

The Last Crash

By Stan Drescher

The 1940s were difficult for my brother Jack. Papa had died, and at 18, Jack became the breadwinner of the family.

Jack and his friends had dropped out of school and had no trades. They were employed in menial positions with no future. Working as a shipping clerk, he earned \$15 a week.

Jack spent little time at our ground-floor apartment on Fourth Street. After work, he'd return for a bite to eat, then join his friends.

Mama was understanding. "He wants to be with his friends," she'd say.

Although they were not big earners, they all had pocket money left after contributing to their households. They spent most of it bowling, playing pool, and eating at a greasy spoon on the corner of Second Street and First Avenue.

Jack and his pals organized a cellar club in a vacant store below a neighborhood tenement. It provided a sanctuary where my brother and his friends could hang out, watch television and make plans for filling the empty hours.

At the time, "crashing"—sneaking into movie theaters—was a new fad. It was not for everyone; there was some risk involved. Several potential crashers got as far as the door and then gave up the attempt.

Although crashing was not commonplace (sometimes it would be a month between takes), it did provide excitement, and it was always a challenge. The crash had to be executed perfectly, and no crash was ever the same. Sometimes it was pitch black outside; other times, a bright moon lighted the way.

To maintain secrecy, "crash" was used as a code word. If they had a plan, they'd say, "Tomorrow's the crash." It worked perfectly. For years I thought they were talking about an auto accident or the stock market.

Sneaking into a large movie theater like the Strand, Capital or Paramount was serious business. Planning sometimes took days. Crashing the Roxy required ingenious preparation, and detailed information had to be obtained. What time did the movie and stage shows finish? How long was the

intermission? Did lights go on? By which exits did the audience leave? How many ushers would be on duty? Where were they posted?

In some movie houses, patrons waited in long lines in a posh foyer. When one show ended, the theater was emptied before those waiting were admitted. Safety laws had been enacted to protect the hundreds of patrons in the theater. Red glass "EXIT" signs were placed above all exit doors, and they had to be illuminated at all times. These doors, placed on either side of the building and behind the stage or screen, led to an alley or other passage.

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Balconies required fire escapes and stairwells. A crash site utilized one of these safety measures.

Theaters took precautions to keep uninvited "guests" from entering. Large fences and gates, sometimes with barbed wire across the top, were installed at the end of the alley. When the theater was closed, an alarm sounded if unauthorized entry was attempted. Crashing was not easy, but it beat television!

At every crash, something new was learned. When a live stage show was included, fireproof drapes had to be installed behind the screen. This mandated additional exits. If an orchestra played in a pit, two exits were included at the rear. Rarely were balcony exit doors locked. Many of the newer theaters had panic levers on these doors. Each improvement and innovation was studied and absorbed.

Once the group thought of buying an Army uniform for the person who would be on the inside. (During the war, servicemen were admitted free of charge.) But after some consideration, it was deemed too risky since getting caught would be a federal offense.

There were some unwritten rules for crashing. The plan was not discussed openly. If apprehended, a crasher would never reveal anyone else who was involved. And nothing regarding a crash could be mentioned to anyone other than another crasher.

My brother became quite adept at crashing. He started with small neighborhood cinemas and

moved up to the Academy of Music at 14th Street and Irving Place. Eventually he mastered the Globe, Rivoli, and Criterion. His street smarts helped him earn the nickname “Spooky.” He was well respected in the art of crashing.

Leaks of the crashes circulated throughout the neighborhood, and everyone became aware of my brother’s exploits. Other club members and First Street residents told Jack how proud they were of him. They knew the Spook, and he was from their block!

As time passed, Jack no longer found a challenge in crashing. He liked the fame, but where was it taking him? It seemed to be getting easier. Now when a crash took place, there were 15–20 crashers. Newcomers joined in—and they all looked up to my brother for guidance.

Now crashes only took place on opening nights, when the theaters were crowded and filled with anxious patrons. The 42nd Street Automat was the pre-crash meeting place where final plans were reviewed. Crashing was always easier with crowds. The more people, the more confusion. The bigger the mob, the more pushing. This simplified the crash. Eventually every movie house had fallen prey to Spooky and his followers—all except one.

The Radio City Music Hall was the classiest, largest theater in the world. It had more than 6,000 seats and was almost always sold out. Patrons who didn’t purchase tickets in advance faced long waits in long lines.

The movies shown there were always superior, and every stage show was fabulous, combining classics, a theme and the world-famous Rockettes.

The doors opened at 10 a.m. to accommodate the public. Each day the movie was shown five times and the stage show four. There were eight minutes between each show. The last stage show was shown at 10:18 p.m.

There was a good reason Radio City hadn’t been crashed—security. An usher wearing a starched blue-and-red uniform with white gloves was posted at every door. Twelve heavily polished brass doors provided exits on the 50th Street side. Two carpeted steps between brass rails led to the street.

Inside, between the rows of seats and the doors, there was a 4-foot-wide carpeted aisle. Those occupying the orchestra seats could depart with ease. The ushers assisted patrons, prevented falls, and were instructed to be on the lookout for crashers.

In October 1946, Spooky and his group decided to crash the impregnable Radio City Music Hall. A new movie was premiering. Attendance records were expected. Larry Parks was playing the title role in *Al Jolson*. Opening night was Columbus Day.

Word spread about the Music Hall crash, and when the group assembled in the shadows of 50th Street, 30 crashers were present—the most ever. No one spoke. This was it! The movie started at 8:22 p.m. They would have eight minutes to get in, be seated, relax and enjoy the show. And the best part of all was that they’d have orchestra seats.

Every precaution and risk was calculated. With so large a group, success had to be guaranteed. A member picked at random had purchased a ticket earlier that day. (It wasn’t my brother; he would not jeopardize his reputation by purchasing a ticket.) The ticket holder would sit in the orchestra and obtain a front-row aisle seat. Split-second timing was imperative. Once the show ended and the crowd dispersed, he would wait a minute before the next show started. Then he would leave the door facing 50th Street ajar. The plan was perfect.

All 30 scrambled in. What they hadn’t anticipated was the availability of 30 seats. Within seconds, a dozen ushers descended on the area and politely but firmly asked for ticket stubs. Prophetically, the crashers were evicted through the same door that had provided their entry.

The crash failed. The group assembled in the same shadows to see who got in. The next day, Rocky (the ticket holder) was questioned about *The Jolson Story*. He had seen the complete show twice and responded, “Yeah, it was OK.” The movie was nominated for an Oscar; Larry Parks became an overnight sensation.

This was the last crash for my brother. Was it an omen? Had he reached his threshold of maturity? He spent the next several years dancing with the opposite sex.

Jack became a policeman and was one of the last applicants accepted without a high school diploma. He studied hard and subsequently became a New York City Police sergeant.

My brother Jack was subjected to many interviews. He completed dozens of applications and was investigated thoroughly. And in all those years, he never mentioned “the last crash.” ❖

