

Eat & Disorder

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« Ils l'associent à mon rejet de la viande », annonce la narratrice au début de Désordre alimentaire. Retraçant une enfance carnivore, elle évoque son refus de manger de la viande, survenu « l'année où [elle a] lu Foucault pour la première fois et où [elle a] cessé de [se] raser les jambes ». Ce refus est perçu par sa famille comme l'ultime trahison, jusqu'au jour où elle « ramène une fille à la maison ». Ces gestes de défi, dit-elle, l'amènent à « assembler l'histoire familiale comme une vieille courtepointe en lambeaux, quelque chose d'utile et non de beau. Cette courtepointe ne [la] tient pas particulièrement au chaud la nuit, mais [elle se] sen[t] mieux de savoir qu'elle est là ».

Part One: Eat

They link her to my rejection of meat.

Days of plates of cabbage rolls, fried moose steak, the thanksgiving bird, rabbit I was told was chicken, deer meat, steak tartar, goose, the christmas bird, breaded veal, glazed ham, stewed beef, the easter bird, head cheese which is not really cheese at all
and once,
bear.

Not ones to waste, make haste and make room for the organs and innards: kidney and liver and tongue and tripe, stuffing up arteries like bursting, bar-b-qued bratwurst, dripping slow deaths of ambiguous hunger. My brain cells waded through the pools of fat in a last ditch effort to digest reality.

Years ago, while still in school, I felt the need to cleanse my system of pigs and deer and bear and cow and moose and rabbit and turkey and goose and chicken. Flush my soul of creatures consumed against their will.

That year I learned how to cook and eat without grimace, tofu and chickpeas. It was the same year I first read Foucault and stopped shaving my legs. At christmastime, I received four angora sweaters from various family members, and an Epilady. They saw me off at the train station with a case of sardines weighing down my suitcase. I couldn't explain to their

satisfaction that I was feeding myself with a steady diet of fresh herbs, ginger root and Virginia Woolf. I bartered the sardines for marijuana and tickets to see experimental theatre.

On weekends, I paraded an array of boyfriends by them. Mostly skinny, much to their disappointment. The melodrama and sensitivity and situational poverty of the young, budding actor or artist were under-appreciated in my family. Once or twice, I brought home a couple of bigger ones, athletic types, good feeders and polite, always accepting seconds and occasionally thirds. Watching them eat was the highlight of our relationships: they filled me to no other capacity beyond entertaining my family with their voracious appetites. My Oma would ask: what is their last name again? and what nationality is that? are they Jewish?

God forbid I bring home to their table a Jew, or a black, or an Indian or a dirty gypsy.

Eye-talians were pretty much suspect too for that matter. And later, as I pushed the meat around on my plate and eventually passed it by altogether, they added to the list socialists, environmentalists, and academics. Artists continued to invoke laughter much like the gag reflex. It just never occurred to them at all that I might bring home

a girl.

Flesh not of my own brought to my lips makes me a carnivore. Hands and lips and breasts and tongue and thighs and sighs from flesh of my flesh make me a lesbian. Dirty, sick, shameless. Condemned to death by my own blood, thrown onto the heap of bodies akin to me in our difference: gypsies, Jews, homosexuals, crazies. Warming me in our criss-crossing faggot of fire roasted to perfection. They'd rather have me eat another than love my own. Pile my plate with nazi propaganda. Learn by rote the family recipe for normalcy, the ingredients needed to make a good girl who'll grow up to (1) work at A Job, (2) buy a house in Suburbia close enough to all relations to make them neighbours, and (3) consume goods from The Mall. Lick the plate clean after each serving.

I starve there: skin breaks out and hair falls out and teeth rot.

We made pudding our first greedy night together. Not enough eggs to double the recipe, we multiplied the fractions and added the remainders

to form a thick, chocolate brew. Laugh and argue over the calculations, counting on fingers. Numbers making us dizzy, banter making us breathless. Turning up the heat to a slow boil. Her hand brushed against my back and the world stopped.

Tastebuds explode on the exotic fruit. I have fallen far from the family tree, plump and tart, juice dripping between my sapling limbs at just the thought of another like me.

I am nine.

Sensing the badness of something I know nothing about, innocent lips curl around a hiss as I ask the Grand Mother: Was Opa a nazi?

Twenty years later the Grand Mother hisses back at me: Are you a lesbian?

Evil wearings on my back, I bade the beasts before you. I know what lies behind those eyes. Locking me up, charged with your indignities. Membership lost at sea, salty like my earthly endeavors, dissolved in tears that followed. Outside to your inside, peeping Pam I am.

When I arrived home it was to her. Two women, she and I, makin' a go of it, eh? Hopeless-chest-china and newspaper all over the floor. Dog hair and little pebbles of kitty litter woven into the carpet. Save it for later. Vacuuming's the last thing on my mind.

In his backyard, accordion and lederhosen hung out to dry. Guilt, crusty mud cracking in the seams.

It seems that I was out of order, out of line to suggest such a thing.

A nazi?

A nazi?

A trisket a trasket, a green and yellow basket.

I went to bed with a lump on my head,
and didn't wake up in the morning.

Don't mention it.

Don't ever mention it again.

I didn't.

Until I could sleep no longer.

And so...

Once upon a time, years later in a place not too far, far away, I rose from my bed of thorns and imported duvets (german ducks produced the best feathers, they said) and tasted the fruit before me. She was sweet, and she offered me cups and bowls and spoonfuls of her. A geyser of seductive truth poured forth from her and I wept with acceptance. Lustily, I led her to the kitchen, where I could eat my fill of her. We set our bed up where the table should be, and began the feast.

Part Two: Disorder

Prepared for the questions they do not ask, I carry on as usual. Usually I just carry on.

And what I expect is what is to be expected.

The phone doesn't ring. Just the proverbial pregnant pause while they await my change of mind.

As if I would change my mind.

And then

a voice croaks through the dusty receiver, full of warning and shaming and saving my soul.

As she did her own, I suppose, half a century ago.

Her eyes grey steel. Were they blue once? She tells me they are blue, but she maintains that she is taller than me too, which she has not been since I have been a fraction of her age.

There are pictures I have seen: first years in Canada mostly, a few of herself as a girl in Germany. Taller, rounder, hair falling loosely from her head in curls. Bosom soft, eyes laughing at something outside the camera. She was a girl once; I have seen the evidence.

There was a boy too, who I have not seen, but heard about. Once. And I have seen the evidence of this too: a silver band, melted-down and shaped to fit her finger, gently hammered by his own hands. He joined up with the German army, she said, and died shortly thereafter. She told me this only once. And at that moment she transformed before my eyes into a woman I had not known but had been waiting to meet my whole life. Her beauty and passion cleared the kitchen of its antiseptic and sauerkraut smells. The room awhirl with her hopes. I hoped for her too.

And then the ring is snatched from my hand and she dashes up the stairs, to hide it away in her piles of things hiding other things. I try when we are alone together to get more scoop out of her. I try other family members for details, but no one seems to know what I'm talking about, including her now too, who looks at me like I'm crazy when I bring it up. Apparently I don't know what I am talking about. Apparently I am crazy. I am always the crazy one. Of course I am. How quickly I forget.

There are the things we remember and the things we forget. And then there are the other things that exist to prompt the remembering or secure the forgetting.

My shape mirrors hers: hearty Russian peasant bones, big hands for the size of us, nose and chin that will meet in time. My bosom, however, pales in comparison. My skin is darker too. Popped out like some brown and hairy little foreigner. The gypsy, they called me. Defects attributed to my mother's gene pool. Imperfections abound in the British; years of scandalous trading with the colonies.

Sugar & spice, all things nice, I add garlic to everything.

I am nine.

Summer of 1976. We – my parents, a cousin and his wife – are packed into some sort of hot rod car, travelling west to Vancouver. We eat Niagra cherries out of a paper bag and spit the seeds out of the window. It's so damn hot we strip down to what is legally permissible. I am conscious of growing out my bangs, which is probably more conscious than my parents believe me capable of. I marvel at the way my father rockets determinedly across a country, never consulting a map, never losing us. I marvel too at his silky armpit hair, catching some breeze through his crooked arm out the window, hand beating rhythm on the door to a seventies soundtrack. Freddie Mercury, a blazing streak of groin lust turning up the heat in our hot rod. The women fall asleep, sticking their thighs to mine. In their purses I dig out tampons, fluff them out and marker wee mice faces on them. Line them up on the back dash. I keep my eyes peeled for prairie dogs, imagining them trainable rodents.

We stay over at the farm of our cousin's cousin, somewhere in dry and dusty Saskatchewan. The cousin's cousin has produced a herd of children,

none of whom appear to ever brush hair or teeth. They are strangely quiet and screamingly hysterical at the same time. They sleep everywhere. I sleep on a couch next to a kitchen table. It smells like beer and wet dog. I wake up early and the girl nearest my age takes me out behind the barns, through a field, into scrub bush sprouting rusted appliances. The doors should be off, I think, all panicky. Hasn't anyone told them that the doors should be off? Else children crawl into dryers and freezers and ovens and get locked inside. They suffocate there on their own exhale, in darkness and the echo of quiet. The girl beckons me behind a line-up of refrigerators, only a couple with doors hanging open on their hinges. I lurch past them, eyes spinning to the back of my head on the lookout for small, withered hands emerging from a Westinghouse. The girl is behind the wheel of a burnt out vehicle. I crawl in next to her, perch on a crate where a seat should be. There is a sleeping bag in the back. She pulls out a pack of cigarettes from underneath what remains of the driver's seat. *This is where we do it*, she tells me. *Sometimes they give me nickels.*

I stay on the porch awhile gathering air in my lungs. The girl has gone inside to get a plate of bacon and toast. I think I should tell my parents before we leave about the children who might be trapped in the appliances. But then I think that our cousin's cousin might not let us go if they know that we know. And no one would know where we were, in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of Saskatchewan, severed and roasting in prairie-sun-powered ovens. I feel a fever coming on and lay out on the porch, one eye peeled on a sorrowful black dog eyeballing me, and one ear tuned and alert to the footsteps of a mangy teenage boy.

When we say our thank-you's and goodbye's to our cousin's cousin's family, I can barely wait to get in the car. I am so unsteady on my feet that my father insists that I use the outhouse one last time before we go, otherwise he's leaving me here. The girl catches me on the way out of the hut that up until now I had been peeing behind. She pulls me close to her and my lungs catch on bacon grease and cigarette smoke and wet dog. *I could come visit you. We could be penpals, and I could visit you in Ontario.* I give her my hair barrette that is holding back my bangs and tell her, ok.

Our cousin's cousin gives my father directions back to the main roads. He tells us to roll up our windows going through the Indian reservation, just like the man at the ticket booth of the African Lion Safari told us to. We emerged from the African Lion Safari with our soft-top roof torn to shreds from the monkeys. I sat horrified mute throughout the entire expe-

rience, holding back sympathetic tears for captured beasts on display. *I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry*, I telepathically plead to them. I anticipate the worst going through the reservation, and for the remainder of the trip keep a close eye on our cousin. I discover a feathered roach clip in his wife's purse and add an Indian tampon mouse to my brood.

Twenty years pass and my cousin and his wife are travelling the Yukon in an RV equipped with an oxygen tank. They have routed their journey according to oxygen refill stations, and my cousin waits for a lung transplant. Twenty years pass and the GrandMother's cellar is lined with an armour of cans: cherries and ham and tomatoes and corn and beans steeling themselves against some unprovoked, anticipated attack multiplying in the dark. How long before their insides poison with ancient aluminum? How long before decaying ham and corroding metal bubble a life of their own?

Twenty years pass and I know no more about family secrets than I ever did, other than that I have become one. My sexual orientation is about as well tolerated as my preference for not eating meat. It is never acknowledged nor taken seriously. Apparently if they ignore these things long enough, I might revert. I might just conveniently forget that I don't eat hormone-injected beef or by-products, that I sleep with girls, that I need to know where I come from. Discontent with silence I create my own noise. I make my own dinner and my own bed. I piece together my family history like a raggedy old quilt, a thing of purpose, not of beauty. It doesn't keep me particularly warm at night, but I feel better knowing that it's there.

Twenty years pass and my CV is filled with acts of disobedience, challenges to social structures, mindsets and political whimsy. Twenty years pass and around my Thanksgiving table assemble my friends: socialists, academics, poets, deviants. We thank the good farmers of Ontario and eat:

Curried Squash Soup

Fennel & Pomegranate Salad

Marinated Portobello Mushrooms

Roasted New Potatoes with Garlic & Fresh Herbs

Kale (from my garden) with Chevre & Balsamic Vinegar

&

Berries & Custard, for Dessert

It's a party, afterall.