to prevent his dead grandfather and dying father from disappearing. He does not succeed, but that is what attracts me to writing about the way things used to be.

I was born in New York City at the beginning of the 1930s and grew up there until I went into the army at the beginning of the 1950s. I will write about the way things used to be there back then; the way we lived, the things we owned, the games we played, the schools, the movies, the stores, the neighbors, the neighborhoods.

That power of black ink, not to stop things from disappearing, but to make them disappear more slowly was what started me writing and it will keep me writing until the day I disappear.

(Originally published at AuthorsDen and reprinted with permission of the author, Herbert Lobsenz).

### About the Author

Herbert Lobsenz studied literature at Heights College, NYU, went into the army during the Korean War and, following Robert Jordan of *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, became an EOD specialist. His second novel, *Vangel Griffin* (1961), won the Harper Prize and appeared on the Times best seller list. His latest novel, *Succession*, will be published in May 2008. Visit [Old Time Writer](#).

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