

Miss McCook · Sari Rosenblatt

THE DAY I MOVED my father was indignant. In his coat and hat, scarf and gloves he paced the new bare rooms. He raised and lowered shades, ran water, gripped the knobs on doors and pulled. Then he walked out.

I found him, his eyes shut, sitting in the Lincoln. I knocked on the window by the driver's seat but he didn't answer. I knocked hard, my hand in a fist, my fingertips pressed in my palm. He didn't look up so I got in on the passenger side. His eyes were still shut, the heat was on high. On the tape deck Leontyne Price screamed an aria from *Aida*. I shouted above her. "Dad!"

He lowered the music and opened his eyes. "The kitchen smells like cat piss, the bathroom smells like cat piss, and what if there's a fire?"

"I'll run. I can run fast."

"She'll run. Flames everywhere and she'll run."

"There's a fire escape outside the bedroom window."

"The fire escape looks good for nothing. Good for cat piss."

Like the princess who slept on forty beds and felt the buried pea, my father could sleep on forty beds and smell the buried pea. And smell the cat beneath the pea. He smelled cats whenever I left home—in my tents at camp, my rooms at college. Don't listen to him, my mother always said. When has he ever smelled a cat? He grew up with dogs. Right, he'd say, agreeing with her so he could catch her off guard. And then I married your mother.

I was leaving home again. I'd come home in May, after graduating from college. We all knew it was a temporary stay; in December I would start my first job, move to my first apartment. For six months my mother went through boxes: Can you use slotted spoons? Grapefruit spoons? Eleanor? Are you sleeping? For six months I lay in bed but I wasn't sleeping. I was practicing the cannonball dive. I hugged my thighs to my chest, I pressed my head to my knees, I held my breath. My bed was the bluff, the floor was the sea.

My mother lifted my covers to show me her spoons and I inspected them by bringing them inside, running my thumbs along the metal. Thank you, I said, my voice blocked by tops of boxes popping. Do you

think you'll fondue? Eleanor? Squeeze an orange? Never mind that, my father said. She needs wrenches and nails. And is this place safe, I want to know. Hello? Ebullient El? You have good locks on this apartment? The door secure?

Yes.

Don't say yes unless you're sure.

I'm sure.

Wise guys are sure. Smart guys are cautious. Hello? Eloquent El? You cautious?

Under the covers I felt the spoons. They were warm as my skin. Warm as my knees touching my chin.

"Hello?" My mother knocked on the windshield. "The movers are ready. What should I tell them?"

I turned to my father. It was his answer she was waiting for. He lowered the heat, raised the music. She knocked on the windshield again. "Cy? Cy?"

He left the car and walked down the street. His open coat flew out like a flag. "They're impatient," she called out. "What should I tell them?"

He hugged the coat to his chest. "Tell the bastards to be careful."

I was a fifth grade teacher, the successor to Mrs. McCook, who in December took a maternity leave. The children missed McCook. Instead of watching my slides on Frederick Remington and the North American Indian, they made cards and gifts for McCook's new baby. They called me Miss McCook.

It wasn't easy stepping into her shoes. I didn't like the reading or math texts she used. I didn't like the mirror she hung on the wall (it lured children out of their seats, enticed them to stare, to pull their hair and lips, kiss themselves, kiss the glass). I couldn't understand her seating plan. She seemed to have ordered children by sexual maturity. Girls were arranged by descending breast size: big breasts were in the back, emerging breasts in the middle, flat breasts closest to me in the front. The girls in the back were altogether big for their age, tall as well as full, and they sat too close to the small timid boys who McCook, inexplicably, also placed in the back. The biggest boys with the biggest mouths sat front row center — perhaps a ploy of McCook's to keep them from shouting. They shouted nonetheless and their voices, so close to me, assaulted my ears.

“McCook!” they screamed. “How you grow so short?”

“It’s Liebmann. Miss Liebmann.”

“Leeman!” they screamed. “How you kiss your man? You stand on the roof? On the clouds? You hang from the sky?”

If a big tall girl liked a small timid boy she’d slap his cheek, touch his mouth, move up close and murmur, “ugly face, ugly face.” If a loud-mouthed boy liked a flat-breasted girl he’d grab her arm and pin it to her back, all the while hunching over her, pressing in.

“McCook! I’m going to save my money and take you to dinner!”

“Miss Liebmann. And be smart. Buy a book with your money.”

“Buy a book! Rather buy me a ham! Or some fuzzy fun!”

“Fuzzy fun!” screamed a big girl in the back row. “What lady want your dollar bill?”

“Buy a smoked ham,” I said. “Or a dictionary. Buy a dictionary.”

“Leeman, what you give me if I buy a dictionary?”

“Ya, Leeman, what you give me if I do all my work?”

Behind McCook’s desk I stared at them. I wanted to give them what they’d lost. They were not much older than ten. They had their whole lives to lose it again.

I couldn’t smell cats in my kitchen. But I didn’t know how a cat smelled. I grew up with dogs.

To be safe, I flooded the floor with ammonia. “Tell me what you smell,” I said to my neighbor Glen.

“Ammonia.”

He had a nose in the real world. And a foot in the door, my kitchen door, where he stood and watched me work. I mopped and sponged. I wrung rags. I used brushes, steel wool, razor blades.

Glen lived across the hall and his proximity to me gave him special rights: to get familiar fast; to stand like a rack in my doorway. I didn’t like being watched. His shoulders were too attentive. They leaned forward to follow me, rocked when I stopped to rest. I didn’t rest often.

“Where do you get your energy?” he asked, watching me work a stain.

“When you doing my floor?” he asked, rolling the sleeves of his green flannel shirt.

“You’re making me feel guilty,” he said, his shoulders set in shame.

So go home, I wanted to say. But couldn’t. Instead I tried pretending he

wasn't there. I wasn't successful. His large figure flashed on the wet kitchen floor and everywhere I looked I saw green.

The man didn't come through the door. He came up the fire escape and through the bedroom window.

At six A.M., awakened by the winter air, I strained to understand: an open window, a sneaker, a fragment of leg; an open window, a sneaker, the leg growing longer. This wasn't a still life I could study: a pear, a lemon, an egg. It was a moving sneaker and a moving leg. A window wide open. I sat up and wrapped myself in sheets. "Bastard!" I screamed. "Bastard, Bastard, Bastard." My screams were gunfire. They got him in the leg, in the heart. They got him where it hurt. And he fled.

"I never saw his face," I said to the officer. He leaned against my bedroom wall and filled out a form.

"I didn't see his age, race, height." He lit a cigarette, took a drag, held his breath.

"He wore a high, white sneaker." He rubbed his back against my wall and left a smear of blue.

"His leg was smallish." The officer's hips were thick with holster and gun.

"I screamed, he left." He exhaled his breath in the edge of my robe.

I made up contact rules: "There shall be no grabbing, hitting, punching, kissing during math, spelling or science. When I take aside a reading group neither—you hear that—neither . . ."

"I hear— beaver, beaver!"

"Neither the people in the group nor the people at their desks may touch the leg of another."

The rules made them edgy. Like tiny Talmudic scholars they wiggled and rocked in their seats. They ate fire balls by the bushel. They screamed even louder than usual.

"Got you last night!"

"You did not get me!"

"Got your sister in the Bank Street alley!"

"You did not get my sister!"

"Got your mother! Got her on your front porch steps!"

"You did not get my mother! Her boyfriend got her!"

“I got her, too!”

“You got shit, Shamont!”

I wouldn't sleep. Instead of closing my eyes I kept watch over my window. I sat propped up on pillows, my night light on. Beneath my bed were arms—a can of mace, a wrench, a planter hook with a jagged claw.

I considered who he might be. Maybe Mark, my boyfriend in college. Maybe he drove cross-country just to climb my fire escape, catch me in my sleep. He had a motive; he always said I didn't love him enough and he was right. I couldn't love him. He lived with his parents who were always around. And peculiar. His mother left out pots of stew which collected dust by day and by night became dinner. The whole family—even the father—watched *Star Trek* while they ate and the house hadn't been cleaned in years. We made love in the basement, on a rollaway covered with hair. Upstairs I could hear his parents talking. If the pitch of their voices rose, I froze and could only go so far. “Relax,” he'd say. “They're probably doing the same thing.” “Right,” I'd say. “Now I can relax.” My back itched. I saw webs on the wall.

“McCook! You going to have a baby like Miz McCook?”

“Who am I?”

“Something like Freeman?”

I held my hand under my chin. “Notice, if you will, my likeness to myself.”

“Miss McCan! Miss BigCan!”

“Miss Liebmann. Say it. Miss Liebmann.”

“Miss Leeman!”

“Again.”

“Miss Leeman! Say it! Again! Miss Leeman! Say it! Again!”

They chanted, profaned, chanted, profaned, and shortly thereafter forgot my name.

He was just some man, loose-limbed, nimble-jointed, just a little desperate and out of his mind and looking for sex. He was ready to give himself—to anyone, anything, it didn't matter. He was ready to fall in love. He fell in love with my fire escape and began climbing.

Bastard be nimble/Bastard be quick/Bastard climbs my fire escape/
And so too climbs his wick.

And so too climbs his sneaker.

And on whose foot will the sneaker fit? A joiner? A doer? A banker? A sailor? A cowboy? A ploughboy? A lover? A son?

If I dozed for a while then woke, my room seemed strange. I couldn't name things. My parents' old bureau was a mound of brown, a square blot. My lamp and chair were lines and squares, foreign bodies. Through my open closet door I saw slacks and skirts and knew they were clothes, but they didn't seem to belong to me. I didn't seem to belong to me. I couldn't name myself.

I couldn't tell my parents about the break-in; they'd insist I move home. Insist all you want, I'd say as I packed.

At home I would sleep. But it wouldn't be restful. Like an agitated professor, my father would walk circles around my bed.

I knew the place was a come-on, a crime trap. But does anyone listen to her father? Does anyone say, Dad, you're a learned man, I want to cash in on your wisdom. I knew it was just a matter of time before something happened. You're an eligible young victim, El. And the world, let me stress, is full of opportunists. There are men of vision, if you will, who can look through a wool coat, a wool sweater, a set of thermal underwear and still see weakness. You have to be on your guard. Eleanor? Are you listening? Wake up. Learn to protect yourself. Learn to be a wolf.

Don't listen to him, my mother would say. Be yourself.

Be a wolf in sheep's clothing, if you want.

Be who you are.

She's a sleeping paschal lamb, about to get lanced.

I told Glen about the break-in. I told him that I couldn't sleep. One night he came over with a power drill. You need to secure your window, he said. I watched as he guided the drill into the frame.

"I didn't ask for this break-in," I told him.

"You think I think you did?"

"Talk slowly. I'm tired. Things don't make sense."

"You think. I think. You did?"

I still didn't follow but said no and hoped it was the right answer.

We were both wearing flannel, the material of friendly neighbors. In the window, his shoulders looked like wings. The drill, tiny in his hands,

was an egg. I was a baby finch in flannel.

He put penny nails into the holes he drilled. "The window is secure now, see?" He tried to lift it, he pulled on it hard, but it stayed in place. "No one'll come in."

"What?"

"No one. Will come. In."

"Oh. No one will come in."

"Miss Echo."

"Miss Leibmann."

That night, the window nailed tight, I sat guard until the sun rose. I added a rolling pin to the collection under my bed. I was stockpiling arms to ensure my peace.

Sleep was all we talked about.

"If you can't sleep alone," he said, "stay with me."

"I don't want to sleep."

"Everybody wants to sleep. Sleep is necessary."

I needed rest, I told him, not necessarily sleep. My mother used to tell me to rest if I couldn't sleep. As long as you lie still, she said, the body can repair itself. This made me think I was undetectably marred and gouged and I lay perfectly still hoping to be healed.

He was a scared cat, a cocky hare, a ne'er-do-well snail always getting short shrift. He was a wounded wolf with a burr in his paw. His hurt was so great, his haunches collapsed and he crawled down the street on his belly. He crawled down the Boulevard, passed Phil's Deli. He was looking for some lamb to remove the burr. That's all. He hadn't expected to feel sexual. But the pressure and friction of belly to ground got the best of him. It got him so bad his eyesight failed and when in the distance he saw a fire escape it looked to him like an outstretched, helping hand. He crawled to the hand and began to climb.

I marked off sleepless nights as if charting my cycle. I was McCook counting the days of her missed period. I counted seven, fourteen, twenty-one. I was one month sleepless. One month crazy. At school I felt disembodied. There was the me who taught and the me who dangled from the ceiling watching me teach. I watched as I taught the children to make animals out

of colored paper. We folded and folded until we had the likeness of wild game. I listened to myself give instructions: "We are in the jungle. The hunters are after our animals. Lets help them escape. Write messages on them and fly them out the window. Set free the rabbits and quail. Set free the fishes and buffalo. Say good-bye to them."

"Bye Dirty Bird!"

"Bye Dirty Dog!"

Bye McCook, McWick, McWolf.

I watched as I allowed children to go to the lavatory not one at a time but in twos and fours, in mixed company. I watched as they returned twenty, thirty minutes later, returning in twos and twos. In mixed company. I stared with interest as I walked to the door to greet the principal. He held in one hand a paper hen.

"Miss Liebmann. Why are your children throwing things out the window?"

"We're celebrating the coming of spring," I lied.

"It's January."

"Right."

"Are you aware that the writings on these things are obscene?"

"No, sir." His thumb was covering the writing on the hen but I knew what it said. "Suck Cock." I wrote that message myself.

"And a more serious offense—why were a boy and a girl from your class allowed to enter a utility closet?"

"They weren't in the lav?"

"They weren't in the lav, they didn't have passes, it took the hall monitor fifteen minutes to get the door opened. I punished the children but we have to—Miss Liebmann? Are you listening? You look like you're not listening."

I met with him after school and told him I was tired and not myself. We've already lost one teacher in the class, he told me. We don't want to lose another. He told me to take a week's leave and get some sleep.

I stood outside Glen's apartment wrapped in a wool blanket. One side of it slipped off my shoulder when I knocked on the door.

"I have blankets," he said, as I walked into his living room. He stood at the stove in the half kitchen. I saw him through the large cut-out square which separated one room from the other. He was stirring a spoon in a

saucepan. "I'm making you strong warm milk. It'll make you so sleepy you won't know what hit you."

"What what?"

"What hit you."

I kept the blanket around me and sat on the couch.

"See how bumpy it is? You take the bed."

"You take the bed."

He poured the milk in a mug that said *Glen*. "You can have the Glen mug."

"What will you use?"

"I have two Glen mugs." He poured himself a mug of cognac, poured cognac into my milk, and joined me on the couch. "What's the longest you ever slept?" he asked me.

"I don't know. A few months? I sleep to avoid things. What about you?"

"Eighteen hours. I didn't really sleep all that time but I stayed in bed. It was this time I was—this is my mother talking—'carrying on' with a woman who was married. And she had to stop seeing me. And I didn't want to stop seeing her. So I got into bed one day and just started thinking about her. I went to bed at three in the afternoon and didn't get up until nine the next morning. I slept, dreamt about her, thought about her, slept."

"Did it help you get over her?"

"No, it helped me hold onto her."

He poured more cognac into our mugs and we drank until my neck felt weightless, until I was sure my body, even on the jungle terrain of the couch, could float. "I think I can sleep now," I said.

"Good." He brought me another blanket and pulled a space heater in front of the couch. "In case you get cold," he said, and kissed the top of my head. He went into his bedroom and I heard him opening drawers, moving a chair. I heard water running. I turned on the space heater.

"You okay?" he called out.

"Yes."

The heater hummed and warmed me. I dozed, dreamt I was dozing, dreamt I opened my eyes. I opened my eyes. Glen's couch was not just bumpy; it had its own arsenal. Beneath the cushions I felt an egg beater, a wire whisk, a serving spoon. I lay in a curl on my side, I practiced the tuck of the cannonball dive, I tried to doze. But couldn't. I felt hot from the

heat of the heater, I turned the heater off. Without the hum the room seemed darker. I turned on the light.

“Eleanor? What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I’m not sleeping.”

He came into the living room, walked to the couch, sat in the space of my curl. “You’ve given *me* insomnia.” His wrap-around robe was a doe-colored beige. I watched as I pinched the terry cloth cord and pulled.

“What are you trying?” he asked, running a finger down my cheek.

“What are you saying?” he asked, prying the blanket away from my fist.

“Hmmm? Tell me.”

“I only want some sleep.”

We slept for three consecutive days. By the fourth I thought maybe I was in love. By the fifth I was looking for an apartment on a safer side of town.

Glen suggested I move in with him, then noticed the look on my face. “Right,” he said.

My father suggested I was crazy. “What are you? Crazy? You just moved.” The static on the phone had the sound of the sea.

The place is a fire trap, I told him.

“Now you’re talking,” he said. I imagined I had a conch shell pressed to my ear. “And that fire escape looks good for nothing.” His voice was the voice of a father, whispering above the waves.

I returned to school on dress-up day. Wearing their best, the children kept a clean, wide distance from each other. Their good clothes quieted them and they screamed softer than usual. They screamed at me, their teacher, who returned to school in a secondhand dress and a stole of fake fur.

“Leeman, who you supposed to be?”

“Miss Liebmann.”

“Leeman don’t dress like that!”

“No? How does she dress?”

“She wear big, long skirts!”

“Good. What else?”

“She be wearing flat, black shoes!”

“Good. What else?” Hands were waving.

“She got this big bangle bracelet she sometime wear!”

“She wear plaid blouses!”
“And gold dot earrings!”
“And she never wear make-up!”
“Not even blush!”
And there I was.