

Hit the Frolicking, Rippling Brooks

KAREN ROSENBAUM

RELIGION IS FOR WOMEN. Says Madeleine, Portuguese-Catholic, chunky in her black pleated skirts, cackling always, nudging God. Women believe it. Women practice it. When pews are filled they are filled with women. Men eh they sleep and drink beer and mow lawns and fish off the dock instead of going to Mass. Men drop a little money in the priest's pocket and call it a Sunday eh? or men marry off their daughters, there in the center aisle with the organ playing and the priest prating, but religion, the knee-bending, the candle-lighting, the bead-counting, that's for women.

Says Madeleine. Madeleine is 65. Ten years older than Mother. Looks 30 years older. A transplanted New Bedfordder, come south when her husband, fireman, died in a two-alarm, come to live with Molly, her daughter, and James, her son-in-law, come to live in the house next door to our flat.

I don't contradict Madeleine. My mother married a Catholic that doesn't even drop money into the priest's pocket, that never chooses to identify himself as a Catholic although somebody there in their fund-raising departments has found out and puts the finger on him every year or so for a hundred bucks. I give to the American Cancer Society, he says and hangs up. Mama now, Mama is a Mormon, like us, no, like Ben maybe, not so much like me, though I am her only daughter, and Ben she didn't acquire until eight months ago when I wooshed off in the dress she made to a ceremony she and Dad couldn't even watch. She was glad she couldn't

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watch, that I'd done it up right with Ben rather than wrong with that pagan Eddie. Dad wasn't so glad. Dad doesn't drink beer and fish off the docks. He works. Every day. Cassidy's Carpets. He insists his employees, also Mama who does the books, take generous vacations. But himself. He'll die at his coffee cup cluttered desk.

And Ben will die in his Sunday-go-to-meeting shoes. He does have such shoes. He has his Sunday shoes, his school/play sneakers and a gorgeous pair of waffle stompers with the waffle hardly stomped. He also has a pair of green leisure slippers that Mama knit him last Christmas. He wore them Christmas morning. It is now June.

Bennion is a good man. Says Madeleine. And my mother. And even my father when he looks up at my brother Arch. I'd introduce him to you but he's out at a meeting. With the boy scouts. Ben will be back about ten. Projected scenario.

"Hi." Plops down on the couch, springs shriek.

"How was the meeting?"

"Fine. Starved."

I get up from a heap of final papers I am grading on the floor under our one big-bulbed lamp. "What would you like?"

"Food." He has shed the sneakers and wiggles his grey-socked toes. "But I'll get it." I motion him to stay down. He'd eat the quart of ice cream. I pull out of the refrigerator the chili bean casserole he gobbled part of between 6:45 and 7, the only time I recall seeing him today. The casserole dish is the one-quart size. The set included also a one-pint, a one-and-a-half pint and a two-quart. Wedding present. I gave Arch the one-pint and the one-and-a-half pint for his bachelor pad. He eats cereal out of them.

"How's Ronald?" I call into the front room. I'm always interested in Ronald, the cute boy who started a fire down by Enser Creek and burned all the foliage off a field before the firetruck could get down there.

"He didn't show up. Have you seen my Galbraith? I've got to finish it before I hit the hay."

Hit the hay. I wince. I circle that phrase on English comps. All college freshmen know that it is one of the ultimate clichés. Right up there with good as gold and white as snow and frolicking, rippling brooks.

"Try the piano. Something foreign is on top of the piano."

"Oh yeah. Thanks."

Lugging the Galbraith to the table, he closes his eyes, I count to about 8, he starts to gobble down the casserole. When he's less hurried he gives 25 count silent prayers on leftover snacks. ("How many times this stuff been blessed already?" Eddie once said eying a hunk of cold chicken. "At least one, right? Besides I suspect its nourishing and strengthening attributes are directly related to its vitamin and mineral content. I don't recall an Adele Davis chapter on food prayers.")

"Adele Davis," I said triumphantly, "is dead."

"Yeah," said Eddie. "She should've asked a blessing on her Virginia Slims.") Ten ten. Here comes Ben now. Friends, Bennion Harris Lockersby.

"Just call me Ben."

"Have a good meeting?"

Take it. I've got to go warm up the casserole.



My hands are knotted around the steering wheel and the poultry truck in front of me looks sure to lose a crate or two. I plot escape routes for one, two or three crates falling off in one, two lanes. I have a crate beside me too—filled with squawking creatures of another ilk—my creative writing students' work folders. I've got to play Lady God and give out grades.

It's Thursday. Ben will be home to dump on. "I'm exhausted," I say as I lug my crate into the front room.

"Here," he rises gallantly. "Where do you want it?"

"There." I point down.

"Okay. Sit."

I flop onto the floor cushion. "Traffic was awful. I almost brought home

a crate of live chickens. Would you have strangled and cleaned them for us?"

"No," he says. "I would have helped you take them back to the rightful owner."

"Get a lot done today? Quiet here?"

"Chapter outline pretty well straightened out. Potter likes it, thinks the rest of the committee will too. You?"

I hold up my hands. "I've been strangling the steering wheel. Want to kill it and clean it for dinner?"

"I've got dinner going."

I don't need to ask what it is. Crazy Ben's sloppy combo—comes out different every time.

"Thought I'd try it with those beets Madeleine gave us."

"The pickled beets? I can imagine what color it is."

"Tastes good. I've been sampling."

What can I say? I've got the perfect man. Even the head of our women's caucus would love him. A genuine independent. Mends his own socks. Better than I could. I'd stick the hole together on the sewing machine. He vacuums. Does the shopping. Gives great back rubs.

"Your Ben," says Madeleine, "is one in a million. He goes to church. You don't even have to drag him there."

"Lots of Mormon men go to church without being dragged," I say.

"And drink," says Madeleine, "he doesn't. Where did you find such a jewel?"

"Lots of Mormon men don't drink," I say.

"And good to you—you're his night and day," says Madeleine.

"Good to me," I say, "he is. But his night and day—I'm more like his mid-afternoon."

Saturday. One batch of final exams down. Two to go. Deadline Tuesday. Spread all over the kitchen table is my Sunday School lesson. It'll probably take the whole day and most of the night. All my favorite resource books are heaped up on the end—stories that high school sophomores might respond to—they like best the struggling across the plains stories, J. Golden Kimball anecdotes and retold tales from the C. S. Lewis science fiction trilogy. I wish fervently the pioneers had spent another forty years crossing the plains, that J. Golden Kimball could squawk down a few reports from the Celestial Kingdom, that C. S. Lewis hadn't rudely gone and died. Those stories have a kind of sanction that the Sunday School Presidency, marching in and out of classes and solemnly nodding—hey, I want to shout, this is not a job I'm seeking tenure for—approve of. I use other stuff too—Mishima's suicide story, Vonnegut's Harrison Bergeron—that jiggles them a little. I have to. What's the point without a picture.

Ben is at the stake farm. Left at 5. I didn't even open my mouth, just hmmmmed when he got up. He'll come back this afternoon, exhausted. He'll shower. Then he'll take his work to school because I like to work aloud. Share I call it. He could do a Sunday School lesson for a pack of 15 year olds in 45 minutes. And it would be a good lesson. The Sunday School Presidency would beam, broadly, as Ben puts it. Some of the kids would even stay awake.

"Sister Lockersby," says Wesley, brother of Ronald incidentally of the

fire fame, "another good illustration of what jealousy does to us is Laman and Lemuel. They were so jealous of Nephi that they wouldn't pay any attention to his teachings." Wesley is the kid who'd be on the edge of his Book of Mormon even if Ben were teaching.

"What happened to them that was so bad?" asks Melvin defiantly. "Their descendants outlasted Nephi's descendants."

"But they," says Wesley, stressing *they*, "are probably in hell. Aren't they, Sister Lockersby?"

"Sandra," says Mickey, Mickey and a few other girls call me by my first name which makes me feel less archaic but more vulnerable, "we don't believe in hell, do we?"

I sigh. What do we believe. They won't know what they believe until I tell them? "The Mormon position," I say, "is that very few individuals, probably not Laman and Lemuel, are assigned to the traditional hell. We believe in a sort of graduated afterlife—you get what you earn."

"And that reminds me," I interrupt myself, "of something J. Golden Kimball said." Even Melvin and Wesley drop their weapons. "So you're going to die!" I do one of my old world accents, "says someone to a flagging J. Golden Kimball, 'don't worry. You'll get everything that's coming to you.'"

"That," says J. Golden Kimball, "is what I'm afraid of."

Mild guffaws.

After, Mickey waits for me. I am uneasy. Mickey is the most draining. I figure, to look at her, she went through puberty when she was about eight. She is very intense. Her father is not a member and unlike my father is moderately hostile. "Sandra," she says with a touch of a whine, "can I talk to you for a minute?"

She doesn't, of course, mean a minute. "Just a second," I say, I hope brightly, making a neat pile out of my story books and scriptures. I am giving myself time to pray madly let her ask an easy question this time. I smile now with all my attention.

"What can I tell my father, Sandra? He says that man just made up God and religion and that there isn't anything up there or after this and when I tell him if he would just pray then he would know, he laughs at me and says man can talk himself into anything and can do it better if he gets on his knees and shuts his eyes and concentrates."

I shudder a little. Mickey has started to cry. I should have been forewarned, her voice had become queasy about her second word.

"Let's go talk to the Bishop, Mickey," I say.

"Oh no," says Mickey, and her eyes become instantly dry. "I don't want to talk to the Bishop. I hardly know him. I want to talk to you. What do you say when people say that to you?"

I gulp. I tell her what I say. "It feels right to me. I can't make it feel right for anyone else."

(Might as well be a Methodist, said Eddie. We can't even have an intelligent discussion when you fold like that.)

"I'm not very good you see, Mickey, at answering people's questions. Would you like to come over to our place and talk with my husband?"

Mickey considers. "That would be okay. When?"

When, I think, is Ben going to be home. On Sunday it is absolutely unpredictable. "When I find out when his meetings aren't, I'll call you," I

say. "How about that?"

Mickey nods.

"What does your mother do," I say, "when you and your father argue?"

"Nothing. I don't think she even believes it anymore." Mickey pulls my arm. "It is true, isn't it? You know it's true, don't you?"

I look at her. I can't give her what she wants. "It works for me," I say.

Mickey's ride home, the Zimmermans, are leaning against their station wagon. It's too hot to get in. I give her what I hope is a pat not a push and drop my books into our car. I haven't seen Ben all morning. I didn't see Ben all night either—I heard, felt him, but my eyes wouldn't quite open. I could think maybe a stranger had climbed in and out of bed if I didn't know how absurd it would be for anyone else to get up when it is still dark on the longest day of the year, or almost, and leave for a meeting with only a chocolate chip cookie under his belt.

Here he comes. Still talking at people behind him. "Look Sandra," he says, "you take the car on home. I'll have Carl bring me."

"When?"

"About two."

"Stay a while then, okay?"

"Awhile."

Angry at myself for reflexively tugging at my skirt when Sister Jessel looks over at my knees, I mellow in a minute and put a hymnbook over the offending swatch of flesh. Brother Shibler is talking. I am not sure what he is talking about. I started to listen about twenty minutes ago but Lily's baby in front of me is much nicer to look at than Brother Shibler. Brother Shibler's family, sprawled all over one bench a few rows down, is also nicer to look at than Brother Shibler. Brother Shibler is quite interesting though when you catch him at a basketball game—his son plays, the tall kid propped there against the wall—and he tells you about prosecuting the people who sell apricot pits for cancer cures or about the doting old judge who falls asleep.

The Bishop now has fallen asleep. So has Brother Jessel. Even the Shibler twins are tugging at each other's hair. Ben beside me is very awake. When Eddie would come to church he would bring Wallace Stevens to read. I thought that rather pretentious myself. I really don't understand Wallace Stevens. Eddie hasn't been to church since I got married. That's not why though he told me. The one time I ran into him, he was all crusty with scorn. I softened all over when I saw him. He is so sad, I said to Ben.

"He wouldn't be so sad if he lived the way he should be living," said Ben.

I haven't mentioned Eddie since.

Thinking about that—it makes Ben sound self-righteous. He isn't. Eddie in fact is. Or self-wrongtious he might say.

I feel a nudge at my elbow. "Listen to this," says Ben who suspects I haven't been.

"They had faith enough," Brother Shibler is saying, "to start a bank without money, without legislative charter, without knowledge of economic principles."

I listen for a few minutes. Lily's temple garments are outlined clearly

under her summer blouse. I am always offended by the things showing. My summer blouses are darker than Lily's. I like Lily though. She likes to read the Russians and she has a splendid baby.

Mickey went away satisfied this afternoon. She had a satisfying lecture from Ben on how everything will work out for the best if she is faithful, and she had a satisfying slab of Madeleine's rhubarb pie. Madeleine for the first time looked askance as she saw Ben in earnest conversation with a big-busted 15-year old. "Part of his counselling responsibilities," I said. Madeleine looked unimpressed.

Part of the congregation is laughing, the virtuous part. "What did he say?" I whisper to Ben. Ben looks at me as though I am seven. I consider asking Sister Jessel but decide it's not worth the trouble.

"Wasn't that a great talk?" says Ben as he shakes open the sturdy lock on our front door. I'm always saying "Isn't that a great story?" and am disappointed at less than enthusiastic response so I nod my head as vigorously as befits one who missed out on the one good laugh.

"Let's go to bed early," he says.

"I can't," I say. "I've got to get another batch of finals done tonight."

"Sandra," he says, "you were going to try not to do them on Sunday."

"I did the Lord's Sunday School lesson all day and all night Saturday. I can't help it if my ox marched right into the mire."

"You could get up really early."

"I'm going to get up really early. And I'm going to go to bed really late. And that way *maybe* I'll make my deadline."

"Okay," he says, mashes me to him and takes Nibley's *Joseph Smith Papyri* to bed instead of me.

I fall asleep about fourteen times over Jeremy Herter's exam. Maybe I'll, Ben's vernacular, hit the hay. Besides things are looking up. And if I finish grading too early tomorrow night, I'll have to feel guilty for not putting off till then what I did on the Sabbath (keep it holy) Day.

I slip into bed quietly. I have probably awakened Ben but he pretends to sleep so as to lessen my guilt feelings. We're maybe the jitteriest sleepers that Somnifex would ever hope to meet. As soon as my head hits the pillow, I fall wide awake. I could grade another dozen exams. Except that by getting up I'd wake up Ben. Again. And as soon as I pulled out Jeremy Herter's blotch-inked final, I'd fall asleep. I know me.

Or do I?

The room is almost black. I look at the crack of light coming in from the streetlamp through the rumpled shade. I check both eyes to make sure I am not blind. I am not blind.

Something is rattling around in the room. A moth I think. I look up. Tiny lights flashing wildly across the ceiling. It lasts forever, maybe three minutes. In a Flannery O'Connor short story it would be a symbol of the Holy Ghost. In a Mickey-like Sandra it might be a terrifying suggestion of a heavenly visitation. I yawn. The firefly is gone. I roll over, nuzzle into Ben's back and call it a Sunday.