Magic Door by Ruth Reichl

I WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD when I first found the magazine, sitting on the dusty wooden floor of a used-book store. My father was a book designer who enjoyed the company of ancient volumes, and he often took me on book-hunting expeditions around New York, leaving me with a pile of vintage magazines while he went off to prowl among the dark and crowded shelves. That day I picked up a tattered old issue of Gourmet, enchanted by the cover drawing of a majestic swordfish leaping joyfully from the water. This looked nothing like the ladies' magazines my mother favored, with their recipes for turkey divan made with cans of mushroom soup, or pot roast topped with ketchup, and I opened it to find the pages filled with tales of food in faraway places. A story called "Night of Lobster" caught my eye, and as I began to read, the walls faded, the shop around me vanishing until I was sprawled on the sands of a small island off the coast of Maine. The tide was coming in, water tickling my feet as it crept across the beach. It was deep night, the sky like velvet, spangled with stars. Much later I understood how lucky I was to have stumbled on that story. The author, Robert P. Tristram Coffin, was the poet laureate of Maine and a Pulitzer

Prize winner with such an extraordinary gift for words that I could hear the hiss of a giant kettle and feel the bonfire burning as the flames leapt into the night. The fine spicy fragrance of lobster was so real to me that I reached for one, imagined tossing it from hand to hand until the shell was cool enough to crack. The meat was tender, briny, rich. Somewhere off in the distance a fish splashed, then swam silently away. I closed the magazine, and the real world came into focus. I was a little girl leafing through the pages of a magazine printed long before I was born. But I kept turning the pages, enchanted by the writing, devouring tales of long-lost banquets in Tibet, life in Paris, and golden fruit growing on strange tropical trees. I had always been an avid reader, but this was different: This was not a made-up story; it was about real life. I loved the ads for exotic ingredients you could send away for: oysters by the bushel, freshly picked watercress, alligator pears (avocados), and “frogs’ legs from the frogland of America.” Once I actually persuaded my parents to order a clambake in a pot from Saltwater Farm in Damariscotta, Maine. Eight live lobsters and a half peck of clams came swathed in seaweed and packed in ice. It cost $14.95, and all you had to do was poke holes in the top of the container and set it on the stove. I couldn’t get enough of those old issues, and now when Dad went off exploring bookstores I had a quest of my own. The day I

discovered a battered copy of The Gourmet Cookbook among the ancient issues, I begged Dad to buy it for me. “It’s only fifty cents,” I pleaded. It came in handy the morning I opened the refrigerator in our small kitchen and found myself staring at a suckling pig. I jumped back, startled, and then did what any sensible person would do: reached for the cookbook. I was only ten, and I hoped it would have some advice on how to deal with the thing. Sure enough, there it was, on page 391: “Roast Suckling Pig Parisienne.” There was even a handy photograph demonstrating how to truss the tiny animal. I remember that moment, and not just because the recipe insisted on a lot of yucky stuff like putting a block of wood into the pig’s mouth (“to brace it for the apple that will be inserted later”) and boiling the heart for gravy. I remember it mostly because that was the day Mom finally admitted she was glad I’d found a hobby. My mother’s interest in food was strictly academic. Asked what had possessed her to purchase the pig, she replied, “I’d never seen one before,” as if that was an adequate answer. The same logic had compelled her to bring home a can of fried grasshoppers, a large sea urchin with dangerously sharp spines, and a flashy magenta cactus flower. She had little interest in eating these items, but if I was going to insist on reading what she called “that ridiculous magazine,” she thought it should be put to use. The fried grasshoppers

were not a hit; I suspect the can had been sitting on a shelf for years, awaiting some gullible customer. And while the editors were eager to instruct me in the preparation of eels, bears, woodchucks, and snipe, they were strangely silent on the subject of sea urchins. When I finally managed to pry the creature open, I found the gooey black inside so appalling that nothing would have tempted me to taste it. As for the cactus flower, its great good looks camouflaged a total lack of flavor. But the suckling pig was a different story. I did everything the cookbook suggested and then hovered anxiously near the oven, hoping it hadn't led me astray. When the pig emerged all crackling skin and sweet soft meat, Mom was happy. "I've never tasted anything so delicious," she grudgingly admitted. "That magazine might be useful after all." Dad took one bite and said, "Do you think you could figure out how to make Kassler rippchen?" There was a wistful note in his voice. "It was my favorite food when I was a boy." "What is it?" I'd never heard of such a dish. "Smoked pork chops. I imagine we could get them up in Yorkville." I'd never been to Yorkville, but I knew Dad had lived there when he first arrived from Berlin in 1926. (He was twenty-six.) "You can't imagine how different it was from the rest of the city," he said as we rode the bus to the Upper East Side. "Every shop, every bakery, every restaurant was German, and in those first months I found it

comforting to be surrounded by all those familiar sights and sounds." I stared at my tall, rather formal father, fascinated by this glimpse into his past. Dad wasn't like American fathers—he didn't have pals, didn't go out drinking with the guys, had absolutely no interest in sports. I was his only child; he was almost fifty when I was born and was slightly baffled by this newfound fatherhood. Quiet, kind, and intellectual, he rarely talked about himself, and I was afraid if I uttered a single sound he would stop speaking. "You know my grandmother was American," he said. I shook my head; I hadn't known that. "My grandfather came here in the middle of the last century, made a fortune, married an American, and carried her back to Germany. When I arrived in New York, all my grandmother's relatives came down to the boat to meet me. They wanted me to stay with them, but I felt more comfortable here. Oh, look!" He'd spotted a butcher shop, its windows crammed with sausages in an astonishing array of shapes and sizes. We climbed off the bus, and as Dad opened the door we walked into a delicious aroma, all spice and smoke with a vague animal funk. I looked up; huge loops of sausage dangled from the ceiling, more kinds than I had ever imagined. There was another scent, something clean and briny that prickled my nose, and I followed the smell to a huge barrel of sauerkraut in the corner. "Guten tag." I was shocked; I'd never heard Dad speak German

before. But the unfamiliar language rolled off his tongue as he said, “Leberkäse, landjaeger, bauernwurst,” as if each word had a different flavor and he was savoring every one. The butcher said something, pointing at me, and Dad shook his head. “Schande.” The man tsked a bit as he handed a rosy slice of bologna across the counter. I put it on my tongue, tasting pork, celery seed, and something elusive and slightly sweet. Nutmeg? “Zo kleine Madchen,” the butcher said. “The father tells me you cook.” He picked up a haunch of pork and sliced off a few thick chops. “Kassler rippchen is not difficult. They are smoked, so you have only to heat them up. Und”—he walked down the counter and filled a container with bright magenta strands—“a little red cabbage and just like that…a good German dinner.” Dad looked so happy as he pulled out his billfold and collected the parcels. “Would you like,” he said almost shyly, “to explore another neighborhood next Saturday?” That was how I came to love my native city. Dad and I began wandering the city’s ethnic neighborhoods, discovering them through food. I loved La Marqueta, a tropical swirl of color that smelled of bananas, pineapples, and coconuts up in Spanish Harlem. Tito Puente’s music was always playing as we moved through the crowded stalls, munching on fried plantains from a cuchifritos stand and ordering mofongo for the pure pleasure of saying the word. Dad became almost

garrulous on these walks, and I slowly began to know him; once he took me to the Lower East Side, to Russ & Daughters, where I discovered that he had a passion for herring. “When your mother and I were dating,” he said, “that’s how she seduced me.” “But we never have herring!” I said. “I know.” He said it ruefully. “After we were married she confessed that she hates pickled fish. And she never bought it again.” Another man would have been angry; Dad found it amusing, just one of life’s little quirks. What I was learning, on those weekend walks, is how much you can find out about a person merely by watching what he eats. Food became my own private way of looking at the world. But although it was my passion, I never thought of food as more than a hobby, and it never crossed my mind that it might be a way to earn my living. Even after college, when jobs proved elusive in the depressed New York of the early seventies and I began baking pastries for a restaurant called Food (run by a group of artists in the scruffy neighborhood that would come to be called SoHo), I considered it a stopgap measure, just something to do until my real life could begin. Then a friend said, “You’re such a good cook, you ought to write a cookbook,” and everything changed. From the moment I picked up my pen, I knew that I had found my calling; I was twenty-two years old. Mmmmm: A Feastiary was not a big bestseller, but it made me a food writer. I moved to Berkeley,

California, and although I continued to work in restaurants to pay the bills, I began contributing articles to magazines, working my way up from a small throwaway newspaper called The East Bay Review of the Performing Arts to New West, Apartment Life, and Ms. magazine. I dreamed of writing for the magazine that had set me on this path, but I lacked the courage to approach Gourmet. I was waiting for the perfect story. It came to me in a spoonful of soup. Sitting in a small Thai restaurant, I ordered tom yum goong, which turned out to be the shocking pink of a Technicolor sunset. I took a tentative sip and suddenly there were fireworks in my mouth. Chilies, lemongrass, ginger, and cilantro exploded in waves of heat, cold, and sweetness. It was the most exciting food I'd ever tasted and I inhaled one spoonful after another, hoping the bowl would never end. I knew I had to go to Thailand and find out what real Thai food was like. This, I thought, is my Gourmet story. The next time I went to New York to see my parents, I made an appointment at the magazine. The offices were just off Park Avenue, overlooking the Waldorf Astoria hotel. As a proud Berkeley person I found the formality intimidating, and all I remember about the editor who agreed to see me is that she was wearing white gloves and seemed terribly ancient. She took one look at my clothes—I was wearing my favorite hand-crocheted green chenille suit—shuddered slightly, and offered a limp

handshake. But she listened politely as I made my pitch. Brimming with energy, enthusiasm, and all the naïve earnestness of a young writer, I cried, “Thai food is going to be the next big thing.” “But our readers”—her voice was cool and distant—“have no interest in the next big thing. Other publications attempt to be timely; here at Gourmet we like to think of ourselves as timeless.” “That can’t be true!” I replied. “I’ve learned everything I know about the food of other countries from the pages of your magazine. Gourmet has taken me to Mexico, China, India….Now you need to take your readers to Thailand.” She regarded me with what I can only call pity. “We ran a story about food in Thailand a few years ago,” she said. “But you only wrote about Bangkok!” I protested. I did not point out that the article had been written by an expat surrounded by servants and living in regal splendor. Instead, I temporized. “It’s a big country, and the food varies enormously from region to region.” The editor remained unmoved. “Thank you for taking the time to visit,” she said. I had been dismissed. Utterly crushed, I left the office. Other magazines proved more enthusiastic, and I sold enough stories to be able to spend a month in Thailand pursuing unfamiliar flavors in the far corners of the country. I wished the articles were for Gourmet, but now when I picked up the magazine I saw that the adventurous spirit that had thrilled me as a child was gone. We had grown

apart. I belonged to the rock-and-roll generation, thrilled by the changes in the American way of eating. Gourmet was a stately grande dame, looking admiringly across the ocean and wistfully back to the past. The recipes were still reliable, but the tone had changed. Instead of stories about men rowing out for midnight lobster raids, there were prissy pieces about pricey restaurants and fancy resorts. I moved on to younger magazines, and although I continued to follow a few favorite writers (Laurie Colwin, Madhur Jaffrey, Joseph Wechsberg), for the next twenty-five years I rarely gave the magazine a thought.

Tea Party by Ruth Reichl

THE PHONE WAS RINGING AS I fumbled for my keys, arms filled with mistletoe and fir. I dropped the branches on the floor, pushed the door open, dashed into the apartment, and sprinted down the hall. “Is this the restaurant critic of The New York Times?” The voice on the other end of the line had a British accent. “I am James Truman.” “Yes?” The name meant nothing to me. “Editorial director of Condé Nast? I’d like to talk to you about Gourmet.” “Gourmet?” “I am hoping,” he went on, “that you will be willing to meet me for tea at the Algonquin. I’d ask you to the office, but we don’t want the press to know we’ve been talking.” “The press?” What could that possibly mean? “But he didn’t give me a clue,” I complained to my husband later. “All he would say was that he wants to talk. What do you think it’s about?” “They’re probably looking for a new restaurant critic,” Michael said reasonably. It was the obvious answer. “I wouldn’t write for them now,” I said. “They’re way too stuffy. So what’s the point?” Even after two decades, just thinking about the half hour I’d spent in Gourmet’s office could make me wince. “I think I’ll cancel the meeting.” “Go,” said Michael. “You should find out what he wants. You may not be curious, but I certainly am.” Here’s

what I knew about Condé Nast before I sat down with James Truman: very little. I was aware that the company was owned by a strange and mercurial billionaire named Si Newhouse, who had recently sold Random House to Bertelsmann, a German media company—but I knew that only because they'd just published my first memoir. I knew that Condé Nast stood for luxury, class, and fashion and owned a lot of high-end magazines, but I was so oblivious I hadn't even known they'd bought Gourmet. (Given that I'd been a food critic for twenty years, that undoubtedly says a lot about me.) Two days later, when I walked into the restaurant of the Algonquin Hotel (famous for being the scene of Dorothy Parker's Round Table), I inhaled the scent of roasted beef, hothouse flowers, and nostalgia and wondered what I was doing there. I followed the hostess through the dark, stubbornly old-fashioned room toward a pudgy, well-dressed gentleman seated alone at a large table. He, of course, would be my date. But the hostess kept walking, leading me to another table, where a scrap of a man rose to greet me. Surprised, I took in the waiflike James Truman, who looked far too young to be editorial director of the vast Condé Nast empire. Could this man really be in charge of Vogue? His hair needed cutting and his rumpled clothes looked like he'd slept in them; whatever nervousness I'd had vanished. I sat down to a table set for tea and Truman poured.

“What do you think of Gourmet?” Anticipating standard introductory small talk, I was caught off guard. And so I simply told the truth. “I went to the library yesterday to look through the last few issues, and…” I groped for a kind way to say this. “And?” “I’m sorry, but they put me to sleep. They’re so old-fashioned; you’d never know this was 1998.” He seemed to be nodding agreement, so I forged ahead. “Gourmet is an important magazine, and it deserves better.” I thought back to “Night of Lobster,” which had so enthralled me as a child. “It used to be filled with such great writing; I remember reading M.F.K. Fisher and Annie Proulx in old issues. And did you know Ray Bradbury’s Dandelion Wine first appeared in Gourmet? But now, just when the world is starting to get interested in food, you’re publishing articles about Louis Vuitton tennis-ball holders!” I’d noticed that in a recent issue and it struck me as the perfect example of everything that was wrong with the magazine. Truman did not react; apparently he didn’t find it as ridiculous as I did. “As far as I can tell”—I tried to make the point—“Gourmet has become a place for rich people to plan their vacations.” Truman sat back a bit, and it occurred to me that he was trying to put some distance between us. Suddenly embarrassed, I toyed with my teacup, trying to gather my thoughts. “You must think I have a lot of nerve. I spend my life telling rich people where to eat, and here I am criticizing your

magazine for doing the same thing. But being a restaurant critic often makes me uncomfortable…." "Why?" "There are so many other food issues to write about!" I could feel myself climbing up on my high horse as I began ticking off subjects that interested me: the loss of farmland, disappearing fish, genetic modification, overuse of antibiotics…."A couple of years ago I wrote a piece for The New York Times Magazine called 'Why I Disapprove of What I Do.' " "I know; I read it." My head jerked up in surprise. "You did?" Truman flashed me an impish smile. "That's why I called; I thought it was interesting. I especially like the part where you said going out to eat used to be like going to the opera but that these days it's more like going to the movies. I thought then that you would make an excellent editor in chief for Gourmet." I dropped my spoon, and it clattered against the thin porcelain. We both watched it vibrate against the saucer. Shocked, I said, "Editor in chief?" "What did you think?" "Well, I certainly didn't think you'd offer me a job like that!" He grimaced; I'd raised my voice. "I was thinking you probably wanted a new restaurant critic." He looked so pained that I realized the man in charge of nineteen magazines didn't hire restaurant critics; he'd expected me to know he had something major in mind. But how could I possibly have imagined this? To cover my embarrassment I asked a question: "How many employees does Gourmet have?" "I don't really

know.” He waved a hand at an invisible army of editors. “Sixty or so.” Sixty! The thought was terrifying. I couldn’t possibly manage sixty people. Everybody has issues with the boss, and all I want to do is please people. “I’m no manager,” I told him. “And I certainly couldn’t handle a staff of sixty.” “Why not? You might have to clean house, get rid of everyone and bring in all your own people.” I almost laughed; where did he think I’d find these “people” of mine? He must have read my face. “Human Resources would help,” he said reassuringly. “That’s what they’re there for.” Clearly, he wasn’t getting it. “Then there’s the matter of budgets.” I almost pulled out my checkbook to show him what a mess it was. “I’m terrible at managing money. What is Gourmet’s budget anyway?” “I could get you that figure, but that’s not really your concern.” He sounded nonchalant. “You don’t suppose Anna Wintour worries about budgets, do you? You’ll have a managing editor to deal with money matters.” I didn’t like his use of the future tense; he seemed to consider this a done deal. Didn’t anyone say no to Condé Nast? “I suppose,” I said with all the sarcasm I could muster, “this managing editor will be one of the new people I bring in after I ‘clean house.’ ” “Exactly!” He had no idea who he was dealing with. I’d never fired a single person, even when I was an editor at the Los Angeles Times, and I certainly was not about to start now. I might be the restaurant critic of The

New York Times, but at heart I was still a sixties rebel with a deep mistrust of corporate ways. My philosophy of management—if I had such a thing—would have gone like this: “Everybody’s good at something. You just have to figure out what that is.” I stood up. “I’m flattered you’ve thought of me. I’m certainly not the obvious choice, and I wish that I could do it. But if you really want Gourmet to be the best it possibly can be, you need someone with experience.” Truman didn’t move. “Think about it.” He said it with confidence, as if he was sure I’d change my mind. I reached for my purse. “I’m pretty sure that if I were foolish enough to accept your offer, we’d both be sorry.” Still he sat there, unmoving. What was he waiting for?

“Paparazzi,” he mumbled, pointing toward the door as if he could see a phalanx of photographers waiting outside. “We don’t want them to catch us leaving together.” I laughed out loud, finally understanding what those cryptic words on the phone had meant. Outside again, I looked around to see if there really were photographers lurking about. The sidewalk was empty; I wondered if Truman would be disappointed. It took a full block before I realized that I had just turned down the chance to run the magazine that had inspired all the work I’d ever done. I began to wonder if I’d been rash. Everything I’d told Truman was true: It was a watershed moment in American food and I yearned to do more than simply write about

restaurants. That article about being ashamed of being a critic had been straight from the heart; in the back of my mind I always heard my mother's contemptuous voice saying, "Aren't you ever going to do something more important than tell people where to eat? Is this why we sent you to college?" I thought too about my son. Nick was almost ten now and starting to complain bitterly about my working hours. He wanted a mother who was home at night to cook dinner and help with homework. It didn't seem like much to ask. I'd spent nearly six years at the Times, and lately I'd been feeling it was time to move on. I loved my job and the people I worked with. We food reporters were a tight-knit group; we read one another's stories and cheered our colleagues on. And in my early days the editors had been remarkably protective of me; it was years before they let me know how controversial my first reviews of small Asian and Latino restaurants had been. "We didn't think you needed to know," they said. But I'd been writing restaurant reviews for more than twenty years, and few people last that long. Eating out fourteen times a week takes a toll on your body, and being away for most meals does not improve your family life. And after so much time on the restaurant beat I was eager for a challenge; I could practically write reviews in my sleep. That fall I'd brought this up so frequently that my friend Marion Cunningham insisted I visit her astrologer. "I know you don't

believe in it," she said, "but whenever I'm at an impasse I visit Alex. It's always helpful. I'm making an appointment for you. My treat." Feeling slightly silly, I'd actually gone to see the man. To my surprise, he told me things about myself I'd almost forgotten. He knew about the crippling panic attacks I'd finally overcome and my deep resistance to change. At the end of the reading, as he was putting his charts away, Alex looked up to offer a final thought. "The stars tell me that you're going to be getting a new job very soon." "Do you know what it is?" I asked. "Do you know what I'll be doing next?" He shook his head. "All I can tell you is that you are going to learn a great deal. And that it will completely alter your life."