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Saint Mazie

Written by Jami Attenberg

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Saint
MAZE

JAMI ATTENBERG



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People ask me why I spend so much time on the streets. I tell them it's where I grew up. These streets are dirty, but they're home, and they're beautiful to me. The bums know about the beauty of it. The bums love it like it's their own skin. The ruddy dust from the streets, the mud in the parks where they sleep, sunk deep in the lines in their foreheads, jammed up under their fingernails. The sun and the dirt mixed up with their sweat and the booze. All the dirt. It's the earth. If you can't see the beauty in the dirt then I feel sorry for you. And if you can't see why these streets are special, then just go home already.

Before she was the Queen of the Bowery, walking around in those brilliantly colored dresses, with her floppy felt hat and dangling bracelets and walking stick, helping all those homeless men for years and years, and before people started writing about her in magazines and newspapers, calling her an important New Yorker, a hero is what they said, before all that, she was just Mazie Phillips, the girl who lived upstairs from me who maybe I had a little crush on but wouldn't give me the time of day.

Today is my birthday. I am ten. You are my present.

I am the daughter of Ada and Horvath Phillips. But they live in Boston, far away. I never see them anymore. So are they still my parents? I don't care. My father is a rat and my mother is a simp.

I live in New York now. Rosie says I am a New Yorker. You are my New York diary.

First it was just Louis Gordon in the one big apartment on the third floor, alone for a long time, I remember. He was a giant man, filled with red meat. You could smell it in the hallway. Him cooking it, I mean. And he was a sweaty man, too. Dead of winter, he'd be sweat-stained before noon. He always wore this brown fedora with a blue feather in it—that was the flashiest thing about him, that feather. He was not a man who liked to draw attention to himself, but that feather let you know there was a little something going on there. So there was Louis, the big man, all alone, right above us.

Now there were five of us in our family, my mother, my father, my aunt, my uncle, all crammed into one small room. Plus another uncle, Al, my mother's brother, he lived under the staircase and he was always up in our apartment, taking up more of what little space we had. I see your face, but those days we really packed them in there. And actually Mazie was of great service to my uncle Al later on, so he's important to this story. He's not just my crazy uncle Al who lived under the stairs.

Okay, so sometimes there were six of us in this one room, but Louis, he had two rooms to himself. It's oppressive, living in a small space like that. On the one hand, we were used to it. I never knew anything else but that room; I had been born into it. And we had our small joys. We all had food. No one got sick, no one died. All around us tenements were soiled and reeking. But we got lucky with this one building. Even if we were crammed together we were still safe and clean. The family remained intact. But we envied those with more room.

So there was a little jealousy, but still, he was our neighbor.

Be nice to your neighbors was what we were taught. My mother used to call him “The Quiet Giant” on account of him being so tall but never making a noise. You never heard the floor creak once, and this is one creaky building we’re talking about. Every ache and pain you could hear. Sometimes she’d go upstairs and knock on his door just to make sure he was still alive. She was worried about him being single; she worried about that all the time.

Then he marries Rosie. The story goes he met her at the track, out of town, in Boston. Oh, let me think... the track was called Readville, which was a big deal at the time, but it hasn’t been around for many years. It’s not much of a story is it? [Laughs.] So he marries her and brings her to New York. And Rosie’s a real knockout when she shows up, this fine, dark hair wrapped around her head, her eyes are lined with kohl, her lips are dark red. She looks exotic, like a gypsy, but she’s a Jew, of course. And she smiles at everyone, because everyone’s smiling at her. She’s just a good-looking girl.

And now there’s two people in two rooms, and now the floor is creaking. Every night! Now he’s not so quiet, and my mother never knocks on his door. This goes on for, I don’t know, a year? But then the creaking, we start to not hear it so often anymore, and Rosie, who had been so happy, now we see her around the neighborhood, and she’s never smiling. She’s shopping, and she’s sad. She’s taking a stroll with Louis, and she’s sad. You say hi to her in the hallway, and she is joyless in her greeting. I remember my mother saying, “The Quiet Giant and The Royal Sourpuss.”

Once I was in their apartment. Only once though. I was running down the stairs in our apartment building and I tripped and fell, skinned my knee right open. Kids do this kind

of stuff all the time. Well Rosie was walking up the stairs with groceries and saw me fall. So she hauled me into her apartment to tend to me. The thing I really remember was this giant wooden table with all these chairs around it, this beautiful shiny wood. When Rosie was in the bathroom finding a bandage for my knee, I walked around the table, counting the steps, sliding my hand against it. What did they need that big of a table for?

Anyway, Rosie took good care of me. She cooed over me, took me into her arms, pressed me against her chest. She held me so tight, and then she very suddenly let me go, sent me downstairs to my mother. I remember it very distinctly. She said, "You belong with your mother."

After that, I don't know, a month or two maybe, Louis and Rosie leave town for a week. They ask my mother to keep an eye on the place. They say they're going on the honeymoon they never had. My mother thought he had money buried in the floorboards. "Ill-gotten gains." She joked about pulling up the floors while he was gone, but she wasn't kidding. She thought he was pretending to be something he wasn't so that no one would suspect him. She never thought they were ill-gotten before Rosie got there. Look, I liked Louis. He had legitimate business too. He owned the movie theater, he owned the candy shop. He invested in the community. And he was always giving everyone a nickel. Ill-gotten, who is anyone to talk?

Then when Louis and Rosie come back to town, they have two girls with them, Rosie's little sisters. This is when I meet Mazie and Jeanie, the Phillips girls. About six months after the girls arrived, the whole family, Louis and Rosie and Mazie and Jeanie, moved across the street to a bigger apartment, a

whole floor, five rooms I heard, but never saw. And *then* you should have heard my mother.

I lost you! And now I found you. But I don't have anything to say.

I'm no good at this. Remembering to write in you.

I ain't no liar, I don't care what anyone says.

When they first got to town, Mazie was probably ten years old, Jeanie's four or five years old. I must have been nearly seven by then. The two girls were always very nice to look at, although they weren't necessarily prettier than anyone else. They looked not so different than the rest of the curly-haired, dark-eyed Jewesses on the Lower East Side.

But Rosie bought them beautiful dresses, and bows for their hair, and they were well fed. So they were not sick or sallow like those who could not get enough to eat, which was more than a few people on the streets those days. And Jeanie took ballet classes when she was very young, which seemed crazy to my whole family when there were no extras for the Flickers, and Uncle Al was sleeping under the staircase. But

there she was walking around dressed up like a tiny ballerina, which we could all admit was at least nice for us to see, a little girl looking pretty.

Mazie had no use for me. I bored her. She always was looking for excitement, looking ten feet behind you like there was something better out there. And she seemed so much older than me. I guess there's a big difference between seven and ten, but now I think it was just that she had been through more than the rest of us. Mazie was very smart. It wasn't like she was book smart, none of us were. And she was street smart, but all of us were that, being city kids. It just seemed like she knew more about the world, and always did. She ran with the older kids on the rooftops of the tenements. They were a tough gang. Of course, my mother wouldn't let me anywhere near them.

So no, I didn't play with the Phillips girls. I just admired them from afar. Or from across the street, anyway.

I can run faster than any of those boys from the block. I told them I would prove it and I did. I raced them all tonight on the roof and won. I beat Abe and Gussy and Jacob and Hyman and not a one of them were even close. They were all spitting in my dust. Even in my dress I can beat those boys. Gussy said I cheated but how could I cheat? He's a cheater for even saying that. He's a crummy lying jerk. After, Rosie yelled at me for getting dirty but I told her I didn't care. It was only a dress.

Louis told her to leave me alone, it's what kids do, they get dirty. Rosie told him not to say another word about chil-

dren, not one more word. That clammed him up. Then she started crying. Jeanie was hugging her, begging her not to cry. I started yelling that it was just a stinking dress. I ran outside, they couldn't catch me. I ran a block, I ran another. I ran as fast as I could. It was just a dress. Why did she have to cry?

Gussy got a piece of my fist tonight. Call me a cheater one more time, I told him. Just one more time. Well he did and now he's sorry.

She drew blood more than once. This scared us, and it impressed us. She was beyond being a boy or a girl.

You're where the secrets go. I mean to write in you all this time. I mean to tell you everything. I mean to tell someone everything about my life but I forgot until now. I got all these secrets inside me. Only I just forget to let them out.

I wouldn't let Rosie throw you away. She's got nothing better to do than go through my personal private things all day. But you're mine.

I turned sixteen today, and I've already fought with Rosie twice. I can't listen to her another minute. She's always yelling and screaming when I come home late. Treating me like I'm a brat. I'm not a brat! She's an old cow. And I've been good for weeks. I've been doing everything she's asked for days and days and weeks and weeks and years and years. One night I go out, and it's my birthday. One night I come home late. One night!

Of course then she grew those bosoms of hers and everything changed.

I dug you out of my closet so I could scream at the top of my lungs without anyone hearing.

Rosie doesn't understand what it's like to love the streets. She doesn't see the shimmering cobblestones in the moonlight, she just wonders why the city won't put in another street lamp already. She doesn't see floozies trying to sweet-talk their customers, earning every nickel they get, working as hard as the rest of us. She just sees crime. She doesn't see the nuns and the Chinamen and the sailors and barkeeps—the whole world full of such different people. It's just crowds to her, blocking her way. She sees a taxi whisking by and she thinks, what's the hurry? And I think, where's the party?

This is what I want to tell her! There's a party.

All the girls I know have a fella except for me. But why would I want just one person loving me when I can have three?

Was she any wilder than the rest of us? She was wilder than me, I can tell you that much. But that wasn't hard. I was a good boy, and she was a good-time girl. You see the difference. She was very . . . touchy-feely. What does that mean? You seem like a smart person. You know what it means.

She was still a brunette then, and she wore her hair in waves. Sometimes she pinned it up, but most of the time it was loose, though still tidy. Her eyebrows were plucked thin, and she powdered her cheeks white. She wore bright pink and red dresses, the brighter the better—she'd have liked to burn your eyes when you looked at her, I think. New dresses all the time. She was always swirling them around, flirting with her body. Day or night you couldn't miss her. She wouldn't let you.

She did a little of this, a little of that. Once in a while she worked in this candy shop Louis owned during the day, but not anything you could count on if you were trying to find her.

But mostly you'd see her on the streets, looking for fun. She went to all the bars on the Bowery, even the bars where the girls weren't allowed. My mother used to say she had no sense of propriety, but I've always thought propriety's for people who need rules. And Mazie had been making her own rules for too long.

Lots of times she'd come home right when my father was leaving for work in the morning. I should explain that my other uncle, my uncle Barney, had a terrible back and he'd get laid up from time to time, so eventually my father had to take on a second job, this one at a pickle factory. I didn't get to see him that much after that, so I'd started watching him leave from the window. I wanted to see him every last possible second. Isn't that crazy? All of us were packed together in that apartment, one bed next to another, no privacy, no quiet. Half the time you'd wake up in the morning under someone else's covers. And still the minute he left I was missing him. But he was a good man, of course I missed him. He liked his pipes, he had a nice set, and I would watch him pack the tobacco in there. He'd let me pack it too, and then my fingers would smell like tobacco. I loved that smell. I smoked a pipe well into my eighties. I thought about him every time I smoked. He was a workingman—life was work to him—but he had his small joys.

Anyway, he'd be walking down the steps when Mazie'd be walking up hers. She'd wave, he'd nod. Now she was an adult, so all the grown men were scared of her too. No men in the neighborhood would be caught dead talking to her while she roamed the streets like she did. The mothers didn't like her, the fathers didn't want to talk to her. But once upon a time she used to be a little girl they all loved. It was not hypocrisy, but it felt something like it.

I sat on the front stairs before I went home. I knew what was coming. Oh boy did I know. I could be standing across the

East River and know when that woman opens her mouth. So I waited for a minute. I wanted to see the daylight hit the stairs. I like watching it spread across the street and then the sidewalk. I smoked. I closed my eyes. I let the sun hit me. The sun's some kind of gift. Another day we're all alive. I wish she could understand. I'm just happy to be alive.

She was asleep on the couch when I came in, tucked into a quilt. When she's quiet, she looks like a girl again, with that pudg around her chin. Louis was in the kitchen like always. He had a plate of hot eggs and leftover steak in front of him. He was peppering the steak. He just gave me a nod. He wants nothing to do with the arguing. Poor Louis. He'd give us every cent he has just to keep the peace.

I stumbled into my room. I knocked into a wall. All right I was drunk I guess. So it was my fault I woke her up. My fault, my fault. Everything's my fault. A minute passed, then there's Rosie in my room. Didn't even knock! Just walked right in. Started talking about the neighbors knowing too much, worrying about them being in Louis's business. Nobody wants anybody's nose in anything. I couldn't argue so I didn't. I just shushed her for Jeanie's sake.

But then Jeanie was up. She had slept in one of her ballerina outfits again. No one could sleep then so it was into the kitchen with all of us. Rosie got back on the couch, stuffed in her quilt. I braided Jeanie's hair while Louis made us eggs. Jeanie told us jokes and made us laugh. Louis went to work and I did the dishes while Rosie stared at me from the couch. She looked mean.

Rosie said: One day that door won't be open.

I told her I'd crawl through the window. I told her she'd never ever get rid of me.

Jeanie danced in circles around the room. Fast, spinning. Jeanie's braids came out. Rosie was wishing ill on me. I wasn't going to change a thing.

Rosie said: Enough, Jeanie.

But you can't stop that girl from dancing.

First of all, obviously this is all secondhand information. I'm certainly fine with speaking on the record, but most of this was told to me by my mother and by my grandmother, and a lot of this information came, I believe, from my great-grandmother, whom in fact I never met, or if I did I don't recall it. There's a chance she held me when I was just a baby. I vaguely recall having heard that she did once from my mother.

But anyway, essentially, this is all rumor and gossip, family lore, I suppose you could call it, although I don't know how interesting any of it is. I guess we take what we can get for family lore. And Mazie was the closest thing to a celebrity any of them knew. She was a celebrity because she was written about, and was sort of known about town as this downtown fixture, but beyond that she was a celebrity in my family because she was charismatic and generous, and led a very big life for someone who barely left a twenty-block radius.

One little thing I can tell you for a fact is that Louis Gordon bought the Venice Theater in 1915, and my great-grandfather became the manager of it the following year. For the first few years Louis's wife, Rosie, worked the ticket booth. There were

some other employees here and there, but Rosie was the one who ran the show.

After Louis bought the movie theater, the girls really started running around on the streets. Rosie was too busy working the ticket booth to keep an eye on them. Always Jeanie had been a good girl. But then she became a handful too, in her own way. Sometimes you'd see her dancing on the streets, hustling for change. Bella Barker sang, Jeanie danced. We all clapped and threw a penny or two at them.

And what a pair they were. Jeanie had a smile as long as Broadway. And Bella, even when she was a little girl, had these dark, heavy, sexy eyes that made her look older than she was, and of course that wise woman's voice. She was born ready for something big. Her voice made everyone stop and listen to her.

Of course Bella was always more of a solo act. She left the neighborhood for a while when she was a teenager. She was off to Pennsylvania for a year or two, working the vaudeville circuit out there. When she came back she was married to a man named Lew, her manager, who seemed like an old man next to her. And she has a new name, a grown-up name. So she's Belle Baker now, and that's when she started to get famous. But Jeanie was still just playing at dancing. Nobody believed for a second she had the same hunger in her as Belle did.