



(a novel)

History Lesson for Girls



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VIKING

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History Lesson for Girls

ALSO BY AURELIE SHEEHAN

The Anxiety of Everyday Objects


Jack Kerouac Is Pregnant

For Jenny

History Lesson for Girls

Once upon a time there was a girl who lived in a small shack made from oak and maple trees, quite plentiful in Connecticut. She and her parents toiled all day making dolls out of corncobs and dyeing socks with the juice of pomegranates. They worked hard, tended to go to bed early, and had many nice family talks and nice family traditions.

The lost heroine, for that would become her name later, liked most of all to perambulate about the village—not called Weston back then, in 1776, but something quite like it, Wistin.



Chapter One

ONE DAY I saw them, our dream horses, and on that day I pulled over to the side of the road and cried. There they were, Appaloosas and roans and bays, and I thought I saw, squinting into the last bit of sunlight, a gray. All the horses moved together, a makeshift herd—maybe they'd heard my car, or maybe it was a chill, the first winter breeze, almost imperceptible on a summer day. So many years later and now here they were in front of me. The horses trembled, shifted, and then became calm and separated out again, twelve or twenty of them, more than enough for the Alison and Kate Horse Training Company.

She saved me. That's the first thing you should know about Kate. It was the year we moved to Weston, the year my parents went haywire, the year my back started curving out of control as if it were the life of the party. She was five feet seven and had long brown hair bleached by the sun, and her father was an Egyptian emperor. Was he for real? Real enough for a small suburban dynasty. Real enough to pass on a legacy.

I think of Kate all the time. I think of her like I've got this little silver Egyptian cat in my pocket, a little silver talisman

that won't go away. I think of her, and then I think of him, too, Tut Hamilton, sham shaman in suburbia. I can't forget him, any more than I can forget her.

The thing is, she saved me that year, and then it was my turn. That's what friendship is. That's how to make history.

I was thirteen when my parents and I moved to the fancy town of Weston from maligned and honorable Norwalk, two towns over. We were ready for anything, ready for the good things to start happening, and the first thing that went wrong was the blue room.

Mom wanted her studio to be blue, despite the fact that most painters prefer a room absent of color, a blank wall, a clean palette. She'd had a vision, you see, a dream of a blue room.

My father offered to paint the room for her, but she would choose the color, of course. She and I went to the paint store together.

"These men—they're painting the world, creating color wheels, color contrasts, color inspirations—without any real conception, no awareness at all, of what they're doing. They could be artists—but no, *no*—instead of using these glorious choices—all the glory, all the *opportunity*, Alison—they just sit around drinking coffee out of a thermos and painting houses tan, tan, and tan again. How dreary. . . ."

She continued talking as we got out of our Corolla (it also happened to be tan) and walked the short distance from the parking lot to the shopping center. I *did* hope she'd stop, or at least lower her voice, before we got to the store. She had a way

of causing a commotion, despite her size. She was a tiny, fragile person, swathed in scarves and perfumes and charms.

Men of uncertain age and weight looked our way as we came in: Scheherazade and the too tall, too bony, too elbowy stalk, in a back brace, beside her.

My mother breezed by their troubling, huntary expressions, and we settled in before the paint chips. I'd just turned thirteen, my back was curved, and my parents were curved, too—bohemians in Connecticut, the Land of Plenty. Either all the colors looked good to me or none of them did. Somehow it seemed that this, like everything else, could go either way.

Mom, however, was confident. She hummed with satisfaction, picking out various small, hopeful cards from the rack, cocking her head, pursing her lips—rejecting one, then the other, until she came to her blue.

Today they've gotten hold of Weston and thrown up these monstrous vault homes, decorated with pillars and neo-this-and-that architectural details, but in 1975 the lovely colonials were what stood out, the historic touch. Some even had plaques near the doorways saying things like PAUL REVERE SLEPT HERE IN 1782 or IN 1801, HERE STOOD WESTON'S FIRST MILL. The split-levels such as ours, built in the aesthetically challenged sixties, were scattered like tawdry cousins among these statelier, storied homes. Still, moving to 12 Ramble Lane was a big step up for us, and my parents had attached hopes to the house, obvious as the taped-up notes left behind by the house's former owners ("Use 5-watt bulb MAX!" "Filter hose needs to be checked 2x year!"). Mom had torn down their

notes impatiently the first day we moved in, replacing them with a sign of her own. Purple felt with silver letters, it hung on the door of her soon-to-be-blue room, her first real studio: “Artist at Work.” She could turn it to face in or out, indicating whether she was “open” or “closed”—a novel idea in a mother. Dad’s office was in the basement (he had another at the university), but most of all he seemed keen on a certain green hillock in the backyard, where he could sit cross-legged and rumble with a middle-aged *Om*.

We were all dressed up now, decked out in zesty Marimekko. And although the first two weeks in Weston passed in a kind of misty, glorious disappointment, most of all we felt lucky to be there, in a town of lilacs and curving roads and studio doors that shut and hillocks and a barn.

Dad stood on the ladder. He’d painted all the edges first, near the ceiling and floors and windows and corners, and then he’d taken out the roller and started in on wide swaths of Prussian Wildflower.

“A bit dark, isn’t it?”

“Well, it’s what your mother wants. It’ll lighten up as it dries, too, Allie Oop.”

This cheerfulness was disconcerting. He’d been duped into thinking he could please my mother.

“It looks different from the little card.”

“Goddammit,” Dad said. A slop of paint had fallen to the floor.

The fact of the matter is, both my parents were fish out of water in Weston. Mom with her dreams of being a painter and Dad with his day job and his poetry books, including the

award-winning one, all lined up on the mantel. They were attempting to piece together a life with art at its center and also (not that I was fully aware of this at the time) making choices based on what might be good for me, their daughter. Art geeks, adversaries, people who drove old cars: They weren't part of the PTA crowd, and they weren't swingers, either. Mainly they were simply *my parents*, and it was extraordinarily embarrassing, but seemed pretty natural, that they were so weird.

"Look, you can't tell anything from the card," he said. "Take a rag to that spot, would you, please?"

"Why do they have the cards, then?"

"To beguile the willing, Alison."

"Why would they do that? They would never do that."

"You don't think so? Think about the visceral and dark depths of the workingman's resentment, darling, and you might have another idea."

The son of Irish immigrants and bardic descendant of many a workingman, my father looked like he was a half second away from falling off the rickety old ladder—either him or the tray of Prussian Wildflower.

"Do we have any more 7-Up?"

Dad concentrated on his next swab of the roller. His somewhat long and unkempt beard, a poet's beard, bobbed precariously close to the wall.

"Dad?"

He grunted. He smoothed the roller down, then over, making a reverse blue cloud in a white sky. "Try the garage."

I sat at the kitchen table, drinking 7-Up and reading the *Weston Forum*. It featured golf and tennis tournaments, with a

handful of asides about “happenings” at the Norfield Grange. I didn’t know for sure what a “grange” was, though I thought perhaps it was a place where they stored wheat or made pantaloons in yesteryear. I studied the picture of the winners in doubles at the Aspetuck Country Club Summer’s End Mixer, two women in ruffled culottes and their partners, men with thinning hair. Another photo was of four men who’d won the Muscular Dystrophy Benefit Golf Tournament: plaid all around.

I didn’t notice the article at first, probably because the accompanying photo was so obscure—a hazy image of boulders, pine trees, and, perhaps, a bit of a stream or river. TEEN DIES IN FALL, read the headline. At first I thought it meant, you know, September, which seemed to bode ill for me specifically as I contemplated my upcoming entrée into public school life, starting with eighth grade.

A sixteen-year-old youth died Saturday night, apparently after a daredevil dive off the rocks at Devil’s Glen. The youth, whose name has not been released because of his age, was from out of town. “A tragic act like this, it didn’t need to happen. Kids will be kids, but parents need to take action,” said Police Chief Riley at the Town Forum on Monday, urging parents to warn kids away from this area, long a hot spot for teenage congregation and tomfoolery.

Tomfoolery? That was an annoying word.

Mom appeared on the stairs, carrying groceries. She was wearing purple sunglasses, the frames big and round as apples.

“I found the best store,” she said breathlessly. “Zillions of healthy things to eat.”

“Oh no,” I said. My mother was mounting a campaign against the tried-and-true food of my youth. It had been a sad day when she swept through our cabinets, throwing away yummy things and replacing them with less yummy things. Skippy peanut butter was tossed, for instance, and replaced by an unsalted almond-peanut blend.

“How’s the studio coming? Been down there recently?” She extricated herself from her sunglasses, pulled the yellow-and-purple scarf from her hair.

“He’s working on it,” I said, peering into a bag. Bulk items: the worst. “Didn’t you get any Oreos? Or anything to eat?”

“What do you mean? Look at all this!”

She began to pull things out: dried fruit, unsalted almonds, oatmeal, some other cereal with black flecks, a huge bag of brown rice. Her long blond hair whooshed as she moved. She was wearing striped pants and red pointy shoes from Afghanistan. Even in this hippie garb, she stood straight and skinny, betraying years of childhood ballet.

“What about regular food?” I asked.

“What is ‘regular,’ Alison?” Mom said. “Regular food is for regular people, my darling.”

I sat back down and began drawing psychotic spirals on a pad of paper. “I couldn’t find anything for lunch.”

“Oh, Allie, we’ve got soup, tuna. Look here—good twelve-grain bread. And loads of cheese.”

“Fritos?”

“No. I got some bean sprouts. And kale,” she said. “You mean to say you don’t like kale?”

“I don’t even know what kale *is*, Mom.”