

The Middlesteins

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First published in 2012 in the USA by Grand Central Publishing,
a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc., New York

First published in 2013 by Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
3a Exmouth House
Pine Street
London EC1R 0JH
website: www.serpentstail.com

ISBN 978 1 84668 932 1

eISBN 978 1 84765 943 9

Printed by Clays, Bungay, Suffolk

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Edie, 62 Pounds

HOW COULD SHE not feed their daughter?

Little Edie Herzen, age five: not so little. Her mother had noticed this, how could she miss it? Her arms and legs, once peachy and soft, had blossomed into something that surpassed luscious. They were disarmingly solid. A child should be squeezable. She was a cement block of flesh. She breathed too heavy, like someone's gassy old uncle after a meal. She hated taking the stairs; she begged to be carried up the four flights to their apartment, her mother *uchhing*, her back, the groceries, a bag of books from the library.

"I'm tired," said Edie.

"We're all tired," said her mother. "Come on, help me out here." She handed Edie the bag of books. "You picked these out, you carry them."

Her mother, not so thin herself. Nearly six feet tall,

with a powerhouse of a body, she was a lioness who had a shimmer and a roar to her thick, majestic self. She believed she was a queen among women. Still, she was damp, and she had a headache, and the stairs weren't fun, she agreed.

Her husband, Edie's father, always took the stairs two at once, in a hurry to get to the next place. He was tall, with a thick head of dark, spongy hair, and had long, lanky, pale limbs, and his chest was so thin it was practically translucent, his ribs protruding, watery blue veins threaded throughout. After they made love, she would lazily watch the skin that covered his heart bob up and down, fast, slower, slow.

At meals, he ate and ate; he was carnal, primal, about food. He staked out territory, leaning forward on the table, one arm resting around his plate, the other dishing the food into his mouth, not stopping to chew or breathe. But he never gained a pound. He had starved on his long journey from Ukraine to Chicago eight years before, and had never been able to fill himself up since.

When you looked at all the things in the world there were to agree upon, they had so little in common, this husband and wife. He was not a patriot; America had always been her home. She was more frivolous than he with money, because to her, living in this vast, rich country, in the healthy city of Chicago, it always felt as if more money could be made. They went to separate synagogues, he to the one favored by the Russian immi-

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grants, she to the one founded by Germans two generations earlier, where her parents had gone before they had died, the synagogue in which she had grown up, and she could not let that go, not even in this new union. He had more secrets, had seen more hardships. She had only watched it on the news. And he would always carry his daughter, Edie, wherever she wanted to go, on his shoulders, high up in the sky, as close to God as he could get her. And she was absolutely certain that Edie should be walking everywhere by now.

But they agreed about how to have sex with each other (any way they wanted, no judgment allowed) and how often (nightly, at least), and they agreed that food was made of love, and was what made love, and they could never deny themselves a bite of anything they desired.

And if Edie, their beloved, big-eyed, already sharp-witted daughter, was big for her age, it did not matter.

Because how could they not feed her?

Little Edie Herzen, having a bad day, was making the slowest walk up a flight of stairs in the collective history of walking and stairs, until she decided she could not take another step. It was hot in the stairwell, the dusty air overheated by a skylight above, and when Edie finally sat, throwing the bag of books on the floor next to her, the sweat squished down the backs of her thighs onto the stairs.

“Edie, *bubbeleh*, don’t start.”

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“It’s too hot,” she said. “Hot, tired. Carry me.”

“With what hands?”

“Where’s Daddy? He could carry me.”

“What is wrong with you today?”

Edie didn’t mean to be a baby about it. She was not a whiner. She just wanted to be carried. She wanted to be carried and cuddled and fed salty liverwurst and red onion on warm rye bread. She wanted to read and talk and laugh and watch television and listen to the radio, and at the end of the day she wanted to be tucked into bed, and kissed good night by one or both of her parents, it did not matter which, for she loved them both equally. She wanted to watch the world around her go by, and make up stories in her head about everything she saw, and sing all the little songs they taught her in Sunday school, and count as high as she could possibly count, which was currently over one thousand. There was so much to be observed and considered, why did she need to walk? She missed her buggy and sometimes would pull it out of the storage closet and study it wistfully. She would have loved to be pushed around forever, like a princess in a carriage, surveying her kingdom, preferably one with a magical forest, with tiny dancing elves in it. Elves who had their own deli where they only sold liverwurst.

Her mother shifted the groceries in her damp arms. She could smell something sour and realized it was herself, and then a massive rivulet of sweat shot from her

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armpit down her arm, and she tried to wipe her arm against the bag, and then the bag began to turn, and she reached out for it with the other arm, and then the other bag began to fall, and she hunched over and held them close, trying to rest the bags on the tops of her thighs, but it did not matter, the groceries at the top of both bags spilled out: first the loaf of bread, the greens, the tomatoes, landing on Edie's head, and then two large cans of beans on Edie's fingertips.

Little Edie Herzen, lioness in training, already knew how to roar.

Her mother dropped the bags to the floor. She grabbed her daughter, she held her against her, she squeezed her (wondering again why Edie was already so solid, so *hard*), she shushed her baby girl, the guilt boiling in her stomach like an egg in hot water, a lurching sensation between wanting her daughter to stop crying already—she was going to be fine in five minutes, five years, fifty years, she would not even remember this pain—and wanting to cry herself, because she knew she would never forget the time she dropped two cans of beans on her daughter's fingers.

“Let me see them,” she said to Edie, who was howling and shaking her head at the same time, holding her hands tight against her. “We won't know if you're all right if I can't look at them.”

The howling and the hiding of the hands went on for a while. Neighbors opened their doors and stuck their

heads into the hallway, then closed them when they saw it was just that fat child from 6D, being a kid, crying like they do. Edie's mother coddled and begged. The ice cream was melting. One nail was going to turn blue and fall off a week later, and if she thought Edie was hollering now, she hadn't heard anything, but no one knew that yet. There would be no scars, although there would be a lifetime of scars ahead for Edie, in one way or another, but no one knew that yet either.

Her mother sat there with her arm around her daughter, until she did the only thing left she could do. She reached behind them on the floor and grabbed the loaf of rye bread, still warm in its wrapping paper, baked not an hour before at Schiller's down on Fifty-third Street, and pulled off a hunk of it and handed it to her daughter, who ignored her, and continued to sob, unforgiving, a tiny mean bone having just been formed.

"Good," said her mother. "More for me."

How long do you think it took before Edie turned her head and stuck her trembling hand out for food? Her mouth hanging open expectantly, yet drowsily, like a newborn bird. Rye to her mouth. Wishing there were liverwurst. Dreaming of elves. How long until she revealed her other hand, pink, and purple, and blue, the edges of her index finger's nail bloodied, to her mother? Until her mother covered her hand with kisses?

Food was made of love, and love was made of food,

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and if it could stop a child from crying, then there was nothing wrong with that either.

“Carry me,” Edie said, and this time her mother could no longer deny her. Up the stairs, four flights, the bag of library books strapped around her neck, only slightly choking her, while one arm held two bags of groceries, and the other held her beloved daughter, Edie.

The Meanest Act

ROBIN'S MOTHER, EDIE, was having another surgery in a week. Same procedure, different leg. Everyone kept saying, *At least we know what to expect*. Robin and her downstairs neighbor, Daniel, were toasting the leg at the bar across the street from their apartment building. It was cold out. January in Chicago. Robin had worn five layers just to walk across the street. Daniel was already drunk by the time she got there. Her mother was getting cut open twice in one year. Cheers.

The bar was a no-name, no-shame, no-nothing kind of place. Robin had a hard time giving directions to it. There was a fluorescent Old Style sign in the sole window, but no number on the front door. *Between 242 and 246* is what she would say, although for some reason that confused people. But not Daniel. He knew the way.

“Here’s to number two,” said Daniel. He raised his