



THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL. Cathy Salit

The first night and day at school was on Saturday, May 30, 1970. It's hard for me to remember all of the things that happened that Saturday, considering it was quite a while ago, but I'll try anyway.

We all met in the morning prepared to work. People had brought mops, brooms, nails, drills, hammers, wrenches, pails, screwdrivers, soap, rags, scrapers, dogs, parents, friends and kids, producing altogether a turnout of around thirty people. There was supposed to be a block cleanup that morning that would help conceal us from the police, but no one showed up. So the whole time we were breaking into the abandoned storefront, we were watching out for cops. People were running about trying to look as inconspicuous as possible each time a cop car came by. It was really funny. That whole block, apartments and storefronts, is planned for demolition. The city wants to knock down everything and build a middle-income housing project there. The storefront we wanted to break into had been condemned by the city a while ago.

So anyway, on the first day, we broke open a tinny window in the front of the storefront, went inside, and looked around. I fell in love with it. It had one big room and, in that room, a glass partition. Then there was a short hall, a bathroom, another small room, and then an even smaller room. Later on in the year we punched a hole in the wall above these two rooms and had a really nice loft.

Everyone went to work. It was so exciting because here was the first physical action that made the school real. Suddenly it was no longer a theory. This concrete action belonged to us. All those ideas, thoughts and dreams were going to come true. I didn't feel like we were just starting a school. I felt as if we were starting a new life. It's hard for me to explain, or rather it might be hard for some people to understand. But that's how I felt. There was such a communal sense that I got from both the kids and the parents. People were smiling like they had never smiled before. *We Existed!*

For the first one or two nights after we broke into the storefront, people had to sleep over in order to establish that the place was ours. We set up mattresses that we had gotten from Pablo and from off the street. We also set up the furniture that we had gotten from off the street. We call this form of interior decorating "shit hunting." You go out on the sidewalk and get all kinds of furniture and shit. There is always some really nice stuff lying in the garbage. I can't believe that people actually throw some of that good stuff away.

Earlier in the day we had gotten a refrigerator and a TV donated to the school. That night King Kong was on, and the refrigerator was stacked with food. Everyone was eating, watching television, jumping, running, singing, etc. We were all really exhausted but still incredibly restless. Soon, though, people started to get into bed. After Miriam and Peter stopped complaining about sharing the same pillow and banging their heads into one another, and Pablo about someone lying on his hair, all was quiet. But the silence didn't last for long because all of a sudden we heard a car screech, a yell, and then someone screamed, *AIEEE!! Wrong way!! Wrong way!!* For the next fifteen minutes Lisa mimicked the sounds. Everyone agreed she did it very well.

In a couple of hours morning came. At 6:30 A.M. there was a knock at the door and Barbara Gittler had come with twenty-five bagels. Then, at around eight o'clock, my father came with thirty more. They disappeared within twenty minutes.

A little later in the month we decided to vote on a name for the school. Names came up like The Che Guevara School, The Liberty School, and a couple of others. Finally Elizabeth Cleaners Street School was voted on. It was derived from the storefront's first resident: an old cleaners. (It was also very convenient because on the front of the store was a big sign reading Elizabeth Cleaners.) I didn't like the name at first, but I do now. It kind of grows on you. Another name that we call ourselves is **THEMARXISTSCHOOLOFTHEGRATEFULDEAD-INCREDIBLESTRINGBANDMENSANDWOMENSLIBSURREALISTEXISTENTIALIST**, etc. I think that Pablo thought it up. It goes on and on, and I really don't think I can remember it all.

So that's the end of the first night and pretty much all that happened. I wish there was better way to explain the feeling of

that day. But the only way to understand is to experience. And since you can't experience my experience, experience your own experience by opening a storefront for anything you feel is important. Whether it be a school, a community center, a food co-op, or a political storefront. Just do it!



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