

Hors d'oeuvres

By Garnett Cohen

I. Childhood (1978)

Whenever Cassie's parents had a cocktail party or hosted Bridge night, Cassie waited until no one was around and hoisted herself up onto the counter. Her thin arms wobbled until her knees--one knee, then the other--were firmly planted. She took a few breaths before she stood and found her balance. Tilting slightly backwards, she tiptoed along the linoleum ledge, searching the top cupboards for hidden treats: peanuts, fancy crackers and tall jars of olives. Her parents knew her appetite for such things was unquenchable, yet rather than strictly forbid her from attacking the party food, they hid it.

The smallness of the food—meals for birds or dolls—excited her. Spread out on trays, the snacks looked like an exotic miniature feast. Cheese puffs, crackers with waves of cream cheese, pizzas the size of silver dollars, and tiny hotdogs wrapped in Pillsbury dough so that they made her think of pink babies in white swaddling blankets. Any one of these savories was more appealing than having to eat through the large sameness of a turkey breast or a pork chop. At meals, her parents often had to goad her to eat. It was the salty taste she really craved, the zing that flashed through her system on the first contact with the tip of her tongue, the way the tang made her upper body quake and shiver.

So when her father hauled the card tables up from the basement on a snowy Saturday a week before her eighth birthday, Cassie's salivary glands ached at the sight of them. Somewhere in the far reaches of the cupboards lurked crackers and olives. Her mother had taken her older brother, Todd, to a Cub Scout meeting at the other den mother's house so the kitchen was clear of her for the entire afternoon. Cassie only needed to get rid of her father. Usually she wanted time alone with him, time when he might notice her. He was a good father to Todd, coached his little league team and helped him earn scout merit badges. Todd had more than twenty embroidered insignias sewn to his sash. Next year, Todd would leave the cubs for Boy Scouts, and Cassie's father was going to be a troop leader. He and Todd spent hours pouring over maps, searching for camping and hiking spots. Cassie's father was also a doting husband. He adored Cassie's mother. They still held hands. Yet he didn't seem to know what to do with Cassie. Occasionally he played board games with her, but his mind usually seemed elsewhere. She had to remind him when his turn arrived. If not for the card tables, she would have tried to coax him into a game that afternoon. Instead, she wanted to be rid of him.

He worked on charts and yellow legal pads at the mahogany dining room table, making frequent trips into the kitchen to refresh his Diet Coke. There, he stood by the sink, leaning against the edge, absentmindedly sipping and staring out the window at the swirling snow. Lean and athletic, he had inch-long ginger hair that he mussed into what looked like a scruffy patch of dry lawn while he concentrated on his papers or built things with Todd. When he left for the office

on weekday mornings, his tie swinging back and forth against his lean torso, he combed his hair back.

Cassie sat on a chair at the kitchen table, sweeping the tip of her big toe inside her right white sock in arches, watching it slowly collect dust, waiting for an opportunity. After the fourth or fifth trip, when her father had a full glass, it almost seemed safe to embark on her quest. How much could he drink? But, just as she edged off her chair, she heard the sudden sound of crumpled paper and he stomped into the kitchen to toss a wad in the trash. No, he was too close to take a risk.

At least since he didn't notice Cassie much, he didn't try to force her into a constructive activity. If her mother had been home she would insist Cassie tug on her bothersome rubber boots that always became twisted and stuck, and go outside for exercise. Build a snowperson or slide down the tiny slope of their backyard in her red plastic snow saucer. Her father would never think of such a thing. Yet, as withdrawn as he could be, he would be worse than her mother if he found her walking along the counter or hiding in a corner gorging on olives. Normally a reasonable man, his anger could flare quickly. In such moments, a vein jutted across his brow like a flash of lightening. Once he had spanked her so hard that he left a pink imprint of his hand on her bare behind, almost as deep as the white plaster cast of her hands that she made in first grade. The image of his large pink fingers had fascinated her. She was sorry when it faded. But she certainly did not want to feel the sting of such a slap ever again.

“Do you want a bologna sandwich or a banana or something?” he asked. No, she shook her head. The thought of chewing her way through either made her sick. She wanted olives or pretzels.

Cassie sat at the kitchen table, looked down at her favorite pink cotton turtleneck. As her father sipped yet another Coke, Cassie slumped forward and smoothed the fabric of her shirt, thinking that her flat belly curving inward would form a capital C. She was ready to give up. She didn’t think he could go anywhere. She was too young to be left alone, so it felt like a miracle occurred when he said—more to his Diet Coke than to her—“It’s really piling up out there. Your mother will be home soon. I better shovel the drive.”

Cassie’s throat ached in anticipation as she watched him slip his arms into the sleeves of his down coat and wrap his Burberry scarf around his neck. Once he was outside, she watched him through the hallway window as he went to the garage for the shovel. As soon as he sank the blade into the snow at the foot of the drive, Cassie ran back to the kitchen, pulled off her socks for better traction, and heaved herself up on the counter. She arched her back, drew her chin in, and walked along, pulling open cupboard doors and sticking her balsa-wood-thin right arm into the far, dark reaches of the upper cupboard. She grabbed at the empty space.

Cupboard one

Cupboard two.

Cupboard three.

Ah, a smooth glass cylinder, shoved too far back to grasp. She wiggled her fingers. Two containers! Slowly, she rolled the nearest one forward with her

fingertips until she had worked the jar half way across the cupboard. She felt a cramp in her leg and her neck was stiff. She kept working, her jaw and the root of her tongue throbbing at the thought of the olive juice, until her palm was firmly wrapped around the glass. When she had it, Cassie turned slowly around and sank to her haunches, than sat on the counter edge so that legs, clad in white and pink checked corduroy pants, dangled over the side. She put her whole weight into twisting off the top.

The first olive was the best. An absolute explosion in her mouth!

Her plan had been to eat only the top layer---four to six olives—so that the jar would look untouched. Her parents might notice that it didn't make a popping sound when they opened the lid but since there would be no rancid smell, they would probably serve them anyway. And even if they threw them away, it wouldn't hurt Cassie. In fact, she could pick them out of the trash later, rinse off the coffee grinds and egg yolks. Thinking about finding lone olives in the trash—green and red jewels—reignited her appetite. She ate beyond the first six, then beyond the first ten. After that each successive olive was a little less satisfying but she kept going. The jar was half empty before she stopped. She slipped off the counter and went to peer out the hall window. Her father had shoveled less than half of the driveway. She returned to the olives.

“Why not?” she asked aloud to herself. That was what her mother always said before she did something adventurous. Besides, Cassie might have a better chance of going undetected if the jar was gone. They still had a jar left for their party—they might even think they had only purchased one. She lined the remaining olives along the counter like a conveyer belt and walked down, sucking

each one into her mouth. Such a luxury! Afterwards, she drank the brine that remained in the jar. The liquid salt made her feel a little queasy but she knew she would never have such an opportunity again. She buried the empty jar and lid at the bottom of the trash. When ring of the phone pierced the silence, she jumped back as if she had been caught. Cassie laughed when she realized it was only the phone. Her laugh reminded her a little of the cackle of the depraved, wicked witch in OZ.

It was her mother.

“Cassie, put your father on.”

“He’s outside shoveling.”

“Urrrrg,” her mother growled. “My damn car is stuck in the Kelly’s driveway. And I’ve got to get ready for the party. Could you two get over here so he can help Ben Kelly get it out?”

“I’ll go tell him,” said Cassie and hung up the phone.

She opened the front door without bothering to put on her socks. The swirling snow and wind that blew into the front hall felt strange against her body without proper gear to protect her. She had to call to her father three times before he looked up and saw her. He shoved up the blue knit cap, uncovering his ears.

“Mom needs you at the Kelly’s house. Her car is stuck,” Cassie shouted against the wind.

Her father’s shoulders slumped. The snow piled in his shovel was as white and high as the cake at her aunt’s wedding. The section he had cleared had already accumulated another fresh half inch. He tossed the shovel in the yard

and shook his head. The wedding cake heap fell to the side, like an empty mound of sugar.

“Go get . . .” he started to say, and then seemed to think better of it—did he want to avoid the work it would be getting her into her boots, coat, hat, scarf, and mittens. Or avoid the intimacy of it? “Do you think you could stay here by yourself for just a little while? The Kelly’s are just a ten minute drive.”

“Sure,” Cassie shouted. Her mind raced to the second jar of olives. No, no, she had to find the pretzels. Her hair and pink turtleneck were getting wet from the snow.

“Close the door,” he said. “You’re letting all the heat out.”

She had the entire house to herself. Such a luxury! But her stomach roiled and for the first time, she wasn’t sure her system could handle more salt. She found an antidote in the refrigerator, hidden behind the milk and the baking powder, a small jar of neon red maraschino cherries. She didn’t crave sugar as much as salt, but when she did have something sweet she preferred the unnaturally charged sweetness of the most saccharine of sugary candy to the natural sweetness of fresh fruit, so the cherries were perfect. The jar was even open. She carried it into the family room to eat leisurely in front of the television. Cassie ate slowly as she watched a rerun of *The Addams Family*. She liked Wednesday Addam’s coyness, her big eyes and her dark dresses. Cassie wondered what her parents would think if she took to wearing dresses all of the time? Cassie treated each cherry like a tiny apple, using just one front upper tooth and one front lower tooth to take tiny bites. She was proud that it took her the entire show to eat just three cherries. While the credits rolled, Cassie took one small

lady-like sip of the glowing red cherry juice, resealed the top and went in search of pretzels. The hunt was almost too easy. In the broom closet, the second place she looked, Cassie found an enormous family-sized bag on the floor behind the mop and bucket. She used a fork to tear a small slit in the back of the bag to wiggle pretzels free. Most of the bag remained intact. Her parents probably wouldn't notice the slit, and, if they did, her mother would just say, "that damn store," and think nothing more of it.

After she had eaten three pretzels, Cassie noticed the room had grown dark. Her stomach felt settled. She switched on the overhead light and looked longingly up at the cupboard that held the second jar of olives. She thought of how wonderful a pretzel would taste with an olive wedged in each of the holes made by the twists.

She debated. Her parents should have been home already. At any second, she would hear first her mother's car, and then her father's, turning into the drive, their headlights casting curving lights against the kitchen wall. The thought of the headlights convinced her. They would provide enough warning for her to actually drag a chair to the counter and create a stairway. As soon as the lights appeared, she could quickly reseal the lid, and climb down. There wasn't any danger of consuming the entire jar, given how little time she had. She would only eat one olive-festooned pretzel.

Holding just one pretzel (to guard against over-indulging), she climbed up onto the chair, and from the chair onto the counter. She leaned back, holding tentatively to the support bar between the cupboards as not to squish her pretzel, and reached into the dark interior. It took longer to get this jar than the first one,

partly because it was farther back and partly because the nausea had returned. When she finally had the glass column, she turned around, unwound the lid, and tucked the tilted jar into the smooth fabric of her armpit, pressing as hard as she could to keep the jar pinned to her side. She held the pretzel with the hand of the arm pinned to her side and used her free hand to remove a few olives to decorate the pretzel. As she pulled out the first olive, juice splashed on her arm. She knew it was a risky operation, dependent on luck and balance.

The reflections of car headlights raced across the wall. Cassie jerked around and the tall jar slid
from under her arm,
hit the edge of counter
spewed juice,
then crashed
on the floor
in an oily heap of olives, surrounded by glass petal shards.

Cassie couldn't believe her bad luck. She shoved the entire pretzel in her mouth, bowing out her cheeks like airplane wings, and chewed as she climbed down. She stuck the bag of pretzels in the broom closet, grabbed the broom and tried to sweep the mess. If she got it under the table, maybe they wouldn't notice until she had time to clean it up, maybe while her mother was dressing for their party. But the broom bristles just brushed over the olives, spreading the juice and sending a few shards of broken glass skittering.

The doorbell rang.

Cassie grasped the broom lower, her hands just above the brush, and batted more ferociously at the clump of olives. A half dozen on the top rolled free, scattering in different directions, like baby pool balls.

The doorbell rang again. It was no use; they would be even more upset if they had to stand outside in the blizzard. Cassie leaned the broom against the wall by the table and headed for the door.

Why were they even ringing the bell?

She opened the front door and was surprised to see Mrs. Kelly, her henna-colored hair iced with a thick layer of snow, standing to the porch. Cassie felt a surge of relief.

“There’s been an accident,” said Mrs. Kelly.

Her relief was replaced with confusion. Cassie stood, uncomprehending.

“Your father has been in an accident. Your mother and brother are at the hospital. Please let me inside.”

Cassie stood back.

“What happened?” she asked.

“His car slid off the road. Don’t worry,” said Mrs. Kelly, unpeeling her coat and dropping it on an armchair just inside the living room as she passed Cassie. She smoothed Cassie’s hair, an unusually affectionate and intimate gesture for Mrs. Kelly. “Everything is going to be fine. Just watch some television. I’m going to make a few phone calls for your mother.”

Mrs. Kelly headed for kitchen. Cassie hung up Mrs. Kelly’s coat. It was heavy and wet and Cassie had a hard time maneuvering it and keeping the sleeves on the flimsy wire hanger, but she knew how much her father hated to see coats

flung about. Cassie was surprised that there wasn't a shriek from Mrs. Kelly at the sight of the olives. She waited a few minutes before going into the kitchen to face Mrs. Kelly's reaction. But when she got there Mrs. Kelly was calmly sweeping the olives into a dustpan, the phone tucked under her chin.

"A truck lost control, ice under the snow. Carl slid to avoid it. No. Yes. Yes. No. St. Thomas Memorial—it was the closest. No, I'm here with their daughter."

Intent on her conversation, Mrs. Kelly didn't even glance up at Cassie or ask what had happened with the olives. Cassie's stomach was roiling again. She headed for the television room as instructed. The doorbell rang again. They were home already! Cassie imagined her father's arm in a sling. She ran for the door.

This time it was Trish and Ed Gordon on the porch. Mr. Gordon stood behind his wife who was wearing a red wool coat that matched her deep red lipstick. The red stood out against the snow almost like cut-out images. She held a round bowl covered in aluminum foil and looked down into Cassie's face. The Gordons were closer friends of her parents than Mrs. Kelly.

"We're a little early," said Mrs. Gordon. "Are your parents still getting ready?"

Cassie didn't think she should say the word "accident" aloud; it would make it sound worse than it was. The Gordons looked at her curiously. She heard Mrs. Kelly hang up the phone and rush out behind her.

Trish laughed.

"You're here? I thought you said Bridge was a game for our parents' generation." She handed Mrs. Kelly the plate and said, "Some shrimp left over from Ed's office party. With the roads so bad, we didn't want to bother going

home first, came straight from the office. Everyone was heading out, no need for the hors d'oeuvres to go to waste.”

Cassie thought she said “all those ordered to go to waste.” It didn’t make sense.

Mrs. Kelly placed the plate on the small table beside the door and to the astonishment of the Gordons, stepped out onto the porch in the swirling snow with them, pulling the door partially shut behind her. Cassie could just hear the first few sentences of what Mrs. Kelly said before her words were carried away by the howl of the snowy night.

“There’s been an accident. I’m calling people for Barb, to cancel. Her address book is here and, well, there was no point taking Cassie out in this storm.” She lowered her voice. Cassie only caught a few words. “It doesn’t look good ...”

Cassie peeled back a corner of the foil gripping the bowl. It was filled with fat curls of white shrimp floating in red sauce. She knew they were shrimp, but with Mrs. Gordon’s words still echoing in her brain, Cassie couldn’t connect the fleshy white pieces with the fancy party food she usually loved.

II. Adulthood (the rest of her life)

For Cassie, adulthood began shortly before her eighth birthday, right after her father’s funeral. The first six months, the house was quiet. Her mother spent a lot of time napping. She never mentioned the olives. Their grandmother

stayed with them on and off. Of course Cassie felt guilty, as if her ferocious appetite, her hunger and greed, had somehow contributed to her father's death.

Less than a year after her father died, Cassie's mother returned to work as a data analyst.

"Just a few years earlier than we planned," she told Trish Gordon as they sat at the kitchen table. Cassie's mother had taken up smoking again. She rolled the growing tip of her ash against the side of the homemade ashtray Cassie had molded for Mother's Day in first grade, the same year that Cassie had made the cast of her hands that resembled the imprint of her father's spanking. A big year for crafts. Perhaps the last year that any child made an ashtray gift in a public school. Cassie stood outside their line of vision. Over the next few years, she would find herself standing just out of sight quite often, eavesdropping, trying to figure out what she had missed. This time, she could only see their hands, two right fingers of Mrs. Gordon's right hand looping the handle of her coffee mug, the thumb on top of the handle for balance. She lifted the mug out of Cassie's eyesight. "He was underinsured. Just the company policy. After all, he was in perfect health."

The next year they sold the house and moved into a rented duplex just outside of town. Todd did not go on to Eagle Scouts as he had planned. Instead he took up skateboarding and smoking pot. Their mother was always harried and didn't have much time for them, certainly no time to be a den mother. And Cassie imagined that Todd didn't want to think about scouts any more than she wanted to think of gorging herself on olives and maraschino cherries. There weren't many bananas in the house anymore, mostly junk food, though seldom olives and

never maraschino cherries. When there were olives, Cassie still craved them but never allowed herself to eat more than one a day.

Her mother didn't tell them when she started dating so it was a bit of a surprise when, shortly before Cassie's twelfth birthday, she announced she was getting married to Tom Wilson who Cassie had only met twice. After that there were a few awkward dinners and outings to the movies and the skating rink. "Tom," as she was told to call him, looked nothing like her father. While her father had seemed hard and sleek, Tom was soft and pudgy with curly hair and long eyelashes.

"Why not?" Cassie's mother said on the phone to a woman friend and laughed.

Cassie asked her if she was going to wear a white gown and have a big reception like her Aunt Linda had had when Cassie was six.

"No, no," said Cassie's mother with a laugh. Her frequent napping and overall harried-ness had been replaced with unexpected bursts of laughter and gaiety. "We're going to get married in city hall, just the two of us, you and Todd, Tom's son, Michael, and the Gordons as witnesses. Then we'll have people over for champagne and hors d'oeuvres at Tom's house."

Cassie's brain seized at the term. Even though she knew her mother had not said ordered, she understood immediately that it was the same strange expression that Mrs. Gordon had used. The way her mother said it, the words sounded more like "or-serves." But Cassie knew that wasn't it either.

"How do you spell that?" asked Cassie.

"Spell what?"

“Ors-serves.” She blurred the words and said them quickly so that her mother wouldn’t know she couldn’t pronounce it.

Her mother spelled it twice. Cassie had to write it down. She had only recently learned the word “whore,” though not how to spell it, and wondered if the two words had a connection. Before her mother left the room, she added, “oh, we’re going to be moving into Tom’s house. You’re going to love it! You’ll have a huge bedroom.”

The dictionary defined hors d'oeuvres as “appetizers served at the beginning of a meal” and named “canapés and olives” as two possibilities. Next, she looked up appetizer. To her amazement, the definition read “excites a desire for more.” For a minute—only a minute—she felt a little relief. The accident didn’t seem entirely her fault.

Cassie’s mother and Tom got married in a judge’s office in the basement of the court house. On the judge’s wall hung an enormous bulletin board with photos of all the couples he had married. Cassie wore a peach colored corsage, a smaller version of her mother’s. Todd rolled his eyes and twisted his lips, and looked angry, which had become his general mood. Despite the fact that Cassie now knew the correct definition for hors d'oeuvres and that she believed that her mother had every right to remarry, Cassie’s mind went in a loop during the ceremony, thinking over and over, “that whore’s got nerve, that whore’s got nerve.” Afterwards, the judge snapped a photo of Cassie’s mother and Tom Wilson. The five members of the new family, the judge, and the Gordons all stood around the camera and watched as the image of the new Mr. and Mrs. Tom

Wilson slid--curling and slick--out of the camera and was thumb-tacked to the bulletin board.

Tom Wilson's house was bigger than the house Cassie's parents had owned. When they arrived after the ceremony, the kitchen was busy with caterers making trays of hors d'oeuvres. Cassie was shown her new bedroom, where she would move after her mother returned from her honeymoon. Cassie and Todd would stay with their grandmother until then. Cassie's new room was nicer than either of her previous rooms, but it didn't seem real. Everything matched. Her mother had decorated the entire room in pink to surprise her. Cassie had stopped liking pink a long time ago.

When the guests started arriving, Cassie sat in a corner of the kitchen, watching the two cooks slide trays in and out of the oven. Her mouth went crazy—her salivary glands howling, pings of little arrows shooting off the roof of her mouth, miniscule bubbles bursting—at the sight of the pastry puffs, tiny crab cakes, cheesy spinach pies, sausages, and, of course, the olives. An institutional-sized jar sat on the counter wedged between the flapping door to the dining room and the door that led into the attached garage. The curved glass magnified the green meat of the orbs. The cooks used the olives for appetizers and every twenty minutes or so the bartender came in and scooped out a bowl. Cassie bided her time. The first moment she was alone in the kitchen, she shot for the counter, slid the jar off and hugged it to her belly, and slyly slid out the door into the garage where two metallic trash cans stood. She lifted the lid of the one nearest the door, found it only half full. She lowered the sloshing jar down into the bottom of the can, digging it beneath the trash, and then piled the trash from the other trashcan

on top. She exited the garage to the outside, reentered the house by the front door and took her place in the corner of a couch by the fireplace.

Years in the pink room went by quickly. Todd and her stepfather didn't get along, and he went away to live with their grandparents and, later, for the rest of his life, was in and out of rehab. Though junior, high school, and Todd's endless fights with their stepfather seemed unbearably long at the time, they were barely a blip in her memory. After Cassie turned fifteen, she and her older stepbrother started an on-and-off surreptitious romance, having long make-out sessions all over the house when their parents weren't home, even though he had an "official" girlfriend his own age outside the house. He was angelically handsome, with soft curls and long eyelashes like his father, but Cassie could see, that like his father, he would turn to fat when he grew older. When she was sixteen and he was nineteen, home on college break, he deflowered her in the pink bedroom. Afterwards, while she reclined in his arms, she asked him what his mother's last words had been. She had died after what her stepfather called a "long battle with cancer" (Cassie always imagined her in full armor, warding off gigantic cells with a slashing sword). Michael said he didn't know his mother's last words. Cassie wondered if that was better than being stuck with the banality of her father's final words to her:

Close the door. You're letting all the heat out.

Life seemed--alternately, paradoxically, simultaneously, and inexplicably--totally meaningless and so ripe with significance that every word,

image and gesture were connected to another moment in her life. Cassie was a bridesmaid when her stepbrother married his “official” high school sweetheart. The bridesmaids’ wore dresses the same pink color of her bedroom. Cassie wondered if her brother noted the irony of a troop of Boy Scouts singing carols when she visited him at the rehabilitation center the Christmas she graduated from college. In Mexico, when she was just beginning as an archeologist, instead of feeling echoes of ancient wonder as she climbed her first Mayan pyramid, she flashed back to climbing from the kitchen chair onto the counter in a quest for olives. She never applied lipstick without thinking of Trish Gordon’s red mouth and red coat and imagining what her father’s red blood must have looked like against the white snow. But what amazed her most was how no one would have ever guessed the way the scenes of her life sped through her brain at any event or cocktail party where she used a toothpick to spear the one olive, round and green and red, she allowed herself on such an evening.

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