

GIRLBOMB:

A Halfway Homeless Memoir

by Janice Erlbaum

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Erlbaum GIRLBOMB !

For Judith

Erlbaum GIRLBOMB !

Perhaps someday it will be pleasant to remember these times.

– Virgil

Author's note

This is a work of narrative nonfiction. Names and identifying details have been changed, and some characters are composites. Certain events are presented out of order. I had to leave out a lot of the good stuff. Sorry.

PART ONE

Shelter Happens

Chapter One: Intake

Where do you think you're going?

Forty-Seventh Street and Tenth Avenue – that's what the lady on the phone told me. "The building has a big sign with a cross on it," she said kindly. "We'll be looking out for you."

I hung up the pay phone and hoisted my bookbag. I was fifteen years old, it was ten thirty on a windy November night, and I was somewhere in Hell's Kitchen. I'd been marching uptown since Washington Square Park, not knowing where I was going, my hands swollen and tingly from swinging furiously at my sides, my bookbag denting my hip with each step.

"Yo, where you goin', miss? I could walk with you?"

No, papí. I was walking alone tonight. I was going to a shelter, which was on Forty-Seventh and Tenth, and I wasn't stopping for anybody – not the hustlers hawking nickel bags, not the Italian homeboys in their tricked-out I-Roc catcalling

me. Not even a break in stride for the two boys passing me, shoving each other and laughing, then yelling, "Hey miss, you dropped something!"

"Hey, miss!"

You miss me yet, Mom? The way you missed Dave so much you just had to take him back? It's only been a few hours, maybe you think I'm walking around the neighborhood, burning off some steam, I'll be coming back any minute. Or maybe I went to one of my friends' houses – what were those girls' names again?

"Psssst. Over here, girl."

I was on a bad block, a gauntlet of drunks, hookers, and bums, leading nowhere. I'd been walking quickly, but now I started really hoofing it, still trying not to out and out run, red-eyed men hissing at me from every shadow. I was almost at the address the lady gave me, but I didn't see the building with the cross. *Don't panic*, I thought, panicking, faint tears blurring my sight. *Maybe it's across the street.*

Across the street was a rotting industrial plant. Catty-corner was a diner and a church. But right here was a building covered in scaffolding, and a man approaching me from a driveway, asking, "Are you looking for some place?"

"No," I said quickly, moving away. "I'm fine."

"You sure? Because this is Sanctuary House here."

I stopped, took in the man's blue windbreaker and badge. His face was impassive, but his hand was outstretched.

"You need to come on in here tonight?"

I sat in a plastic chair and waited. The place looked like places look, I guessed. Linoleum. Windows that probably didn't open. A lot of taped-up construction paper on the walls, memos on bulletin boards. NO HATS OR DO-RAGS INSIDE THANK YOU. PRAYER GROUP 7:30 CHAPEL. *Prayer group*, I thought – *oh Christ, not Jesus*.

An older woman with short gray hair and a black smock came out of her office and nodded at me. A nun. I didn't know any nuns. I thought nuns were spooky. This one appeared human. She looked like a middle-aged gym teacher in a smock.

“Come in,” she suggested. I rose and followed her.

The entire inside of the nun's office was papered with “MISSING” posters, ghostly kids smiling down in smudgy, high-contrast black and white. Shameeka Wells, age 16, missing from Brooklyn since September. Ebony Johnson, age 15, missing from the Bronx since July. Ebony's fax had curled and yellowed, but her eyes burned bright from the center of a black splotch. Her picture looked like it had been drawn by a seismograph. Ebony was not smiling.

The nun sat at her desk, engulfed in this cage of missing kids. She looked concerned, and busy.

“How are you tonight,” she asked.

I was...how was I? Disoriented. In shock. Just two hours ago, I was heating up some lentil soup at my mom's in Brooklyn, thinking I'd eat it and

maybe read some Edith Wharton before bed. Now here I was at a runaway shelter, staring at a nun's moustache and wondering where I was going to spend the rest of my adolescence.

"I'm okay," I said.

She nodded, and tried to meet my eyes. "Is there a reason you came to Sanctuary House tonight?"

I didn't want to cry, so I kept them averted. "I can't live at home any more."

She nodded again, like she agreed. "Can you tell me about it?"

"I..."

Where to start? *I was born, and...*

"My stepfather...he's crazy. He's...abusive to my mother. And he's creepy. And they have a baby, and he shakes the baby." I winced, thinking about Dave handling baby Jake, panged with guilt over leaving Jake behind.

The nun bobbed her head seriously, like, *Yes, you're right, that sounds bad.* I was heartened to continue.

"So...my mom and him fight all the time, and he gets crazy and violent, and she throws him out – like, ten times in the past two years. And every time, it's the same. She calls the cops on him, and then she changes the locks, and we go to court to get a Order of Protection...."

The nun's nod knew what was coming next. It knew before I knew. I still couldn't believe it.

"And then she takes him back."

She was taking him back. She swore she wasn't going to do it this time, and here she was, doing it again. I told her, after the last time, "That's it. If you take him back this time, I'm leaving." She swore to me, "Jan, I'm not taking him back."

Until tonight. There I was, heating up some soup, and my mother came in to the kitchen with her cigarettes, and she said we had to talk. And I knew what that meant, so I turned off the soup, went into my room, and got my bag.

And I left.

"So here you are," said the nun, like something was settled.

I shook my head yes. I looked her in the eye. Then my eyes welled up again, and I looked at my lap.

I didn't know what else to say. The nun wasn't questioning me, she wasn't jotting down notes. I didn't have to go on with my story, didn't have to back it up with dates and details the way I did in depositions with my mother's endless divorce lawyers. She wasn't asking me for proof that I wasn't lying, or exaggerating – *Yes, we know your stepfather threatened to hit you, but did he ever actually strike you?* She just believed me.

"What about your father? Do you have a relationship with him?"

Ugh. Another case history, in twenty words or less: "Not really. He's abusive. He hit me when I was a kid, we don't talk anymore. I can't live with him."

Case closed. "Any other family you'd like us to contact?"

“No.” No grandparents, no aunts. No godparents, no friends’ families. No friends. Nobody.

Nod. She closed her eyes for a moment and drew in a breath. I got the crazy idea she was saying a prayer for me.

She opened her eyes and said, “We’re glad you came to us tonight.”

The fifth floor lounge was crowded. Twenty or thirty girls were sitting or lying on thin foam mattresses on the floor of the large rectangular room, some curled up with their jackets over their heads like they were trying to sleep, which clearly wasn’t going to happen with the ruckus underway. Two girls argued loudly over the custody of a Walkman; another hollered at her neighbor to *move the fuck over before I wreck you, ho*. Several animated conversations dropped to whispers as the nun escorted me to the supply closet and pulled out a pallet for me. I distinctly heard the word “white,” more than once, and I knew, from the simple process of elimination, that it was directed at me.

“We just did headcount,” said the nun. “It’s almost lights out. Here’s toiletries for you. We’ll take you over to the Minors wing after breakfast. It’s in a separate building. It’s a little quieter over there.” She handed me a baggie with a toothbrush, a small tube of paste, and a hotel-size soap. I put it in my bookbag, which I clamped to my side. “Have a good night.”

The nun walked away, and I was left to my foam mattress. I was in the furthestmost corner by the closet, right up against the wall. The girl to my right

was sleeping with her coat over her head and her sneakers on; either she or somebody else had tied the laces together. How could she sleep in here? People were cursing each other out, shrieking with laughter, stomping around the room looking for the *bitch who took my fucking comb*. The girl on my other side gabbed in Creole to her neighbor.

I was too wired to sleep anyway. I leaned back against the wall and looked around the room. Several people looked back at me, some frowned. I lowered my gaze, dipped my head, and gently closed my eyes as though I was exhausted.

My mind raced, as it had been racing all night, since I stepped out my mother's door, *What now what now what now what now*. I didn't know. So far I'd been running on instinct and adrenaline, following my feet. They took me out of the apartment, down Flatbush Avenue to the D train, through cold, empty Washington Square Park, to a payphone in Hell's Kitchen. Now we were here, in an asylum. What now? What now? What now?

I heard someone say, "What that white girl doin' here?"

Quiet.

Then, "Same as you, bitch, she ain't got no place else to go."

Laughs.

Welcome to the asylum, to the first night of the rest of your life. I stayed with my eyes closed and my back to the wall until the lights went out. Then I curled up with my jacket over my head and my sneakers on, put my thumb in my

mouth, and stared at the darkness for hours, until I finally fell something like
asleep.