

Again  
and  
Again

A Novel

Ellen Bravo



SHE WRITES PRESS

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To all the survivors and other activists who make it  
possible for nobodies to go against a somebody  
and change the reality for everybody.

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Danforth University,  
Otsego, New York,  
Friday, August 18, 1978

*Let her be from New York City. Let her wear black. Make sure she's smart and funny. Let her think I'm smart and funny, too.*

By turning this into a mantra and keeping her eyes on the trees whizzing by, Deborah was able to drown out her parents' yammering in the front seat.

"You brake *before* the curve, Debbie," her father boomed from behind the wheel. "That's the ticket!" He'd begun mapping the drive from Cleveland to Otsego the moment the acceptance letter arrived, revising the official TripTik after frequent consultations with the atlas he kept on his desk.

"Mixers. That's what your cousin Rivka did: she went to every mixer she could find, and look at her—she met that Harold the third week!" Her mother, head turned slightly, hurled the words from the passenger seat toward the back of the car while keeping her eyes on the curves.

"Debbie has plenty of time to find someone."

"Thank you, Mr. Ann Landers. Oh my God, will you slow down? That truck is coming right at us!"

"Sylvia, please. You're killing me here."

Deborah shifted away from the pile of bedding wedged between her and the carton that held her brand-new electric typewriter and a tin of cookies, both presents from her grandmother. The plastic surrounding the dove-gray coverlet had left her back sweaty and her blouse wrinkled. Leaning against the back door, Deborah hoped the breeze from her father's window would air her out.

"Don't slouch, Debbie; it's bad for your complexion. Brains are good, but they'll only get you so far."

"And harping makes your skin glow?"

Listening to her dad come to her defense, always without raising his voice, Debbie wondered whether he did this out of love for her or to needle his wife.

The sun wove its way through the filter of trees and made patterns on Deborah's blue skirt. *Let her be from New York.* Danforth University had sent only her roommate's name, no other information. Deborah pictured Elizabeth Golmboch as a Manhattan sophisticate, willowy, maybe an English major, definitely not a virgin. She'd be striking but not vain, have lofty ambitions, never obsess over the mundane. Deborah's grandmother had warned her not to pin too much on any one person. Whatever happened at college wouldn't depend on who slept in the other twin bed in the room at Martha Hillerman Hall. But Deborah clung to these images like a sign. If the roommate worked out, Danforth would provide the transformation she longed for, from American Wasteland to World That Mattered.

*Let her wear black.*

The Timex on Deborah's wrist flashed 1:48. She'd hoped for something more chic when she graduated high school, but Timex was what her dad sold in his drugstore. "Digital, Debbie—you'll always know exactly what time it is," he promised, fastening the watch to her wrist as though it were a diamond bracelet. At that moment, she'd promised herself she'd morph into Deborah the second she arrived at college.

The room was empty when they finally pulled into the Hillerman parking lot and hauled the suitcases and boxes up to the seventh floor. But the south side had already been set up, the bed covered with an abstract quilt of various purples; Deborah could picture the quiet

Village boutique where Elizabeth bought it, maybe with her mother, maybe with her own credit card. There were no stuffed animals or froufrou pillows, no Yankee pennants like they'd spotted covering an entire wall a few doors down. Over her roommate's desk was an assortment of postcard prints, arranged not in rows, like Deborah would have done, but in an artful pattern.

"See, I was right, Debbie!" her father said. "The campus is magnificent. I told your mother they didn't airbrush that brochure, but she wouldn't believe me. And this isn't half bad for a dorm room." Her father, five feet eight with his shoes on, stood between the beds and extended his wiry arms. "Your brother had to be careful his roommate's *tuchus* wasn't in his face every time he turned around."

"So, where *is* the roommate?" Her mother opened the closet door on their side of the room as if Elizabeth Golmboch might have been hiding there. She checked herself in the full-length mirror, smoothed her slacks over her panty girdle, reapplied the powder meant to slim her nose ("like Barbra Streisand's, only shorter and without the bump," she liked to say), and tugged on the hair around her face. The heat threatened to restore its natural curl. How many fights had they had ("You have my features; why not learn my beauty lessons?") because Deborah refused to wear powder or let the beautician straighten her hair? "We want to take you girls to an early dinner. Your father is convinced we have to leave at the crack of dawn. If he's not back for his pinochle tournament, the Heights social scene will come to a grinding halt."

Her father might not have a clue about sophistication—Deborah had to talk him out of wearing his plaid golfing pants—but he did seem to get that she needed to be on her own. A better daughter would be grateful that her parents, however tacky, had traveled all this way to get her settled. A better daughter would have been glad to explore the campus with them, slurp the local ice cream, take photos of the Tamarack Gorge. Deborah just wanted them to disappear.

"Go on to the hotel, Mom. Dad deserves a nap for doing all that driving. And then you can wander around the campus a little. I'll put my stuff away. Remember, I have to be at a student-only orientation with the provost at four o'clock."

Her mother insisted on unpacking Deborah's clothes first and making the bed while her father stood on a chair to stow sheets and blankets on the top shelf of the closet. Deborah could have written the script: "How's she going to reach those?" "She'll stand on a chair, like I did." "And the next thing you know, our daughter will be trying to get to class on crutches." "Don't worry, Debbie, I'll come autograph your cast."

They'd been gone only ten minutes when a slight girl with fair skin and a pixie haircut walked in, wearing a wrap-around denim skirt and plain white blouse and brandishing a campus map. Her hair, an ordinary brown, was practical, rather than cute. She had features that were neat but unremarkable, what Deborah's mother would call a weak chin. A man with a similar chin lingered in the hallway, twirling a Milwaukee Brewers cap in his large hands.

"Hi, I'm Liddie Golmboch." The girl tossed the map on her desk and stuck her hand out. "You must be Deborah Borenstein. It's okay, Dad, come on in."

Even though Liddie was approximately the same height as Deborah, her dad had to stoop a little when he entered the room. "Horace Golmboch, from Saukville, Wisconsin," he said, nodding his head. "Very pleased to meet you."

Deborah had no idea where Saukville was, only that it was a long way from Manhattan. She could picture Liddie in ads for a 4-H club, her arm around the neck of a large calf, a straw hat shielding her skin.

Mr. Golmboch stuck his cap in his back pocket and looked around the room as if scanning for something that needed fixing. When he'd satisfied himself that everything was in working order, he cupped Liddie's head in his hand. "I need to get on back, Lid. Have to work on the Schmitz place tomorrow. And you need to get started here. But I'm so glad I got to see the Lutheran chapel. And to meet your roommate."

He turned to Deborah. "It's easy to get lost around here. I'm glad they gave you gals that map. Make sure my daughter shares the kringle her mom made. She was real sorry she couldn't get away. And I'm sorry we didn't get to meet your folks."

Deborah backed up slowly until she felt her bed with the backs of

her knees and sank down on it. Okay, so you didn't have to be best friends with your roommate; there'd be other girls on the hall she could hang out with, someone else who could be her guide to a world of sophistication. This Liddie was probably very nice. At least she had a good eye.

While Liddie filled out paperwork for her work-study assignment, which turned out to be busing tables in the cafeteria, Deborah finished sliding her things into the dresser drawers and setting up her electric typewriter on the desk. They talked a little over a piece of kringle—it turned out to be a kind of Danish in a flat, skinny ring, apricot flavoring, unexpectedly tasty. Liddie hoped to get into the textile design program—she'd made that quilt herself. Deborah spoke of her interest in political science. But there wasn't much time; they'd been encouraged to get to orientation early. Just as they were about to leave, a girl with honey-colored waves stuck her head in the room and introduced herself as Nancy Minkin, their neighbor from down the hall.

"You two look normal. Can I walk with you to orientation?" Nancy's roommate turned out to be the Yankee fanatic. "When I told her I don't really like baseball, she nearly had a shit fit," Nancy told them. "'You're from Long Island!' she yelled. Her whole side of the room is Yankee decor, and if there's a game on, she's already announced, it *will* be playing loudly on her radio in our room."

Nancy talked nonstop all the way across the bridge and down to the arts quad. Having a small-town Midwesterner as a roommate was starting to look less alarming to Deborah, if this was what the New Yorkers were like. They made their way to Willard Broome Hall, where several hundred students were gathering in a large room made somber by heavy red drapes. Nancy broke away to hang out with a friend from her hometown. Some dean introduced the provost, both men right out of *Animal House* central casting, with hearty smiles and full heads of hair. Deborah was only half listening to the platitudes about "the greatest adventure of your life" and the need to "buckle down," when the provost made a sudden, dramatic pause.

"Look to your right and to your left," he bade them. Liddie was balancing on one leg on Deborah's right. On the left, a skinny

black girl in khaki pants introduced herself as a physics major from Rochester. The provost peered at them over the lectern. “Now recalibrate your expectations. You may all have graduated at the top of your high school class, but you can do the math. Half of you will be at the bottom of the class here.”

Deborah bit the inside of her lip and blinked hard. She tried to summon up the shimmer of the acceptance letter on her fingers, the fresh print smell of the course catalog she’d pored over all summer, the visions of stimulating conversations on the quad, but the sound of the provost’s voice triggered the only sense still functioning.

Beside her, Liddie crossed her arms over her chest. “Thanks for the welcome, asshole,” she muttered. Then she looped one arm through Deborah’s. “I hear they call this building the Broome. From now on, I’m calling it the Willard, ’cause that guy will always give me the willies.”

Deborah felt the gratitude whirl throughout her body like something injected into her blood.

Liddie had to miss dinner to attend cafeteria training. Deborah didn’t mention the provost incident to her parents. But she described it in full to her grandmother in a letter the next morning. “Dear Grandma,” she began. “I lucked out. My roommate’s not what I pictured, but I think she’s just what I want.”