



UNDER THE 82nd AIRBORNE

s t o r i e s

"Nothing short of extraordinary."
The New York Times
Book Review

DEBORAH EISENBERG

Author of *Transactions*
in a Foreign Currency



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UNDER THE 82ND AIRBORNE

Deborah Eisenberg

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*Wholehearted thanks to the John Simon Guggenheim
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the time they gave me.*

D.E.

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“EXTRAORDINARY . . .

For all her urban cool, there's nothing trendy about Eisenberg's prose style: her stories have a generous internal reality akin to those of Alice Munro or Ann Beattie. . . . She seems capable of writing about adolescent trauma, cocaine psychosis and the Third World with equal aplomb.”

The Boston Globe

“This is risky fiction. . . . The writing is charged. . . . The brilliance of [this book] resides in Eisenberg's gift for marrying empathic writing to her worldly concerns. . . . If her gorgeously distilled first collection proved that Eisenberg is an exceptional writer, UNDER THE 82ND AIRBORNE proves that she can be important as well.”

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For

and because of

WILLIAM SHAWN

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A CAUTIONARY TALE



"STOP THAT, STUART," PATTY SAID AS STUART struggled with the suitcases, which were way too heavy for him, she thought. (Almost everything was way too heavy for Stuart.) "Just put those down. Besides," Patty said, "where will you go? You don't have anyplace to go." But Stuart took her hand and held it for a moment against his closed eyes, and despite the many occasions when Patty had wanted him to go, and the several occasions when she had tried to make him go, despite the fact that he was at his most enragingly pathetic, for once she could think of nothing, nothing at all that he could be trying to shame her into or shame her out of, and so it occurred to her that this time he really would leave—that he was simply saying goodbye. All along, Patty had been unaware that time is as adhesive as love, and that the more time you spend with someone the greater the likelihood of finding yourself with a permanent sort of thing to deal with that people casually refer to as "friendship," as if that were the end of the matter, when the truth is that even if "your friend" does something annoying, or if you and "your friend"

decide that you hate each other, or if "your friend" moves away and you lose each other's address, you still have a *friendship*, and although it can change shape, look different in different lights, become an embarrassment or an encumbrance or a sorrow, it can't simply cease to have existed, no matter how far into the past it sinks, so attempts to disavow or destroy it will not merely constitute betrayals of friendship but, more practically, are bound to be fruitless, causing damage only to the humans involved rather than to that gummy jungle (friendship) in which those humans have entrapped themselves, so if sometime in the future you're not going to want to have been a particular person's friend, or if you're not going to want to have had the particular friendship you and that person can make with one another, then don't be friends with that person at all, don't talk to that person, don't go anywhere near that person, because as soon as you start to see something from that person's point of view (which, inevitably, will be as soon as you stand next to that person) common ground is sure to slide under your feet.

Poor Patty! It hadn't even been inclination or natural circumstances that led her to Stuart—it was Marcia. And perhaps if it hadn't been for Marcia, Patty and Stuart never would have carried their association further than their first encounter, which took place almost exactly a year before the sweltering night when Stuart packed his things and left.

Patty had been in Manhattan for several weeks, living in the ground-floor apartment that Marcia had sublet to her, but Patty had been too shy to go down the hall, as Marcia had instructed her, and knock on Stuart's door, so she didn't meet Stuart until one evening when, on her way out for an ice-cream cone, she found two men chatting above an immense body stretched out across the

hall floor. Bodies! she thought. Chatting! Marcia had not prepared her for this.

"Relax," said one of the men, calling Patty's attention to the thunder that reverberated around them. "She's snoring. It's a vital sign. I'm Stuart, by the way, and this is Mr. Martinez, our superintendent, and that's Mrs. Jorgenson down there. I bet you're Marcia's friend."

"Nice to meet you," Patty said. "Should we call an ambulance?"

"Marty and I used to," Stuart said. "But it just makes her mad."

"She get so mad," Mr. Martinez said. "The mens come, they put Mrs. Jorgenson on hammock, she bounce up like Muhammad Ali."

"Maybe we should try to get her to her apartment," Patty said.

"You can try," Stuart said. "But she lives on Three, and she's even bigger when not all of her is on the floor."

"Is nice girl!" Mr. Martinez announced happily, pointing at Patty.

In fact, Patty had been ready to abandon Mrs. Jorgenson and go about her business, but Mr. Martinez's praise revitalized her concern. "There must be something we could do," she said.

"Not really," Stuart said. "She just does this for a while, and then she goes back upstairs. But she could probably use a blanket." So Patty went back into Marcia's apartment and got her Hudson Bay blanket, which the two men gently tucked around Mrs. Jorgenson.

"Nice young girl come to make home," Mr. Martinez declaimed accusingly to the hallway, "but what she see? Is Mrs. Jorgenson and floor." He turned grieving

eyes to Patty and made a tiny gallant bow. "You need something, miss, you come to Marty."

"Well," Stuart said. He moved slightly, buffering Patty against the dismal spectacle of Mrs. Jorgenson. "I was just looking for a girl to make cookies with anyhow."

"So Marcia was right," Stuart said as he set the cookie ingredients out on his counter. "She told me you were nice. 'Caring,' actually, is the word she used, which I have to say is a word that makes me fundamentally throw up. You know, I watched you dragging in all those cartons, and I figured you had to be you. I've been waiting for you to come say hello. I thought maybe you were avoiding me."

Patty was puzzled by Stuart's probing pause. "Of course not," she said.

"Well, here we are, anyway. Yeah, Marcia talked and talked about you. Patty this, Patty that."

"Really?" Patty said. Certainly Marcia could talk and talk, she thought, but it wasn't usually by way of praise for her female friends. "Marcia and I used to be in the same dormitory. She was a few years ahead of me."

"I know," Stuart said. "You'd be surprised the things I know about Marcia. We're very tight. In fact, there was serious consideration put into my going out to Austin with her while she set up her practice."

"Oh?" Patty said. She wasn't sure why she'd expected Stuart to be glamorous, although, now that she thought about it, Marcia's descriptions of him had been studded with words like "artistic" and "unpredictable." Well, he might be artistic and unpredictable, but he didn't seem glamorous enough even for Marcia,

whose tolerance had been widely remarked upon at school. But perhaps Marcia and Stuart's relationship had professional roots. "Are you involved in therapy, too?" Patty asked.

"Therapy," Stuart said. "All right. Let's get it over with. Let's just concede that therapy's the most revolting expression of the hydra-headed pragmatism of our times." Patty picked uneasily at the chocolate chips while Stuart pressed forward with the tedious sifting. "Of course, Marcia always thinks what she wants," he said, "but, between you and me, that's actually why I let her go out West alone. Total misappropriation and subversion of the insights of a few geniuses."

"But therapy can be very helpful to people," Patty protested.

"Yeah, to would-be thieves and assassins crippled by restrictive superegos," Stuart said.

"Well, I don't really know much about it." Patty felt she'd become lost on some twisting private path. "I studied graphic design."

"Uh-huh," Stuart said unreceptively.

"Actually, that's why I've come to New York," Patty said. But Stuart maintained a bristly silence as he spooned dough onto tins, so Patty glanced around for clues. "Are you . . ." She noticed stacks of paper and a typewriter. "Are you a writer?"

"In the sense that I sometimes write things," Stuart said. "Here. Or are you too mature to lick the bowl?"

"Well, what— Thanks," Patty said, accepting the bowl. "What sorts of things do you write?"

"A little of this, a little of that. Look, I really don't want to get into this thing of 'I do this' or 'I write that.' If you develop a stake in some rickety prefab construction of yourself, you have to keep shoring it up."

"But that's an unproductive way to think, isn't it?" Patty said. "I mean, people have different things to contribute. Everybody's part of a system."

"I agree," Stuart said. "And I'm the worthless part. I'll tell you something. I think that every really good system has a significant worthless sector. The rotting leftovers on which the healing penicillin mold grows. That's me. Except that now greed is shrinking the world—you know what I mean? Desire for personal gain is collapsing the entire range of human activity into, essentially, resale value. So at this moment in history there's no room for people like me, who don't contribute anything that's recognizably salable."

Patty hesitated. Was she being *criticized*? "But graphic design is something I *enjoy*," she said. "And I might be able to succeed at it."

"Ha!" Stuart said. "Maybe what you consider failure I consider the milieu of freedom."

"Look—" He was *smug*, Patty thought. "I understand that you think there's something wrong with my career choice, but I don't understand why."

"That's cute." Stuart leaned back and squinted at her. "That's sweet. You're *earnest*, you know that? You look like a Girl Scout, with your little face, and your little sneakers and stuff. But the problem is, you're going for the wrong merit badge. Yeah, Marcia warned me I was gonna have to take you in hand. And the first thing is, it's that *word* is what I'm saying; that word 'career'—it's a meaning substitute used to camouflage a trench. I mean, that's exactly what I'm saying: the more you identify yourself with a set of economic expediencies, the greater your interest in rationalizing indefensible practices. And that's why people whose jobs yield a large income or a lot of prestige are usually

incapable of thinking through the simplest thing. In fact, in my opinion, abstract ability decreases in direct proportion to prestige and income."

"Stuart"—Patty was held in check by the tranquilizing aroma seeping from the oven—"that is absurd. That is absolutely ridiculous. Take me, for example. I don't have any job at all, but I don't think more clearly than anybody else."

"True," Stuart said. "But that's because you *want* a job. You've been corrupted by desire."

"Desire has absolutely nothing to do with me and jobs at this point." Exasperation empowered Patty to bound with unaccustomed agility across clumps of thorny concepts. "At this point, the relationship between 'me' and 'job' is 'need.' I need a job!"

"See?" Stuart nodded triumphantly, as if apprehending some brilliantly crafted but specious argument. "You've already found a way to construe this degraded appetite of yours as need."

"Then how do you suggest I pay the rent, please? I've been scraping and scrimping since December so I'd be able to get here and have some time to find a job—"

"Since December?" Stuart said.

"That's right." Patty was far too annoyed to remark Stuart's sudden attentiveness. "No movies, no dinners out, no—"

"You and Marcia planned this out in December?"

"What's the matter?" Patty said. "Is something the matter?"

"Listen," Stuart said. "I apologize. I don't know why I'm such an asshole. It just sort of comes over me from time to time." He looked around restlessly and

tapped his foot. "Just standard-issue archaic bohemian bullshit."

"Wait—" Patty was stricken. "You have a right to your opinion."

"By the way," Stuart said. "Just what, exactly, is Marcia charging you for her miserable sty?"

"Well, I know it's a lot more than she pays for it herself," Patty admitted, "but it's still way under the open-market rate, because it's rent-stabilized. So even if she makes a big profit from me, it's still much cheaper than anything else I'd be able to get. It's the only way I could afford to come to New York and the only way Marcia could afford to leave." ("One hand washes the other," Marcia had remarked cheerfully when she explained this to Patty.)

"Yeah," Stuart said. "Marcia. I should have guessed. It was Marcia who actually drafted the Hammurabi Code of Friendship, did you know that?"

Considering that he'd almost gone to Austin with Marcia, he was being kind of nasty about her, Patty thought. But she had to remember how quickly it had become understood in the dorm that when Marcia appeared at the door of one's room gripping a six-pack or offering the loan of her car, she had probably just slept with one's boyfriend.

"And you know what she's going to do next," Stuart continued ominously. "The instant this building goes co-op, she'll reclaim her apartment, buy it at the insider's price, and sell the tiny squalid treasure for a king's ransom."

Why was he talking about Marcia's apartment like that, Patty wondered. It was no more tiny, no more squalid than his own! (And it was true that while Marcia's apartment was now bare except for Patty's few

things and Stuart's was cozy with layers of an accreted past, and Marcia's faced the airshaft and Stuart's faced the garbage cans that lined the street, the two were virtually identical.) Besides, it was Stuart's problem if he was living like that at his age, Patty thought—he must be at least thirty-five. If Marcia could do better for herself, why should he hold it against her? “Well, it seems fair enough to me,” Patty said.

“Oh, Jesus,” Stuart said. “I suppose. No wonder I drive everyone nuts. No wonder everyone can't wait to get rid of me.”

“Stuart—” Patty said. “Hey, you should try one of these cookies! And some of what you were saying is very interesting.”

“Let's just drop it,” Stuart said. “I'm an asshole.”

“Oh, look”—Patty cast about—“you've got Sprouse's *Tented Desert!*” What luck to have recognized the title among all those books; as she remembered, her English Lit teacher had said it was fabulous. “Could I borrow it?”

“Sure,” Stuart said listlessly. “Whatever you want.”

“People say it's fabulous,” Patty said.

“People who admire it,” Stuart said.

Patty looked at him warily. “You don't think Sprouse is a good poet?”

“He's an O.K. poet.” Stuart picked a crumb from the table and glanced around for someplace to deposit it. “A small poet.”

But gradually Stuart's gloom cleared, and Patty found that she was grateful for his company: she'd been lonely. When she went back down the hall, there was no sign on the floor of Mrs. Jorgenson or her blanket, but as she passed the spot where they'd lain a psychic net seemed to be cast over Patty, and later, trying to sleep,

she flopped about, struggling, unable to disengage her mind from the phantom form of supine Mrs. Jorgenson. How tender Mrs. Jorgenson's puffy ankle had looked, where it was exposed by her rolled-down stocking. From the shadowy crevasse there, demons now leapt to haunt Patty.

Patty had assumed, until this night, that she'd been drawn to New York by a lodestone buried at the core of her unexplored life. And images had seemed to shimmer out from the direction of its pull—images, for instance, of gleaming white drafting tables accoutred with complex systems of shallow drawers; a wineglass, held in a powerful, manicured (ringless) hand, which cast a bouncing patch of brightness on table linen; the balcony of a brownstone where a marvelous man lounged while he waited in the surging twilight for the woman inside to finish dressing.

But now, as Patty lay in bed, what she saw was herself—herself as Mrs. Jorgenson, distended and bleary from poverty's starchy diet; herself weeping into her gin at a darkened bar while some grimy bore expatiated incoherently into her ear; herself standing over the stove while she ate, straight from the pan, her scrambled eggs. Oh, *were* they scrambled eggs? Dear Lord, she prayed, *let* that stuff be scrambled eggs. And all around Patty's little bed circled the terror that perhaps those former shimmering lures had not been signs of some central imperative but were instead the snares of a mocking siren; that perhaps she was soon to be dashed, like Mrs. Jorgenson, against the rocks (so to speak) of the hall floor.

The weeks that followed were truly disheartening. By August, Patty had exhausted the heady sensation of ex-