

# Sweeties

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*"There's no metaphysics on earth like chocolates."* —Fernando Pessoa

I do not recall precisely when bananas became an awkward thing to eat; when I took to breaking off a bite with my fingers and placing it discreetly in my mouth, as I would do with a dinner roll, rather than brazenly tooting my way through, but I know it was a sudden change—abrupt as the onset of acne and training bras—when it was no longer safe to eat a banana in public.

I suspect this shift occurred when I was twelve or thirteen, around the same time that my sophisticated older sister (then fifteen years old) started sleeping with the father of her friend, a man she'd met through a community-theater production of "Camino Real," which was not long before we returned home from a family vacation—which my sister had declined to join in—to discover a tube of KY jelly

on my parent's bedside table and all my mother's jewelry gone...taken by a boy my sister had picked up on a beach.

Until then I had liked the ritual of peeling a banana. Although I was loath to peel an orange (the oily stain on my fingers, the ache wherever the juice seeped into my torn cuticles, the inevitable spray in the eye), a banana was a joy. Like a tiny present, individually wrapped. It didn't occur to me that banana peeling was a sort of fruit striptease; it seemed the most innocent of pleasures—more modest for having arrived fully clothed, tidier for having been sealed in its little yellow suit. Unripe bananas were an outrage, of course, with their bitter taste and astringent meat that coated my teeth like plaque, but a ripe banana was better than candy. Sweet and tender, fragrant and dense, it was like pale fruity fudge, with the added benefit that it had my mother's highest endorsement: "It's full of potassium!"

It's obvious, of course, in retrospect that my family's fixation on food was a means of negotiating other appetites. The kitchen was the only room in our house from which orgasmic sounds of pleasure issued. Long before I knew what an orgasm was, I knew to be embarrassed by my father's appetitive moans—uhhh, unnhhh—when devouring a particularly delectable morsel (almost always something sweet—coffee ice cream or a chunk of almond roca, my father's favorite candy), a sound of pure abandon and pleasure that I heard from no other room of the house.

We did not keep sweets in our home as a general rule, though near Passover you could find tucked back by the nickel-plated bread box beside the copper stove a black square tin of marvelously tender almond chews. Passover also brought forth like jonquils the achingly sweet macaroons—white with a pale-brown toasting toward the top. My father loved dentally damaging Jordan almonds and jujubes; I preferred Kosher fruit slices—tart and coated with granulated sugar you could suck off and still have the pleasure of the sour gelatinous slice to look forward to. (I was devoted to all but the lime and cherry slices, whose false and bitter flavoring bore no resemblance to the eponymous fruits, as far as I was concerned, but then neither did the candy.)

Perhaps my childhood passion for sweets was compensatory, a desire for a sweetness childhood was said to contain but did not. The things kids were supposed to care about seemed mostly trumped up to me; like the ambition to earn Girl Scout badges, our preoccupations seemed pointless—popularity, boyfriends, life itself seemed aimless as the empty summer blue skies.

As a child, childhood seemed to me vastly overrated. As far as I was concerned, it was mostly a tightrope act, in which one had to thread one's way over the unsteady terrain of teachers, parental moods, and sibling rages, while defending crickets against decapitation by vicious boys and avoiding getting beaten up on the playground by roving packs of kids.

I realize now that I was waiting for something worthy of attention. Had I read, I'd have likely found it there in books, but I didn't. By the time I graduated from high school, I could count on two hands all the books I'd read outside of class assignments, for pleasure: Greek myths and legends, a few Shakespeare plays, a collection of ghost stories, *The Happy Hooker*, and John Ciardi's translation of Dante's *Inferno*, which I read over and over again. (I took no interest in *Purgatorio* or *Paradiso*, in childhood I wanted to read about how to get through Hell.) Sweetness had so little utility.

Of the few sweets in childhood, my mother made a meltingly good chocolate mousse and wondrous bourbon balls: dense and bittersweet, these were mysteriously compelling, slightly smoky and

flammably alcoholic, they made me cough, but were addictive; she kept them in a tin in the downstairs fridge, where we pilfered them as other kids might cigarettes or booze.

By comparison, the Segal's house across the street was a bacchanalian pleasure palace, an absolute orgy of sugar and salt. At the Segal's, childhood was in full swing—there was almost always a game of Capture the Flag to be had on a summer night, and no one stopped us from climbing into the attic in winter to play hide and seek among the pink insulation. There—while Mrs. Segal was raising four children and nursing a nervous breakdown—we feasted on a child's fantasy of food. (Mr. Segal, like most fathers at the time, was a spectral presence, more an idea than a person—I recall his pale blue eyes and a salt-and-pepper beard and his penchant for playfully slapping his wife on the ass, snapping his fingers when he wanted her to come, which remarkably she did.)

In their kitchen could be found a treasure trove of ruffled chips and long hard logs of wrinkle-skinned salamis tied off with a string, from which you could cut slices thick or thin; there was a freezer full of popsicles in any season; Fizzies that could be peeled from their silver-foil packaging and dropped into a glass of water to make a carbonated, fruit-flavored drink (although we preferred to pop the tablets directly into our mouths for the thrill of the carbonation burning on our tongues), and to my delight and amazement bowls throughout the house were heaped with hard candies, free for the pilfering (golden lozenges of butterscotch and round hard sour balls individually wrapped in clear cellophane and paper-wrapped fruit lozenges with fruit jam centers, which were uncool to like, but which I secretly loved, as I secretly loved math). They had fittingly the board game Candy Land, and a color TV; they were the first people I knew to get Pac Man and to host parties where spin the bottle was played; the first to have glamorous orthodontia.

On weekends I often walked with Patti—the Segal girl closest to my age—the seemingly endless two-mile trek to Bridgman's ice cream parlor for papery wafer cones of butter brickle or hot fudge sundaes and to buy a quarter's worth of candy at the drugstore next door, whose long tall racks of sweets induced an almost existential crisis with their variety of options.

Certain candies were simply not done: pink wintergreen lozenges, for example, were a candy that only the elderly ate, and which—in point of fact—seemed never to be ingested at all; they sat in cut-glass bowls in the homes of smelly elderly people taunting children with their faux candy cast, the comestible equivalent of a doily. Powdery as old ladies' cheeks, hard and dry, they were a candy to be avoided. In the drugstore, they hung in clear plastic bags with crimped paper tops from metal hooks, but we never bought them.

Necco wafers were similarly anathema—temptingly numerous in a wax-paper wrap, they looked like a roll of multicolored nickels, like Smarties on steroids; almost everyone had fallen for their false charms once, but not again. Thin and hard and dusty, with a surprisingly un-sweet sugar coating, they were like colored bits of tile.

Candy bars—like childhood itself—were subject to an ornate caste system, and despite their impressive heft seemed to me an unimaginative option (partly because you only got one for your money, whereas a more careful selection could buy you many sweets—five candy sticks, say, or two foot-long ropes of gum and a Charms pop). I was an agnostic when it came to the religion of Hershey's with their waxy chocolate bars, but I was devoted to Cadbury's Caramello, which a school group took to selling to raise money in the 9th grade. And I liked Butterfingers, which had the frisson that came of being unnaturally orange beneath a coquettishly thin chocolate veneer; I loved how the

salty-sweet center crumbled in layers, flaking, like the mica we'd collected on vacation in the Black Hills of South Dakota. Wonderfully geological.

There were root beer barrel penny candies and paper rolls, like ticker tape or accounting receipts, dotted with candy drops in pastel or bright primary colors, which tasted like sugar water and left flecks of paper on one's tongue but which earned points for novelty. Candy necklaces, stained with neck sweat on the long summer walk home, had a similar appeal, though my teeth tended to get caught on the elastic band and often enough broke it, scattering the precious sugar beads. Raisinets and Good & Plenty might be tasty, but their popularity among our parents at the movies ruined their reputation for us, as sex later ruined others'.

My favorite candies were hard and sour: Sweet and sour Charms pops (half clear, half brightly colored), sour zots, with their exploding centers that fizzed in your mouth rather like the charge that came from touching the tip of the tongue to a battery, Pixy Stix and Lik-em-Aid, the magical watermelon slices, and achingly good Lemonheads. I was devoted to the floury foot-long sticks of sour apple gum, the hard-coated cinnamon-flavored hot dogs, the marvelous clove gum that was a forerunner to the equally perfumed and sugary clove cigarettes to come in college. All of which was as satisfying to contemplate as the stash of Playboy we later discovered in the Segal's basement, which we devoured with equally single-minded attention.

This was all before the great candy efflorescence of the late 1970s, which brought with it a host of new candy options and combinations—delicate Skor and elegant Godiva, Skittles and Wacky Wafers and Starburst fruit chews, though none of these new sweets ever eclipsed that most talked about candy, green M&Ms, which were rumored to have aphrodisiacal properties (we were unacquainted with our own desires, but the idea of sex had been sold to us, like candy, so we were impressed by the claim).

I do not know that candies were more delectable in the 1960s and 1970s, but I have a strong suspicion that they were, that this was a sort of apogee of American sweets before superabundance gave way to malaise. Cadbury had just made its way to our Midwestern high school in the late 1970s and early 1980s, along with *Masterpiece Theater* and *Merchant Ivory* films, lending an Anglophilic glamour to our forays to the high-school store. Its Caramello bar was marvelously creamy, a buttery chocolate that melted on our fingers and oozed a salty-sweet caramel goo.

My own penchant for Cadbury bars had more to do with the extraordinary beauty of the girl who sold them, Jodi Cline, a blond as vital and vulnerable as Marilyn Monroe, with thick honey-colored hair and the most magnificent breasts in the ninth-grade class. She was the first truly charismatic person I'd met, the sort of kid others doggedly tagged after, myself included, an adulation she shouldered with admirable grace and benign indulgence, bordering on indifference. (I never once saw her be derisive or cruel.) Her brother was a handsome, easy-going pothead, whom I envied because of the love she bore him, and whose Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young records we listened to obsessively when we visited their lakeside home. Her father was a successful psychiatrist—tall, slender, white-haired, handsome—an exacting man, whose approval of me arose from an obscure quarter of parental ambition: I realize now that he thought Jodi had fallen in with a bad crowd of "fast" playground smokers; my banality and general dweebishness was, for him (if for no one else), high recommendation. As he later told my mother, he was glad I was her friend. He did not realize, I suppose, any more than I did, that I was in love with his daughter.

I was flattered when Jodi wanted to be friends, though sleepovers at their lakeside house were exhausting affairs, in which my usual hum of anxiety took on an insomniacal intensity; I lay wakeful in bed beside my beautiful friend, whose nuzzling of my ear in innocent intimacy before she slept did nothing to induce somnolence. It was years before I'd realize that she had been in trouble at the time and in pain over her brother, who was in some kind of serious mess, the sort people from our suburb were rarely in. We sensed something was amiss when a boyfriend she'd broken up with kidnapped her, hauling her off the street into his car (from which her brother later rescued her), an act that even we, in our practiced suburban innocence, recognized as violent. What I'd construed as maturity was sorrow, the gravitas and tenderness conferred by grief. If I'd ever returned to a reunion, it would have been for her alone. But I knew she'd not return. When I heard decades later that she had moved to Hawaii and become a therapist and had married a woman, the news was sweet.

Ten years later, when I'd finished college and come out and moved to Manhattan and was briefly working in a queer bookstore in the West Village, I discovered the Li-Lac chocolate shop on Christopher Street, a three block stretch of the city that was the spine of gay New York. I was in my twenties by then and had gotten involved with a woman for the first time, and had made the perilous crossing from who I thought I ought to be to who I knew I was, and the hand-dipped chocolates on offer there in the tiny, cacao-scented shop seemed to betoken something of the rare and distinctive pleasure of that choice. The heady smell of butter and maple and nuts, the small white paper bags into which they'd drop your selections and lovely boxes tied with ribbon, even the smallness of the place lent to it an air of secretive pleasure, the spirit of a speakeasy. It was more alluring and more erotic than the condom shop up the street or the S/M outfitters with mannequins in leather and studs.

The chocolate shop was around the corner from the queer bookshop where I worked at the time—the first job I had ever loved, though hardly what my education had prepared me for. I knew it was a disappointment to my parents, given my Yale education in economics, but it did not disappoint me; I considered it an education in itself, and I was thrilled to spend my days amidst books, helping people find the ones they'd come for. Beautiful men loitered among the magazines, pilgrims came for *Dancer from the Dance*, while I shelved books and rang up sales, simple satisfying tasks. I'm looking for a memoir, or maybe a novel, one woman memorably said. I think the cover's, um, orange...? "You're looking for Audre Lorde's, *Zami*," I said, like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat.

One evening, as I was heading home from the bookstore, I saw a couple walking up Hudson Street, summer coming on, the twin towers of the World Trade Center set like candle sticks at the far end of the banquet table that was that city then; I watched the couple looking around, craning their necks for the New York they'd read about—romantic, literary—the White Horse Tavern was just up the street (where Thomas Merton had written and Dylan Thomas drank, as had Mailer, Baldwin, Anaïs Nin); the Cedar Tavern was mere blocks away. All my life I'd felt myself to be like that couple; on the outside, looking in, trying to catch a glimpse of the vital life others seemed to be living more vividly than I. But for the first time in my life I knew that I was on the inside, and I recognized that somewhere in the journey to this city, to Christopher Street, to a woman's arms, from the Midwestern suburbs where my parents had tried and failed to love themselves and one another, I had slipped inside my life, myself, was here. Now.

Of all the sweets that sweeten my mid-life the ones that I love best are slightly bitter, like my mother's bourbon balls. Their flavor, I suspect, is rather like that of my parents' love affair: dense, rich, alluringly complex, a little harsh, slightly sweet, bringing—as it did when I was young—tears to my eyes.

With age, my taste for sweets has dimmed, replaced by an appetite for subtler flavors. These days, my life is filled with unexpected sweetness—my four-year-old daughter’s gleeful shouts, my beloved partner’s calm presence in a house crowded with art our friends have made, here at the edge of the Rocky Mountains, where I teach and write. I often forget candy bars in the kitchen cupboard until they grow chalky with age and, like the overlooked vegetables in the fridge bin, have to be tossed out—I prefer more complex flavors. But such sated nonchalance in the face of sweetness was something it would take me time to discover. It seems easy now, that crossing; it is easy to forget that for a time it seemed I would not make it.

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