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An Edible Adolescence

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MEMOIR | alexandra stein

An Edible Adolescence

London

It was a pressure cooker of a home. Slices of life wedged together in that four-story Victorian, an imposing building that faced the fountained entrance of Primrose Hill. Life at 62 Regents Park Road—where we had settled after abandoning South Africa to the rigors of apartheid—emanated from the kitchen on the first floor. At the four-hundred-year-old refectory table, where monks once sat, now gathered haphazardly a family of committed atheists—on one side, atheism reached back a full four generations. The monks, it seemed, were vanquished. I contemplated this as a child while I sat and poked crumbs into the central join of the table—two great slabs of polished oak that didn't quite meet, leaving a quarter-inch gap filled curiously with the historical debris of the meals of many lifetimes.

In the basement of this tall house lived Jesse Hinchcliff, an elderly violinist who played in the London Philharmonic. Here she occasionally received a gentle, balding cellist from her orchestra. The whole family enjoyed his early morning departures through the French doors of her living room, which opened out onto the coal and rubbish cellars, and which were, as if in defiance of such a view, prettily boughed about by flowering vines grown upon a trellis. Also in the basement was my father's study, where he got little work done—these were his dry years. On his wall hung a charcoal nude of my mother, her sumptuous rear affectionately detailed by Evie, her childhood friend.

When my brother Jeremy was older, the storage area across from the furnace room was converted into a bedroom for him. When his girlfriend with the turned-up nose came over, my sister Hatty and I would stand at the top of the basement stairs and listen for her inevitable moans. While we did not know exactly how they were produced, we were happy with the success of our spying and felt in some way we'd gotten our own back at Jeremy, who treated us poorly, as elder brothers do.

On the third floor, well distanced from the hormone-driven activities in the basement, lived Grandma and Grandpa Stein. Grandma represented the only religious faction in the house, apart from the monks' practical legacy. Here she lit the candles every Friday night, unpresumptuously, privately, Grandpa accepting her ritual but remaining rather more interested in the algebraic patterns he steadily created, ink from his fountain pen staining his right hand blue while pipe tobacco yellowed the other.

Grandma cooked careful Jewish food. Chicken schmaltz was saved for us to spread on toast and sprinkle with salt and pepper. For me and Grandpa she made milk-soup knaidlachs: white matzo balls served in scalding buttered milk and dusted with cinnamon and sugar. Or she'd prepare a fat cow's tongue, curled around itself and tucked neatly into a Pyrex dish for long stewing on the stove until it was tender and the goose-bumped skin of taste buds peeled off the soft meat beneath. The anatomy was fascinating. I would feel my own tongue as I ate it, eerily one with it as carnivores are with their prey.

On school mornings my mother woke me and then dragged herself down the stairs in her long white nightdress. Half asleep, she stirred porridge for me and served it up with a remarkable inconsistency: sometimes runny and half-raw, other times thick and burnt, occasionally somewhere in the middle and good to eat. My father, who could not and generally would not cook, made porridge on those mornings my mother was too depressed to get up. Then, as in Goldilocks, the porridge was just right, creamy and sweet. Porridge and boiled eggs were my father's only dishes, but the eggs always had soft yolks and hard whites and the porridge was always smooth. To achieve this result, as I came to understand, he measured the oats and water and timed the eggs, having benefited from his early years in Grandma's orderly kitchen.

My sister Hatty and I shared a room until I was twelve and she was fourteen, by which point she was unambiguously mad, by turns anorexic and gluttonous, sometimes both at the same time. She wouldn't eat with the rest of us, but still would be forced to sit at the table. She'd narrow her sloped green eyes and hiss at us as we ate shepherds' pie, greasy with a film of orange fat turned the color of a sunset by the canned tomatoes that my mother had cut into rough pieces and added to the pot of browning minced meat and chunks of onion, the juice dripping like blood down her arm.

"You're pigs," Hatty would say, "Look at yourselves. *Look* at yourselves."

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The Stein children, ca. 1961. Alexandra is in the foreground, with Hatty to her right. Lyndall and Jeremy are on the left, in the middle and rear.

COURTESY OF ALEXANDRA STEIN

I'd see her, later, eyes hidden behind flat dull-yellow hair, her stick body hiding at the bottom of the stairs. I'd watch her reflection in the bay windows as she waited for the kitchen to be empty. Then she'd come in, half-starved, and tearing at it with her thin, pianist's hands, shove down a whole, cold chicken that my mother, in one of her few successful moments of nurturing, had realized she must leave for her—and this in a house where the fridge was always empty and there was, strangely, never extra food, apart from the social pot of bean soup on the stove.

Across the channel, the sixties were in full swing. Paris erupted with barricades and youngsters hurling cobblestones at caped policemen—this I learned from TV footage as I sat at my perch on the kitchen table. The outside world became immediate and of utmost importance to me. At home I watched and watched: the family, the friends, the visitors, but secretly I empathized with all this rebellious humanity in the external world. Then Hatty was gone and I remained unfixed, floating, not attached to anyone, hidden in a cave of my own thoughts. The kitchen continued to provide not only endless soup, but also a rotating cast of characters and a great deal of laughter and color, layered in between Hatty's mercurial sickness, but nowhere really for a quiet person, like myself, to entertain a private thought or feeling.

On summer nights I'd open the window and crawl from my bedroom onto the ledge outside, the top of the kitchen's bay window. Crouched on the ledge, I watched the red London sky, lit up here and there by orange sodium lamps. I talked to the twin oak trees at the back of our yard and listened to the trains rumbling through, blowing their steam whistles, hundreds of yards away behind the primary school I'd left a few years before. Jeremy had left by now. My sister Lyndall was at college up north in Bradford. Back in the house Hatty's madness dominated everything, even during her hospitalized absences. My father escaped with migraines, lovers, and Mozart playing loudly in the morning when he delivered tea to us in our beds.

When I was fourteen my best friend, Robyn, another troubled child of South Africa, was expelled from our school, North London Collegiate, for smoking and other

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transgressions. I read more and became more isolated, staying in the empty classroom at break time and avoiding contact with the other girls. For a while, Robyn and I met on the weekends at workmen's cafés in Camden Town. We drank tea and ate baked beans on toast, or eggs on toast, or mushrooms fried soggy in dripping and served on toast. But gradually Robyn receded further and further into London's drug underworld. I lost her first to Quaaludes, then to speed, then, finally, to heroin, which she shared with her boyfriend, injecting it directly into the veins of her arms, her fingers, and her toes.

Sperlonga

Then it was summer. I turned fifteen and went with my family on holiday to Italy.

Sperlonga Antica was built on a peninsula that pointed sharply out into the sea. Where the long beach narrowed as it met the rise of rocks, four hundred steps carved into the upthrusting of the earth led steeply up to the whitewashed fishing village, a casbah-like heap of houses through which only donkeys and pedestrians could navigate. I first saw the group from Paris, drinking espresso and grappa, in the café on the piazza. Danny the Red, Bernard Carrasso and his lover Anne Wizemsky, and Pierre Aroutcheff had found their way to Sperlonga. It was 1969, just a year after the upheavals of '68, and they had come for a rest—I remember them telling us that—after the meetings and riots, the cobblestones ripped from the streets and hurled at *les flics* in a failed replay of earlier French revolutions. Here they were, those same students I'd watched on TV, tending their psyches, trying to understand what they had just come through.

Pierre and I met on the beach when a crowd of us went for a midnight swim. He took my hand. My body felt like electricity. The rest of that holiday we spent hours together, much of it lying on the sand, our faces just inches away from each other. I looked into his eyes. He would rest his hand on his temple and reach his palm over to my temple to provide shade from southern Italy's intense sun as it blazed off the Mediterranean. Inside this shade our eyes talked to each other. Sometimes I caught my breath and let my eyelids shut. This connection with another person was something I had first discovered in books, but only in Sperlonga did I fully realize its possibilities. It was like swimming in the warm phosphorescence of the night sea.

Now I had another soul in the dark, a fellow explorer, someone else swimming through this murk with me. It was not that I thought Pierre necessarily knew more than I did about the topography of this new country. Nor did he pretend to. It was that he was there, simply existing in this realm.

In Sperlonga we ate cold squid soaked in olive oil and lemon juice, or on the beach, sand underfoot and a thatched roof overhead, we sucked up *spaghetti al vongole*, grit from the salty clam shells creeping into the red sauce, and all of it washed down with wine that sweetened the back of my throat. This lasted until one day the local fascists discovered that Jewish radical Danny the Red was in town and chased him through the whitewashed alleys. The whole scene was somehow made ridiculous by the panting, red-faced Danny, the yelling and warnings, and the clumsy disruption of the village—it all seemed, while frightening, somehow amateur, as if the fascists and my new friends were just pretending.

Everyone went home. I went back to school. Pierre wrote letters to me on squared paper torn from his journal, which he kept in a schoolchild's notebook. By Christmas my parents (oh, the perils of liberal parenting!) allowed me to accept his invitation to an alpine holiday. A group of us left from Paris, crammed into two tiny deux-chevaux, my eyes stinging the whole way from the blue smoke of Gauloises, Gitanes, and, eventually, in self-defense, my own Marlboros.

On that trip to the mountains Jean Crubelier brought a whole Parma ham. It became our staple, each of us grabbing the oily shank and carving thick slices with Georges's sharp hunting knife. Money was in short supply, and eight of us lived this extravagant student frugality, skiing in the French Alps with borrowed equipment, buying only bread and cigarettes and occasionally broiling rectangles of Raclette, dripping the pungent cheese onto hot new potatoes.

Paris

Back in Paris I met Françoise, Pierre's last lover, who had not left him yet though he had left her. One night, in a restaurant on Rue Jussieu, Pierre, Françoise, and I ate *steak au poivre*, the cream sauce hot and thick with black peppercorns and cognac, the meat crusted with more peppercorns and inside—red, bloody, and tender. Everyone called the owner of Chez Ray *l'Anarchiste*—and he looked like one: his big black mustache drooping like a caricature over the corners of his mouth, intelligence and perception shining from black eyes. He toasted me and bustled around behind the gleaming wooden bar, and then fussed and hovered, pouring wine, encouraging me to eat: "*Mange! ma petite Anglaise.*"

It was there that I complained of having to leave Paris —and who wouldn't, when faced with such a work of art as

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the Anarchist's *steak au poivre*? I dreaded returning to North London Collegiate School, my sick sister, the empty fridge, our chaotic kitchen, my disconnected existence, where Robyn, now lost to me, had been the only person who really understood what it was like to float aimlessly in London with some great gaping hole inside torn in the shape of South Africa. Françoise listened with a generous spirit.

"I don't want to go home," I said.

"Well, then, *ma petite*, don't," she replied, as Pierre swabbed up the intoxicating sauce with a piece of bread, then washed it down with a swig of wine.

"But what about my parents? It's not as easy as you think."

"That is their problem."

"I can't just leave. I have an obligation to them."

"*Eh! Pourquoi ça?* Did you ask for your situation? You aren't doing something bad to them. You just want your own life."

I couldn't make sense of it. How could I, or anyone, think of leaving like that? I wasn't allowed to. I was too young. I had to finish school. I crushed a cognac-soaked, cream-softened peppercorn between my teeth, and the pepperiness infused my senses, temporarily distracting me from the discussion at hand. With some effort I recovered myself:

"But I have a responsibility to them, don't I?"

Françoise leaned forward, her sweet eyes glittering under the low lights above the restaurant table, "Alex, *your parents are your chains*. You can be free. You are able."

A MONTH LATER Robyn's boyfriend Philip dropped me off at the train station, then returned to my house to deliver my goodbye note through the front door of 62 while I headed for Dover and the hovercraft across the Channel. In Paris, Pierre arrived to meet me, late, which I would soon become accustomed to, but which wasn't the kindest gesture right at that moment. Bernard Carrasso took us to dinner—yes, Chez Ray—and gave me a black Victorian choker hung with bright burgundy beads that bounced back the light bobbing in the eddies of wine in our glasses.

That night Pierre lay beside me. I touched the black hairs of his chest, ran my fingers through and through. My hand smoothed down his side, over his ribcage and back up to his sternum and I buried my face in his chest hair, rubbing and smelling, a happy animal.

In turn he touched me.

"Your breasts are like chocolate," he said, mouthing the words into these parts of me.

I thought of bread and chocolate, the breakfast of French school children: the soft crusty bread and the bar of chocolate inside. It seemed a strange idea of breakfast —nothing like the eggs and toast and strong cups of tea I'd grown up with.

"Chocolate?" I asked.

"So smooth. And soft. They melt; *c'est comme du chocolat*."

Pierre led me. I melted into him like chocolate, became attached to him, felt connected in a way I never had.

ONE DAY PIERRE BROUGHT ME HOME a tube of Kwell. Yes, in France it has the same name.

"You probably have little creatures," he announced.

"What?"

"In your hairs, you probably have little creatures. I have them, and also Michelle." He assumed I understood about these things.

"You take this medicine and wash it in all your hair, your head and down here," he gestured below his belt. "I will take the bed things to wash."

I examined myself. Yes, little creatures indeed, and some crawling, very much alive, on *me*, on *my body*. I recoiled from myself and in the shower made rapid use of the thick gray Kwell paste, waiting the required time while I could not bear to be in my own skin. I had not invited these animals to take up residence on me: they had arrived entirely without my agreement and now I could not remove myself, could only wait for this medicated clay to suffocate them and then, thank God, rinse them into the sewers.

Michelle, it turned out, had shared Pierre's bed one day when I'd been gone to England.

"It isn't anything. Alain was gone, you were gone, we just ended up there. But you know, the creatures did too!" He joked. It wasn't a serious thing. Certainly nothing I should feel upset about.

IN FRANCE I LEARNED TO DRINK COFFEE: *café au lait* in the morning, and *café express* after dinner. Sometimes I still drank *thé au lait*, but without the dedication one learned in England. In France the coffee was good and strong, flavorful and sweet. I watched Pierre as he took one of the rectangular sugar lumps from his saucer. The first sweet cube he dipped halfway into the cup of hot blackness, layered with a thin golden froth. Then he lifted the melting cube and sucked on it, the brown of his eyes deepening with pleasure. The second cube went into the coffee and was stirred into richness. Through Pierre, I learned about ritualistic French eating. The coffee and sugar were the penultimate step in the meal. Last was the lighting of the black-tobaccoed Gauloise, sometimes followed by a glass of Calvados, an intense, clear, apple brandy.

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Jenny Stein, the mother of Alexandra, ca. 1961.
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My eyes followed these small acts. Meal after three-hour meal, I focused on the comings and goings of food and drink; onto the table, into the mouth, off the table; watched the swinging doors into the kitchen, the bump of the waiter's hip and his turning, plates held up above obstacles, and their safe deliverance onto one table or another. For two years: French food, the flowing abstraction of French language, Pierre's love, Pierre's infidelities. I became, you could say, fluent. But then, over a dish of *lapin chasseur*, juicy, tender rabbit falling perfectly off the bone, Pierre announced to me that he had fallen in love with Harriette. This was followed, on my part, by some weeks of a distinct loss of appetite.

Harriette, however, married someone else and Pierre stayed with me, until my father, in one of his few acts of paternal care, took me to New York.

New York

There I lived with my cousins Ezra and Ruthie in a one-bedroom apartment on the tenth floor of a red-brick apartment building flanked by Harlem on one side and Columbia University on the other. There was a small kitchen with a window looking out to an air shaft. We each kept separate food, some of it labeled. Ezra was thin and worried about not having enough, and so he kept a reassuring supply of steaks and frozen vegetables and coffee from the A&P down the street. Ruthie and I shared more: having a soul-sister bond, we did not feel threatened by each other's eating. Besides, she was a chronic anorexic, subsisting on condiments, and only ate by the half-teaspoon portion. She would bring out a selection of ketchup, pickle, mayonnaise, and mustard, and a quarter of a piece of white bread and rip it into tiny pieces. Then she would anoint one tiny piece of bread with a mixture of condiments, chew it delicately, lick her fingers and, after a rest, start over. Ruthie's nickname was Toothpick.

When Ezra was in a generous mood he would invite me to share a steak dinner with him. He would put on Marvin Gaye or Stevie Wonder forty-fives and wiggle himself around the kitchen with an appreciation of the rhythm that failed, however, to demonstrate itself through his body. Then we would cook together and eat companionably while he told me about his girlfriends or we talked politics. He had old SDS friends, and friends from the black caucus at Columbia, and he was driven, in a certain way, like me

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Pierre Aroutcheff, Paris, ca. 1969.

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(this another symptom of us ex–South Africans) to find a place to be politically active. He and his latest girlfriend had joined the Union of Radical Political Economists and together read long Marxist economic tracts which I could not yet tolerate.

Ezra often left to spend the night with Sally. Then Ruthie would take his bed and I would sleep alone in the living room, pulling out my sleeping bag from under the couch. Since this was New York the nighttime was inhabited by cockroaches. Turning on the light sent them scurrying, heads down, for the baseboards. I never got used to it. I felt them encroaching, as their name suggested; they reminded me, I suppose, of the crabs I had hosted on my body in Paris.

West Broadway was the main drag near the apartment and I loved it. In winter, wrapped up in a five-dollar fur coat bought at the thrift shop, I walked through the chilled but clear blue air—a weather not possible in Europe where winter brought clouds and fog and low skies. West Broadway was populated by a jazzed human wildlife flowing up and down and probably under the street, fed en route by pizza slices shaken with chile flakes and oregano. Doing in Rome as the Romans do, I happily took to this urban pizza picnic as the foundation of my New York diet. On the corner of Amsterdam Avenue near our building sat a black-and-yellow Chock Full O'Nuts coffee shop, with its horseshoe-shaped counters, into the hollow of which joggled worn waitresses with bitter lips.

"Excuse me," I asked one day as I stopped in, thirsty from pizza, "Could I have a cup of coffee, please?"

I stepped slightly away from the counter, tentative, watchful, turning my head back and forth to watch the powdered face of the waitress as she coursed between one horseshoe and the next, filling up the half-full cup of a middle-aged Black man sitting, head sunk under his felt hat, across from me. She ignored me.

"Excuse me!" I tried, louder.

She ignored me again. Even then I realized that her behavior wasn't malicious, it was just New York. She responded only to the aggressively delivered imperatives that made it through her filters, which, had she not had them in place, would have meant a constant submission to the frenzy of the place—a frenzy I found myself awed by, entertained and terrified by, and yet morbidly drawn to. It was so *interesting*.

I observed the new customers who came in and achieved cups of coffee. Finally I tried a frightening experiment. I sat full-square to the counter, elbows out from my body, ready to intercept her during one of her runs, and as she came towards me, shouted, "Gimme a cup o' CAWFEE!"

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She looked up for a split second, hoisted a cup from beneath the counter, and filled it contemptuously.

"That's a qwaarter," she said, holding out her hand. This wasn't Paris where a cup of coffee entitled you to more or less permanent residency in a cafe. Here you ordered, paid up, imbibed, and left. Which I did, never to return.

I learned to drink my coffee in the relative calm of Ezra and Ruthie's apartment. I smoked, still, which they tolerated, and fixed coffee with a paper filter and ready-ground beans from the yellow-and-black Chock Full O'Nuts can. Into this sour beverage I spooned a tablespoon of another new discovery: CoffeeMate non-dairy creamer. For a while I became addicted to this claggy, oily stuff that covered up the sourness of bad coffee. It soothed me and made the coffee taste like Horlicks, a childhood milk drink my mother had given me when I couldn't sleep. It eased the shock, somehow, of my transition from the relative delicacy of Paris to the full-throttled, steel-edged existence of New York, where ritual and etiquette cracked under the blast-heat.

Sometimes Ruthie and I went to Columbia's Philosophy building for tea. Only a few hundred yards from the apartment, and just inside the campus, tea was served every afternoon by the wives of the Philosophy faculty. Ruthie and I, illicitly taking on the identity of young philosophy students (in fact, we were probably pursuing this study with far more determination than the actual students), lined up by the silver tea urns and nodded politely to the middle-aged floral-dressed women as they offered us equally floral cups of tea. These we balanced delicately on saucers as we moved on to the biscuit tray where I, at least (Ruthie not willing to take so large a share), stacked up four or five thin, sugary biscuits. The ritual reminded me of milk-break time at North London Collegiate School, where I should, by rights, still have been.

Bearing our free aids to philosophical discussion, we moved to the low couches, set ourselves down, and curled our feet up on the flowery fabric. I broke a biscuit in half and passed it to Ruthie, and we sipped tea and spoke of matters deep.

Soon we discovered that we could also meet men there. They, apparently, had discovered the same thing. Before long we were rubbing shoulders (and sometimes other things) with strapping New England architecture students, Iranian chemistry majors, Indian soon-to-be MBAs and/or gurus, and other philosophically unlikely types. While I had not officially left Pierre, the span of the Atlantic Ocean was making itself felt. In any case, for us fidelity was the foreign concept, whereas "free" love was the norm.

London

Soon thereafter I decided that I really did have to become independent—I was seventeen, after all. I had to earn a living, become a grownup, finally. So back over the ocean I flew. In London I rented a room in a flat, which I shared with three of my brother's friends. Every morning I took the tube from Finchley Central down to Soho to an entry-level receptionist's job, where I appeared in cotton mini-skirts and Peter Pan blouses and, in my last known attempt at applying makeup, clumps of mascara and sparkling sky-blue eyeshadow.

In the evenings, my flatmate Jan taught me to make chicken curry. He'd extrapolated the recipe from the Karachi Café, a dimly lit basement restaurant up in Bradford, a five-hour drive north. Bradford, where my sister was drinking and protesting her way through university, was a grimy mill town, not far from the Wuthering Heights of the Brontë sisters and now home to thousands of Indian and Pakistani immigrants. The immigrants worked in the mills and lived in the drafty Victorian-era back-to-backs heated with kerosene stoves that failed to keep the damp at bay. Thanks to their fortitude, Bradford was undergoing a culinary rebirth—curry was mercifully replacing the traditional "chip butty" (a white roll spread with margarine and stuffed with French fries—"chips" to the English). The curry was so good at the Karachi Café that often, on Friday nights, our Finchley Road household would drive the five hours up to Bradford to catch a late-night meal.

The menu was simple at the Karachi: for one pound you'd get an institutionally thick porcelain bowl filled with a rich and complex curry on top of which had been ladled a layer of butterfat saturated with roasted cumin, coriander, cardamom, fenugreek, fresh ginger, burnt-orange turmeric, and volcanic-red crushed chile pepper. And then, a plate of whole-wheat roti: flour and salt and water kneaded and flattened and thrown onto the hot walls of the round tandoor oven, blisters of burnt crust yielding to a satisfying chew of bread and served, in the American style—oh, joy—a bottomless plate, as many roti as we could eat, an endless cozy pile, so soft and tender that I wanted to rest upon their warmth and sleep forever, pillowed by the smell of hot baked bread.

The love of food and the food of love tugged me down to earth. And though I didn't stay long in England, and never learned to make roti, my chicken curry became quite good, and thus prepared, I headed down the road of life, more or less on my own two feet.

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