

Excerpt From

# Eating My Heart Out

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A Memoir in Progress

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This memoir, which chronicles my love/hate relationship with food and with my mother, begins when I was 12 years old and ends now at age 75. Part One, the first 100 pages, describes a 24-hour period during which I, at 12, had been instructed by a doctor to eat as much as I possibly could – something I had never before experienced and my mother had never witnessed. The memoir is complete and in final edit, except for an epilog that has yet to be written.

**PART ONE**

**EATING DAY**

## The Lab

I was 12 when my mother took me to The Lab to find out what was wrong with me. That was a long time ago. But one morning, over a breakfast of watery oatmeal into which I hopefully sprinkled a small portion of fat black raisins, my friend Jill said to me, "I've made up my mind that when I'm 80 I will eat anything and everything I want." And then, like so many times before, I thought of The Lab.

If The Lab had another more official name, I don't remember it. Perhaps I never knew it. I know that I was glad to be going there. I wanted to go. Like my mother, I hoped there was something medically wrong with me, something that could be fixed with a pill or an injection or even an operation -- an option that my mother had hesitantly suggested might be a possibility. Since bariatric surgery was not something any of us had heard of at that time, I can't help but wonder what she could have been thinking.

I didn't like being a disappointment to my mother. That's not to say she didn't love me, her only child. I never doubted that she did. But my mother often said about herself, "I live through my eyes." To the end of her 100 years of life, my mother was likely to say to me as we walked down the street or exited a museum or restaurant, "Did you notice the slim dark-haired woman in the Saks 5th Avenue rain suit? She had the most beautiful ears." Now I wouldn't know a Saks 5th

Avenue rain suit if it was hanging in front of me on a rack at Saks 5th Avenue, much less notice a person's ears -- unless they were grotesquely deformed. But then, I don't live through my eyes. On the other hand, if that dark-haired woman had been eating something, I could almost certainly have described exactly how it looked, smelled, and probably tasted.

So when my mother suggested The Lab as a place that might uncover a solution to making me more pleasing to look at, and therefore less disappointing to her, I was eager to go. It's probably worth saying that I was, at the time, 5'4" tall, the maximum height I would ever attain. With a body already fully developed, my weight hovered in the 130-pound range. Since this was the mid-1950s when voluptuous women like Marilyn Monroe and Jayne Mansfield were still considered sexy and beautiful, I'm not sure why my mother and I felt that mine was such a dreadful weight, but we did. Perhaps it was because my mother, 3 inches taller than I, weighed a never-fluctuating 127 pounds. But it's ironic that for all the years since that time, 130 has stayed in my thoughts, as a weight so ideal for me, as to be totally unattainable ever again.

On our first visit to The Lab, we met with a white man. Literally. White lab coat, white hair, white teeth, white skin, white frost surrounding him. Well, maybe not real frost. In my memory, his name is Dr. White. He, behind a formidable desk and backed by many framed certificates which may or may not have been degrees from

educational institutions, and we, facing him in straight-backed leather chairs, discussed my problem. After reviewing a promisingly long list of potential diagnoses, he issued the following instructions:

1. Return to The Lab in 4 days, bringing along a 3-full-day collection of urine - every drop to be collected and carefully refrigerated until delivery.
2. Return to The Lab in 8 days for a complete physical examination.
3. For 24 hours prior to the physical, eat as much as possible of absolutely anything that I craved.

The profound rush of joy and anticipation that I felt at the issuing of the third instruction has rarely been duplicated in my life. Twelve years old, and I already understood that in relationship to food, restraint and deprivation would be lifelong requirements. My mother, who routinely hid from me any sweets that might tempt me to eat inappropriately, looked stricken. "Everything, Doctor?" she asked, eyebrows raised, pitch slightly too high. "Absolutely everything that she wants to eat?" "Yes," said Dr. White, the ravenous creature in my belly warming to him, "Absolutely everything. As much as she can possibly eat."

Back in the car, heading out of Manhattan toward our home in Queens, I began making a mental list of what I would eat: cream-filled chocolates for sure. Veal parmigiana. Mashed potatoes with extra butter. Chocolate malteds. French fries. My mother was in a different

place entirely. In German, her mother-tongue, she muttered to herself, shaking her head, making tsk tsk noises, questioning the doctor's credentials (Was ist das für ein Arzt?), his sanity (Er ist doch ganz verrückt), the wisdom of following his instructions (Wierklich eine blodekeit). But my mother ultimately believed in doctors, looked up to them, and she had pinned high hopes on this particular one. So, in the end, she relaxed, adopted an air of bemused tolerance, and allowed my food fantasies to flourish as I set about following the first part of Doctor White's instructions.

It's very hard to collect 3 days worth of urine, especially for a 12-year-old girl who considers urine to be only the second most disgusting thing produced by the human body. First, to collect urine, you have to be someplace with a bottle and a refrigerator every time you have to urinate. Second, it's difficult to know in advance how large a bottle you might eventually need. Third, no matter the size of the ultimate container, a smaller receptacle has to be used for the collection process and then emptied into the larger reservoir. Clearly one wouldn't want to make such transfers in a kitchen, which is where, in most households, the refrigerator is likely to be. So the collection process requires a great deal of planning and moving of containers from place to place. Add to that the layout of the house in which I grew up: kitchen downstairs, bathroom upstairs, and it's understandable that instruction number 1 was not easy to carry out.

For three days I painstakingly did what was required to collect my

urine as instructed. From my mother, who has always saved empty bottles, containers, and bags (both plastic and paper) for reasons I have never fully understood, I got a Hellman's Mayonnaise jar that seemed appropriately sized. I remember it as one of those huge institutional-size jars commonly found today at Costco or BJ's or any other of those vast warehouses that sell things in tremendous quantity for supposedly bargain prices. Perhaps the jar was smaller than I remember, but what counts is that it did turn out to be just the right size for holding 3 days worth of urine. On the fourth day, having to my great relief completed all collections and transfers without mishap, I carefully placed the filled jar in a brown paper Gristede's bag, pulled together the top edges of the bag, folding them tightly down twice over, and headed for the subway.

I can't recall the circumstances under which I was charged with sole responsibility for delivering the jar to The Lab, but I assume that it was either a Saturday or some school holiday, and that my mother was unavailable to act as chauffeur. Already well accustomed to travelling by subway on my own, although never before with a large bottle of urine, I boarded the westbound F express train for the easy 25 minute ride to midtown. There were no empty seats on the train that morning, so I stood, awkwardly balancing myself and the bag, just inside the doors that wouldn't open again until the second stop ten minutes away. A couple of minutes out of the station, I began to suspect that the bag I was holding to my chest with both arms was



flashing a large neon sign that said: URINE. Why else was everyone staring at the bag, seeming to know exactly what I was carrying? As casually as I could, I gently lowered the bag to the floor and slid it to my left until it was secured between my leg and the side of the seat next to which I was standing. Relieved of my embarrassing burden, I did a quick check to make certain that stares were no longer directed at my midsection. They weren't. All eyes now appeared to be focused on my left foot. I looked down. My left foot was centered in a spreading puddle. And while I knew for absolutely certain that it couldn't possibly be my carefully collected and refrigerated urine there on the floor of that subway car, there was no doubt that the puddle was emanating from the bottom of the brown Gristede's bag tucked against my leg. The horror of the situation took some seconds to work its way through from my eyes to my brain. Just as my brain finally registered the fact that I was most certainly standing in a puddle of my own urine, and that the other passengers in the subway car were backing away from its expanding edges and looking accusingly in my direction, the train screeched to a stop and the doors opened behind me. My face burning, unable to comprehend how the bottle could have broken, unable to believe that it had, I did the only thing I could do. I turned, walked off the subway, crossed the platform and boarded the train that would take me home, leaving the bag behind to spread its incriminating contents without me there to either accept responsibility or to bear witness to all that wasted effort.

Whether or not that jar broke as a result of any action or carelessness

on my part, I paid the price for the next three days as I repeated the arduous collection process. But when the new jar was at last filled, and safely delivered to The Lab by my mother, a reward was waiting for me: the day that I had so eagerly anticipated was only hours away.

### **Breakfast**

Despite all my fantasies in advance of Eating Day, I had no idea what my capacity for food actually was. I had never, in conscious memory, eaten as much as I wanted to eat. I knew from my mother's oft-repeated stories of how difficult a baby I had been, that for the first year of my life I held down nothing the first time that it was fed to me. What went down, quickly came up. So my mother learned to prepare a double portion of formula, and later of food, because it seemed that once my body had violently rejected whatever was offered, it didn't have the strength to reject it a second time. I don't know whether my mother explored alternative solutions, or whether there even was any other course of action she could have taken to provide me with the nourishment I needed to survive and to grow. But surely the process of feeding me double the amount I should have been fed, cannot have left me unscarred. Twelve years into my life, I didn't know what it was like to feel full and incapable of eating more. I still don't know.

Late in the afternoon of the day before Eating Day, hours after the bottle of urine had reached its destination, my mother and I went to the supermarket to buy the ingredients I needed for breakfast. She

was in an indulgent mood as we shopped, seemingly greatly amused by my exuberant anticipation of the day ahead, as well as by the shopping list I had prepared. In the week since our first visit to The Lab, my mother appeared to have come to terms with the idea that I would have this one day to eat as I pleased. We had even agreed that we would go out for lunch and dinner on that day. I had told her exactly where I wanted to have lunch, and had then happily agreed to her suggestion of an Italian restaurant in the city for dinner.

I could barely sleep that night in anticipation of the day ahead. I was out of bed before 7, wanting to make Eating Day last as long as possible. I brushed my teeth, combed my hair, put my robe over my pajamas and hurried downstairs to the kitchen. My mother was there, sipping coffee and reading the paper. Through the kitchen window, I could see that our car was in the driveway, not the garage, which meant that she had already driven my stepfather to the subway. We would pick him up at work that evening on our way into the city for dinner.

Cheerfully, my mother the good sport looked up and said, "So, I suppose we're making bacon and eggs for breakfast this morning?" "Bacon, eggs, cheese and toast," I told her firmly. She raised her eyebrows. Untroubled, I eagerly began taking ingredients out of the refrigerator. My mother's mood, tone, looks and actions would not stop me from eating as I intended on this day.

At 12, I was not yet much of a cook, but I had acquired some basic skills simply by watching my mother prepare food. I was also taking a Home Ec class in junior high, required for girls since we were expected to eventually become good homemakers. As a result, I was not only capable of making popovers and pinwheel hors d'oeuvres (neither of which I intended to make that morning), I had also learned how to handle standard kitchen equipment. Add to that the weekly instruction my stepmother had given me in preparing my favorite breakfast, and I was ready to give it a shot.

Hauling the heavy black iron skillet from the pot drawer under the oven, I set it on top of the stove and began to line it with bacon. "Don't you want me to do that?" asked my mother, moving toward the stove. "No Mom," I said, "I can do this myself." I could see that she was surprised, having never before seen me do anything more than heat leftovers or a can of soup. She sat down again, observing me with some skepticism.

I fried the bacon until it was crisp, and then scooped the dark strips out of the skillet and onto the paper towels I had prepared. I broke two eggs into the hot fat remaining in the pan, ignoring the grease that splattered all over the top surface of the stove. As soon as the eggs were opaque, I laid a slice of munster cheese over each and placed a cover on the pan for a minute to ensure a total meltdown. My mother continued to sit silently, watching as I then uncovered the pan and allowed the melted cheese to become brown and crisp

around the edges of the eggs. Realizing that I had forgotten to make the toast on which I planned to deposit the eggs, I asked my mother if she could toast two pieces of bread for me. "Two?" she asked, sending a message that one would be more than enough. "No," I said, "not two. Three." I had forgotten about the piece I needed for mopping up whatever was left in the pan. "You're going to eat three pieces of toast with all of that?" she asked, incredulous. "Yes, Mom. Please. I need the toast quickly. And can you butter it for me too?" I felt powerful. She didn't say another word as she laid the three pieces of bread out on the toaster oven rack. When she finally handed over the buttered toast, I put two pieces onto a plate, slid the eggs and cheese onto the toast, laid the bacon across the top, wiped out the pan with the third piece, put that on the plate as well, and proudly carried my creation to the table. "That's quite a breakfast," said my mother as I lifted the first fork-full.

Breakfast in my mother's house was normally a spartan affair: orange juice, coffee (which, because my father was in the coffee business, I began drinking as a small child), a slice of toast with a little butter and sometimes a teaspoonful of jam or, on weekends, a thin slice of boiled deli ham. The only item over which any fuss was made was the orange juice. Made from concentrate, there was nothing special about the juice itself. But each morning my mother would carefully measure out 3 small glasses of orange juice, pour them into the blender and whip them into a frothy substance with which she then refilled the 3 glasses. Because our blender was an Osterizer, my

mother always referred to what she did as "osterizing" the juice. I have never particularly liked orange juice, unless freshly squeezed from sweet oranges, but osterized orange juice is, to my taste, about as bad as it gets. My mother, however, took such delight in her innovation that I didn't have the heart to tell her I didn't like it until well into my teens -- which was just as well, because by then she was convinced that I hated anything she had made simply because she had made it.

There were only two possible variations in our breakfast routine. The first happened when I was sick. Then, and only then, my mother would make a wonderful, warm, soothing concoction that she called grieskoch, something that her mother had made for her whenever, as a child, she wasn't feeling well. I loved grieskoch, and simply assumed that it was one of the few old family recipes that my mother had managed to take with her when she and my father fled Vienna in 1938. When I eventually discovered that grieskoch was nothing more than cream of wheat cooked with milk and a little sugar, something that even Americans knew about and could eat at any time, I was stunned and more than a little disappointed.

I made this discovery soon after my friend Carol moved into the house next door. Carol had been living in an apartment house across the park from us. Friends since our first day of junior high, we were the ones who came up with the idea that her family should buy the house next door as soon as our neighbors told us they would be

moving. Incredibly, her parents loved and could afford the house, and the deal went through. Almost from the day that Carol and her family moved in, we began a morning routine that would last through high school graduation. As soon as I was ready to leave for school, I would go out our back door, cross quickly and quietly behind the other half of our house, inhabited by Mr. Bonnicks, an elderly man who made no secret of his dislike for children, cross the driveway separating our house from Carol's, and slip through her back door into a long narrow kitchen identical to ours. Always early, I would arrive just as Carol's mother was serving her breakfast.

It was on the first morning of this new routine that I recognized both the aroma and appearance of the steaming white cereal being set in front of my friend. It was my special breakfast, and Carol wasn't even sick! Not only wasn't she sick, but this bowl of grieskoch had been topped, by Carol's mother, with at least a dozen chocolate chips that were shiny and half-melted by the time the bowl arrived at the table. Every weekday morning after my meager breakfast, I would sit at that table smelling the mingled sweetness of chocolate and cream of wheat, hoping that Carol's mother would just once think to offer me my own bowl or, at least, that she would leave the kitchen long enough for me to help Carol finish hers. Because, of course, tall, skinny Carol would have much preferred to have my breakfast and to be spared the cereal that her anxious mother forced on her each morning. But, without variation, I sat and watched her through the years, eating slowly and methodically around each of the carefully

placed chocolate chips until we left that table and headed off to school, the longed-for chocolate buried daily in the uneaten remains of my friend's breakfast.

The next time I was sick and my mother made grieskoch for me, I did ask her if she could please put some chocolate chips on the top. Surprised, my mother asked where I had come up with such an idea. I explained that Carol was served grieskoch with chocolate chips for breakfast every morning. "Carol!," exclaimed my mother. "Well, of course. Carol can afford to eat chocolate chips." And that was the end of that.

The second variation on our daily breakfast theme was reserved for special occasions such as birthdays, school graduations and important holidays. On these occasions, my mother would replace the toast with a home-made Gugelhupf, a dense, yeasty bundt cake flavored with lemon rind and packed with raisins. I loved and still love Gugelhupf, but on Eating Day, the day before my return visit to The Lab, I had a very different kind of special breakfast in mind.

Once each week, either on Wednesday or Saturday night, I would sleep over at my father's house. Amicably divorced when I was ten, my parents were each immediately remarried - my mother to a longtime love from whom she had been separated by the war, and my father to the recent widow of an old friend. My father's wife, my step-mother, was a talented cook and seemed to like nothing better



than to make delicious meals for me and my father. Oddly enough, she never seemed to want her own two daughters to eat the fatty delights she prepared for us, nor, come to think of it, did she eat any of them herself. In later years, especially the years during which I struggled through one stringent diet after another, and watched my father, plagued by heart disease, get fatter and fatter, I was not as thrilled by the constant temptation his wife placed in front of us. But at age 12, Dita was my fairy godmother. Had I asked, she would surely have given me grieskoch coated with chocolate chips. I wouldn't have asked though, because I so looked forward to the breakfast she made for me each week. It was this breakfast, which she had taught me how to make, that I had in mind for Eating Day.

Normally too embarrassed to eat freely in front of my mother, ashamed of my seemingly bottomless appetite, dreading above all her words and looks of disapproval, I found myself approaching Eating Day with an entirely different mindset. Although I knew that my mother would be horrified by the size and richness of the breakfast I planned to make for myself, I relished the idea of demonstrating my capacity for food. I believed that letting my mother see how much food I truly craved, and finding out together how much food I could actually consume, would make her realize the extent of the restraint that I exercised on a daily basis. She had NO idea, but on this day she would find out. Without embarrassment, with total legitimacy (because it was, after all, on doctor's orders), I would allow the creature that lived inside me to devour everything it longed for.

My mother always asked me, after a night at my father's house, what had been served for dinner. Somehow she had never asked about breakfast. Perhaps she thought that everyone ate as she did in the morning. Now, however, she asked, "Where did you learn how to make that?" Not yet savvy enough to understand that my mother hated my stepmother, the woman who had "stolen" the husband she didn't want and made it possible for her to marry the man she loved, I said, "Dita taught me." "She's made this for you for breakfast?" My mother's tone let me know that I had better answer carefully. "Yes. Well, just a couple of times. Do you want to try some?" She shook her head and made a face as though I had just offered her poison. Knowing what we now know about the relationship of ingested cholesterol to coronary artery disease, I suppose I **was** offering her poison... but we didn't know it then.

Without another word my mother got up and began emphatically cleaning the mess I had made of the stove. I ignored her and focused on enjoying every bite of the breakfast I knew would probably never again be seen in that kitchen. When I finished, when my plate was totally clean, I brought it over to the sink where my mother stood still scrubbing the skillet. "Well," she said, "I don't suppose we'll be going to Topsy's for lunch today after all." "What do you mean?" I asked in a panic, all my fantasies of a perfect Eating Day fading.

I can hardly bear to describe Topsy's - because it's gone. In all these

years, the only restaurant food that has ever come close for me is served at Sylvia's in New York City's Harlem. Topsy's, oddly situated in Forest Hills, Queens, a white middleclass suburb, offered up southern food at its very best. Baskets of hot sweet rolls, crunchy red cabbage salad with tangy orange-colored dressing; the best fried chicken ever anywhere, served with a tureen of thick peppery cream gravy; round, Spaldeen-sized corn fritters accompanied by real maple syrup, sweet potato pie, spicy greens and, for dessert, a peach cobbler so perfect it rendered me forever incapable of enjoying any other. To me, Eating Day meant not having to forego the rolls, or choose between half a corn fritter and a sliver of sweet potato pie; not ordering the childrens' size portion of chicken or telling the waitress to hold the gravy; and certainly not leaving before dessert.

Not go to Topsy's? Was she going to punish me for the breakfast I had eaten? "Suzy," she said, "You cannot tell me that you are going to be able to eat lunch at Topsy's after that enormous breakfast." Ah. I understood. It was like my mother feeling cold and insisting that I put on a sweater. Immeasurably relieved, I reassured my mother for the first of many, many times that day that I could indeed eat more, that I was not anywhere near full, that I would not have a stomach ache, and that I was simply doing what the doctor had instructed me to do: eat as much as I possibly could.

While my mother continued to ponder the likelihood of my being able to eat a big lunch four hours hence, I spent the time getting dressed

and worrying about how I would get to eat all the food I still intended to eat before lunch. In my head was the list that had been accumulating throughout the week since my visit to The Lab -- a list of all the tastes I craved and had been prohibited from enjoying since my body had started to blossom. I had an eating plan for the entire day, and at 9:30 a.m. I was already falling behind.

### **The Village**

As soon as I was dressed, I went back downstairs to the kitchen to try to move my agenda forward. "Mom," I ventured, "could you drive me to the village now?" "The village?" she asked, "What for?" "Well, I thought we could get some jelly roll and, um, maybe a few other things." "Jelly roll? For what?" She still didn't get it. "For today, Mom. For me to eat." "When can you possibly eat jelly roll today?" she asked. "You just had a huge breakfast, we're having lunch at Topsy's and then an Italian dinner!" "I want jelly roll before lunch, Mom. I thought we could go to the village for a little while now, and then

when we come home I'll eat some." My mother was incredulous. "You can't be serious," she practically gasped. "Come on Mom, please. If I walk it will take too long. You know I have to eat as much as possible today. You heard the doctor say so. It's just for this one day. Please?" She shook her head slowly from side to side but, to my great relief, I could see that she was going to relent. "It's your stomach," she finally said. "Okay, we'll go to the village."

"The village" was the way we always referred to the heart of Forest Hills, the quiet, shop-lined T formed by the wide 2-block length of Continental Avenue, perfectly bisected by Austin Street, which stretched, longer and narrower, to the east -- forming the stem of the T. Of course the Forest Hills in which I grew up was nothing like the frenzied carnival it has since become. In those days, it was always possible to find a parking space just steps from one's destination.

Ordinarily, I loved going into the village with my mother. Most Saturdays I would eagerly ride the subway back to Continental Avenue after my morning dance class in the city, and meet my mother for a sandwich and an afternoon of shopping. Since she worked fulltime during the week as a fashion designer in Manhattan's garment district, my mother would cram all her errands into those Saturday afternoons. The routine was almost always the same. We would head down Austin Street to the little notions place where she bought the ribbons, seed pearls, sequins and buttons that she used to customize the cashmere sweaters she sold, as a sideline, to a

Madison Avenue boutique. Arthur, the owner, and his wife Sylvia, both tiny just like their shop, always let me select a length of ribbon for my hair or some bit of lace to dress up my dolls. "Such a beautiful girl," Arthur would often say to my mother as I blushed with pleasure, "you must be proud." And my mother would find a way to deflect the compliment: "Arthur, if you'd look at the buttons instead of at my daughter, maybe you'd find the ones I ordered." Or, more frequently, with a flirtatious smile, she'd make the joke that I knew was not a joke, "Of course she's a beautiful girl, she has a beautiful mother."

Womraths, the bookstore across the street, was usually our second stop. There was a lending library at the back of the store. Each week my mother would return the book she had borrowed the week before, and then carefully select another to take home with her. When it came to literature, her taste was eclectic. She favored historical novels and biographies, but liked to stay abreast of the latest fiction - reading with equal ease in English, French and German. An avid reader myself, I always enjoyed browsing through the long rows of hardcovers and paperbacks while waiting for my mother to make her selections. I think it wasn't until a year or two after *Eating Day* that I managed in that way, while standing in Womraths over a series of Saturday afternoons, to read all of Harold Robbins then scandalous early novel, 79 Park Avenue.

I recall, much less fondly, the clothing store of my childhood, Famous Fashion. This was where the battle lines were drawn. Then and now,

my mother agreed that what one likes is a matter of taste, and that taste varies from person to person. According to my mother, however, her taste was correct, and this applied to everything -- but most especially to clothing.

My mother liked to select my clothes for me. In fact, she insisted on it. The problem was that she would choose styles likely to look good on her, and expect them to look good on me. I had a high, small waist, good-sized bust, and large hips. My mother was essentially flat-chested with a low, wide waist and narrow hips. I would stand in Famous Fashion's dressing room struggling to fit into the clothes my mother would pass to me from beyond the curtain screening my cubicle. As I tried each new outfit, I was expected to emerge from the cubicle, walk up and down in front of my mother and Frances, the saleswoman, and listen to them evaluate my appearance. This was not fun. Nor did it do wonders for my self-confidence. In fact, the precipitating event, leading to our trip to The Lab, had occurred during just such a session.

My mother had made the decision that I was now sufficiently grown up to wear a straight skirt, notwithstanding the fact that my figure was sending a clear message that it was formed for anything but. That afternoon she had selected for me a narrow gray flannel skirt and a yellow button-down oxford shirt. The skirt, a size 12, barely made it over my hips, while the closed waist band stood away from my skin by at least an inch all around. The shirt, which was stiff and bulky,

filled up the empty space around my waist when I tucked it in. "It doesn't fit," I told my mother through the curtain. "Let us see it," she insisted. "Come out here." I came out. The two-woman jury frowned. My mother fussed with the bulk of shirt at my waist, reached up under the skirt and pulled the shirt down, attempted to reposition the skirt around my hips. "Walk," Frances said. I walked. "She needs a girdle," Frances proclaimed, as she got the rear view. "I don't want a girdle," I said. "The skirt's too tight, and I hate the shirt." I had seen a soft pink sweater set that I thought would look much better with the skirt, but since I didn't want the skirt, I held my tongue.

Frances disappeared, and my mother fussed some more, examining the waistband and inside seams of the skirt to see how she could rework it for a better fit. Frances reappeared with an extremely ugly and frightening undergarment. Although my stepmother's sister Tilda sold things like this at Bloomingdales in Fresh Meadows where she worked, I had never seen anything like it, either on my mother, or drying over the shower curtain rod where she hung all the underwear that she hand-washed every night. But this thing that Frances carried had garters dangling from it. Garters meant stockings. I had not yet been allowed to wear stockings.

"Try this on under that skirt," said Frances. "Can I have stockings?" I asked my mother. "Try the girdle first and let's see how the skirt looks." "Can I try it with that pink sweater-set?" I pointed, sensing the opportunity. Frances brought it over. Back I went behind the curtain.



The girdle was hard to wiggle into. It was stiff and uncomfortable and made my stomach hurt. But the skirt definitely fit better over the girdle, and the pink sweaters eased the pain. Back out to be scrutinized. "Much better," said my mother, I'll just have to take in the waist." "That looks good now," said Frances. "Can I have stockings?" I asked. My mother nodded. And so I learned how to lock my body into a girdle, and live with the discomfort, a practice that I continued for almost 20 years. After all, "Schoenheit muss leiden" my mother always said to me. One must suffer to look beautiful.

It was later that night that my mother expressed her concern over the fact that I needed a girdle. The way she put it was, "I can't believe that a daughter of mine would have to wear a girdle. I wonder if there's something wrong with you. I'm going to talk to the doctor." And so she did.

On Eating Day, I needed a ride to the Village, but I didn't anticipate shopping with my mother once we got there. At the corner of Continental Avenue and Austin Street, my mother stopped at the traffic light and signaled a right turn. Since the bakery was directly ahead of us, and there were several empty parking spaces in sight, it was obvious that she had some other destination in mind. "Where are we going, Mom?" I asked. "Well, since we're here and have some time, I thought we could stop into Grad's and see if they got in those cotton skirts," she answered, as we turned and cruised slowly down Austin Street. Grad's was the discount labels store where my mother

bought most of her casual clothes. If that's where she was headed, I knew I'd have the time I needed to run my own errands -- if I could get her to agree to separate for a while.

"Could you go to Grad's alone and just meet me at the bakery in an hour?" I asked as she parked the car. She was surprised. "What are you going to do for an hour?" she asked. I was evasive. "I want to go up to Continental for a while." She hesitated, thinking, and then asked anxiously, "You're not going to eat more now, are you?" "I don't know," I lied, "I'll see what I feel like when I get there." "Remember it's only a couple of hours till lunch," she said, "And you still want your jelly roll." "I know," I answered. "Don't worry." I could see she was worrying. I waited. She looked at her watch, she looked down the block toward Grad's; she made no move to get out of the car. I looked at my watch and then leaned over to give her a quick kiss on the cheek. "I'll see you at Peter Pan at 11:00," I said, and jumped out of the car before she could tell me not to.

I quickly began walking, and then looked back over my shoulder to see her getting out of the car and heading away from me, down the block toward Grad's. I was relieved, because I knew that if she had stayed with me, I would have had to fight for every bite I intended to eat in the next hour. But I was also somehow sorry that she wouldn't be coming with me to see the extent of my capacity for food. I was surprised to find that I was actually enjoying shocking her, and was fairly certain that, despite her protestations, she would not stop me

from carrying out the doctor's orders to eat as much as possible. But it was still only morning, and I would have the rest of the day for the demonstration of my prowess.

As I headed toward Continental Avenue I mulled over the choice I would have to make when I got to the corner. I could turn left onto the Avenue and head down the block to Schmidt's, the luncheonette just next to the railroad underpass, where I had recently made the discovery that a piece of toasted and buttered Drake's raisin cake paired perfectly with an extra-thick chocolate malted. But if it was chocolate that I wanted, and oh it was, then I could turn right and first check the Barricini's Chocolate store, just next to the Forest Hills Movie Theater, where my father's cousin Stella worked. If Stella was there, and alone, I was assured of some immediate free samples, and then I could buy even more to take home with me for the afternoon.

### **A Box of Chocolates**

Stella and my mother did not like each other. And to be candid, I didn't like Stella nearly as much as I liked her position as manager of the chocolate shop. Stella liked me though, and since there were no customers around that morning, she let out a hoot of delight as I pushed through the door into the thick, deep scent of chocolate.

Although first cousins, my father and Stella had never been close. But now they were two of only four survivors of what had once been a big

family. The other two were their respective brothers. All the rest, their parents, aunts, uncles and cousins had been murdered by the Nazis. By default, Stella and my father had become close family. Like my father, Stella was big (which is probably one of the reasons my mother didn't like her). Her hugs were enveloping, and not totally unwelcome since she smelled strongly of chocolate.

I had always been told that I looked like my father and my maternal grandmother -- which is not as odd as it sounds since my father and my mother's mother were reported to have looked very much alike: fair hair, blue eyes, regular features, full bodies. I think that when Stella looked at me, she saw her family --its past and its future. On Eating Day morning, what she also saw was a 12-year girl yearning for chocolate.

"So schatzi," Stella said, once she had released me from her sweet-smelling embrace, "What would you like to taste this morning?" We had developed a routine, Stella and I. I stopped in to visit whenever I could, and she rewarded me with my choice of two chocolates from the trays in the showcase. She already had her arm around my shoulders and was guiding me toward the case. "Stella," I said, "Today I'm going to buy chocolate - a whole box of chocolate; a pound, but not the pound already in the package. I want to choose the candies from the case."

"A whole pound of chocolate!" Stella seemed delighted. "This is a

present for someone special?" "No. It's just for me," I said. "For you?" Stella looked confused. "Shatzi, you can come every day and Stella will give you chocolate to eat. Whatever you want. You don't have to buy a pound to keep." "I know Stella. Thank you. I love to come have chocolate here with you. But this pound is for me to eat today," I explained. Stella laughed a big laugh and pulled me to her. "No shatzi," she said. "You don't want to eat a whole pound of chocolate in a day. You'll have a big belly ache." And she laughed some more.

I was starting to feel intense frustration at the difficulty I was having in carrying out my well-constructed eating plan. I had surely not anticipated any resistance from cousin Stella who had always seemed to love feeding me chocolates. Why was it so difficult for me to get the food I wanted? "I have to eat a lot of chocolate today Stella. Really I do. The doctor said I do." "The doctor? What doctor? Dr. Glauber?" she asked, naming our family physician. And then I said the magic words: "No, the doctor he told mommy to take me to. I have to eat as much as I can today to find out why I'm fat."

"Ach! Here we go again with the fat." Stella scowled. "This is your mother who says you are fat, ja? You are not fat Schatzi. You are built like your papa and your Oma. You want a pound of chocolate today, I'll give you a pound of chocolate." And so I finally got to select my pound of cream-filled chocolates: milk chocolate candies in various shapes filled with raspberry, vanilla, coffee, orange, and even

chocolate cream. I pointed to each of my choices, naming them slowly, one at a time, still hardly believing that they would be mine to enjoy that very day. With the taste equivalent of perfect pitch that has always been my burden and my talent, I could savor the exact flavor of each candy as Stella lifted it and placed it carefully into a shiny, white, one-pound box.

When the box was full, she gently slid it into a shopping bag, and then let me select two additional candies to eat right there in the store as she watched with a big, satisfied smile. When I tried to pay, Stella wouldn't accept my money. It was her gift to me. I hugged her in appreciation, giddy from the taste of the candy and the anticipation of more to come. Finally, after way too many good-bye hugs, Stella released me back into the morning sunlight, and I again turned right, heading further up the block toward Queens Boulevard, the heavy, reassuring weight of the bag clutched tightly in my hand.

### **The T-Bone**

There were only two reasons to go to Queens Boulevard. Well, three, if you counted crossing it to get to the library. Of course I never crossed it above ground. I would go down into the Continental Avenue subway station and cross underneath the six lanes of traffic zooming above. But I generally came to that corner with no intention of crossing. Down the block to my right was the Midway movie

theater. At 12, I was allowed to go to the movies with friends on occasional Saturday afternoons --even with boys, as long as it was a double date.

Down the block to my left was the T-Bone Diner. When I was younger my father often took me to the T-Bone for lunch on Saturdays. Like so many other things, those lunches ended with the divorce, and it was at least two years since I had eaten there.

Lunch at the T-Bone with Daddy ranked among the best memories of my childhood, right along with Mutchky-time, a game he played with me when I was really little. My father would sit in his big armchair and hold my hand and wrist very tightly as I stood next to him. "Go away!" he would say. "Go to your room." And oh I would try. I would pull as hard as I could, wriggling, lurching, struggling to get away, and then dissolving in giggles as he, in a stern voice, would repeat "Mutchky, why aren't you listening to me? I said to go away." "I'm trying Daddy" I would shriek through the giggles, pulling at his fingers to pry them off my wrist. "I can't. You're holding me!" Then the skin around his light blue eyes would get all crinkly and he'd grin and pull me to him for a big hug, so close that I could smell the Tums he always chewed on, before finally letting me go.

Of course we didn't play Mutchky-time at the T-Bone; but we did have another game that we played there. We'd practically run into the diner, hungry after a morning spent together at Fairyland or the Zoo

or the skating rink, and head straight for one of the narrow back booths. The waitresses all knew us and, like every waiter and waitress I would encounter over the years of dining out with my father, they couldn't do enough for him. Whichever waitress was serving our booth that day would rush right over. "Hello Mr. Dalton," she'd say. "How are you today? Can I get you the usual?" Then my father would look at me and ask, "Do you think Mommy will be angry if I have the steak?" And I would give the same answer every time, "I won't tell, Daddy. I promise." And he'd nod slowly and say, "That's probably a good idea," and then he'd turn to the waitress and say "Yes please, the usual for both of us." And the waitress, still smiling, would write something on her order pad and rush off to the kitchen.

Then, while we waited for my tuna on rye with lettuce and mayo and for Daddy's big T-bone steak with A-1 sauce, we'd start speaking in our made-up language that we pretended was Hindustani. I can't remember whether we ever spoke that language anywhere else; in my mind Hindustani is wrapped around the T-Bone Diner. We would speak very earnestly, as if engaged in serious conversation. I would give our invented words strong inflections, use wild hand gestures and contort my face into odd expressions. If there were people around us, they would turn to stare at me, and sometimes even start to laugh. My father would answer me with his own nonsense words, but in serious measured tones as though he were reassuring me or imparting some great wisdom. I loved that game -- my father, sitting there looking so elegant and serious saying things like, "Magishku



talima makti!” and my knowing that the words were meaningless, a joke, a special secret that only we shared.

The imaginary conversation would continue right up until our food was served when we ended our game and got down to the serious business of eating. Loving, and indulging in, good food was a guilty passion that we shared. We recognized and understood it in each other. Food was, in some ways, our strongest bond, our true common language.

Sometimes, after I finished my sandwich and my father finished his steak, he'd ask me if I wanted dessert. We never ordered dessert when we went out with my mother, and it was something we only rarely had at home --unless there was company. My mother was a wonderful baker and always made elaborate desserts for company, Sacher Torte, Dobosh Torte, Panama Torte. But when it was just the three of us, a shared apple that she would peel, core and slice was our standard dessert.

I always said yes when Daddy asked if I wanted dessert, and I always wanted the same dessert at the T-Bone: rice pudding with warm fruit sauce. He wouldn't order any dessert for himself, he would just sit and watch me eat, but with never any sign of disapproval. Even in front of my father, I ate quickly and efficiently and with careful attention to the table manners that were drilled into me from early childhood. My mother had taught me that, even when eating alone, I

must always eat as though the Queen of England was sitting at the table with me.

After lunch, satisfied and happy, my father and I would head home. Once there, he would disappear into his wood shop, down in the basement, where he was always in the midst of some project. Then my mother, usually engrossed in a book, would make suggestions as to how I might spend the rest of the afternoon -- either doing homework, practicing playing the instrument of the moment, or helping with some household chores. Neither my father nor I ever mentioned the T-bone steak or the rice pudding that we had just consumed. But my mother made it easy by never asking anything about the time we spent together - not even what we had eaten.

Walking into the T-Bone Diner, in search of rice pudding on Eating Day, stirred memories. I avoided looking toward the back booths as I climbed onto one of the high red stools lined up in front of the counter, and settled the bag of chocolates firmly between my feet on the little step where they rested at the base of the counter. I wanted rice pudding; I would do what I had to do to get it, but I was glad not to recognize the waitress standing behind the counter. "I'd like a bowl of rice pudding please," I told her, "with the warm fruit sauce?" "Howie," she yelled toward the wall behind her, "We got rice pudding today?" I held my breath. She stuck her head through the swinging door leading to the kitchen, listened to a muffled response and then disappeared through the door. I waited. And then, there she was

holding a deep bowl of creamy rice pudding with a gravy boat of warm red syrupy sauce on the side. "Here you go sweetheart," she said as she set it down in front of me.

I took my time. I never ate in front of anyone the way I ate when I was alone. Eating was always a sensual pleasure for me. I hid that pleasure from all other eyes. But on the rare occasions that I did eat alone, I allowed myself the full joy of food.

I poured sauce over the top of the rice pudding and slowly ate tiny spoons-full of pudding and sauce until all the sauce was gone. Then I poured more onto the top and ate through the next layer the same way. It took five layers for all the sauce and pudding to disappear. As I worked my way through that bowl, I became oblivious to my surroundings. I forgot that desserts were meant to be eaten quickly, quietly and guiltily. I ate as though alone, paying no attention to whether anyone was watching me. I believe I wouldn't have cared if they had been -- as long as they didn't try to stop me. It was the first time I had eaten alone at the T-Bone, and the first time I had eaten that rice pudding exactly the way I wanted to. And it was just as perfectly delicious as I had imagined it would be.

When I finished eating, I checked my watch. Only 15 minutes remained until it would be time to meet my mother at the bakery. Not long enough to walk back to Addie Vallins, the ice cream shop I had passed on my way to the diner, to get a black and white soda. I briefly

contemplated a cone to go, but then pictured my mother's expression of horror, were I to meet her in the hope of purchasing the disputed jelly roll, ice cream cone in hand. Not a good idea.

I paid the check, left a tip as my father had taught me (10%, just move the decimal point one place to the left), and walked outside with my chocolates. There was a wooden bench at the bus stop just outside the diner. It was empty, so I sat and took the opportunity to eat a few of my hard-earned candies. In front of Stella I ate politely, popping the whole piece of chocolate into my mouth and carefully chewing, lips sealed until it was gone. But, on my own, I devised a system of eating cream-filled chocolates that made them even more enjoyable. First I selected the flavor I wanted according to the shape of the candy. Then I bit off one of the end walls on the short side of the candy and ate that pretty quickly. Next I slurped out the cream center, sticking my tongue deep into the chocolate to make sure I got every trace, and held it in my mouth to savor the taste for as long as I could before having to swallow. Then I waited until the taste faded before popping the rest of the chocolate into my mouth and slowly chewing and swallowing it. After four pieces, it was time to meet my mother. I closed and repacked the box, carefully wiped the evidence from my mouth and fingers with some tissues, and walked around the corner, half a block back down Continental Avenue to the bakery.

## Jelly Roll

Always early, it was five minutes short of the hour when I approached the bakery. Having learned from my mother to honor the clock, I was not surprised to see her already waiting for me in front of the door. Her welcoming smile turned quizzical as she took note of the direction from which I came. "Where were you?" she asked. No wasted preliminaries. Hoping still to keep the secret of the rice pudding, I answered evasively, opting for the lesser evil. "Up around the corner," I gestured vaguely with the hand holding the bag of chocolates. It worked. Her eyes followed the bag. "What have you got there?" "Chocolates," I bravely offered. "From Stella." "Chocolates," repeated my mother, in much the same tone that one might say "Dog shit," and with an expression to match. "For today, I suppose?" "Yes Mom. For today." Surprisingly, she had no more to say on the subject. She simply turned and held open the swinging glass door for me to precede her into the bakery.

Oh that smell. That sweet, thick aroma and its promise of pleasure. The Peter Pan Bakery -- one of the most intense and pervasive of my childhood memories. We were no strangers to that bakery, my mother and I. Despite not considering dessert a necessary part of a meal, my mother did have a sweet tooth of a sort. Late in the afternoon on weekends and holidays, the days that she did not go to work, she would set about brewing a few strong cups of coffee in her little espresso pot from Italy. "I need some coffee," she would say. But it was code. It meant it was time for a tiny sliver of something sweet. It was one of the only customs she brought with her to

America; a remnant of her Viennese past. Jause, the Austrian equivalent of British high tea.

Our Saturday afternoon shopping expeditions, a regular occurrence once Saturdays with my father ceased after the divorce, always ended with a visit to Peter Pan to ensure that a sweet would be available for jause. They all knew us at the bakery, the worn-faced women with their hairnets, their soft pink uniforms and frilly starched aprons. They called me honey, offered me cookies, told my mother what a nice, polite, lovely young girl I was. I never refused their offerings, but cookies were not what I wanted. Oh how I yearned for the tall shiny chocolate poufs, filled with who knew what, or the small square petit fours, coated with hard icing in beautiful bright colors and topped with little sugar flowers. My eyes scanned the tall glass showcase consuming the frosted cakes, the layer cakes, the cream-filled cakes. "Oh Mommy," I would say, "Look at that cake. Can we get that one?" My mother wouldn't even take my requests seriously. Those were American cakes. Filled with salt. Made with inferior chocolate. Too rich. Too gooey. I couldn't be serious.

No. What my mother craved was a nice dry piece of coffee cake, a nut cookie, sometimes in the summer a sliver of fruit tart - peach or plum. But every once in a while, never predictable in advance, she would opt for a piece of jelly roll -- a long sheet of yellow cake lathered with a thick layer of raspberry jam and then rolled into a cylinder and sprinkled with powdered sugar. I learned, eventually, not

to ask for the unattainable, the cakes she would never consider. But the jelly roll, there was always the possibility, every Saturday, that she just might consider the jelly roll.

Whatever my mother chose, I would watch through the showcase glass as pink-covered arms reached in to slide her selection out of the case and onto the marble counter just behind it. Overhead, above the counter, hung huge skeins of thin red and white string twirled into double strands. I never tired, week after week, of watching as our order was lowered into one of the many differently shaped and sized white cardboard boxes and then deftly tied with that red and white string, pulled down in one smooth motion and then snipped with the scissors always lying at the ready on the marble top. Then up would come the box, over the counter, into my mother's hands and, at last into mine -- but only for the trip home. Once there, the box would be removed from my grip and carefully hidden so as not to subject me to temptation.

As always, I pulled a numbered ticket from the machine just inside the door and we positioned ourselves on the perpetual line leading to the counter. It was a weekday morning, and only three people were ahead of us. I could already taste the jelly roll. But would she actually buy it for me when we got to the counter? Two people ahead of us. "Suzy," she began. I knew it. "We can get the jelly roll now, but let's save it and we'll have it for jause this afternoon if you're still hungry after lunch." It was 11 A.M., and our plan was to be at Topsy's for

lunch at 12:30. Her suggestion wasn't entirely unreasonable. But at 12 years old, having permission to eat openly and without restraint for only this one short day, I reacted by bursting into tears. The person still ahead of us on line looked uncomfortably back over her shoulder, and then rushed to the counter as her number was called. "My God, why are you crying?" my mother asked. "You're crying about jelly roll?" "I'll buy it myself," I almost shouted at her through a choking sob. "You can't stop me. And you can't stop me from eating it either." "You're really crazy," she said, looking at me as though I were a creature she'd never before seen. They called our number. She bought a pound of the jelly roll, pushed the box into my free arm, turned her back, marched angrily out of the bakery, and headed toward our car. Embarrassed, sniffing, but nonetheless victorious, I followed, clutching the box filled with jelly roll -- not a big piece, but mine, not to be relinquished when we got home.

After a silent car ride, my mother preceded me into the house and disappeared up the stairs. Knowing that she was not prone to hold onto anger, I felt confident that she would reappear when the time came to leave for Topsy's. But, for the moment, I had the kitchen to myself. I wasted no time opening the Peter Pan box -- a snip of the scissors and the jelly roll lay seductively before me. Taking the one sharp knife from the drawer, I gently divided the cake into three equal pieces: one to eat immediately, one to eat after lunch, and one to save for the very end of the day. I wanted that hard won jelly roll to be the taste that would linger with me when Eating Day came to an end.



I put one piece onto a plate and then carefully closed the box with the two remaining pieces inside. I carried the box into the little vestibule between the kitchen and the back door that we used as a pantry and broom closet. I pulled out the red wooden stepladder that was stored leaning against the pantry wall, climbed up to the highest step and found an empty space on the top shelf behind a solid row of Campbells soup cans. There I placed the box with its precious contents. This was not one of the hiding places my mother used to keep sweets from me, but it was now the one that I would use to keep my jelly roll safe from her.

At last I was ready to eat the first piece, the one I had scheduled for morning consumption. I brought the plate and a fork to the kitchen table, sat down and, taking tiny little bites, slowly ate my way around the curve of the jelly roll, unraveling it, revealing its sweet red insides, savoring every morsel of dense yellow cake infused with the leached raspberry flavor and color, scraping the sticky jam from the outside of the next curve, sucking it off the fork and then pushing a moist piece of cake behind it to pull it all down into my yearning stomach. And so I ate my way through to the end and then, not hearing my mother yet on the stairs, I did the unthinkable: I lifted the plate to my lips and licked it clean. Satisfied at last, although of course only temporarily, I washed and dried the plate and fork, restored them to their resting places, and innocently sauntered up the stairs to see when we might be leaving for lunch.

My mother, once again in a seemingly good mood, was just coming out of her bedroom at the end of the upstairs hall and approaching the stairs. "Ready?" she asked with a smile, the jelly roll incident already forgotten or, more likely, deliberately set aside. Peace at any price was always my mother's motto. I was indeed ready.

