Under the Bar

“Your wooden arm you hold outstretched to shake with passers-by.”

College a cappella groups sing of a lady in red, her beauty ravaged by age and sin, and urge listeners to “let her sleep under the bar.” Now Charlotte Silver gives us a report from under the bar in Charlotte au Chocolat: Memories of a Restaurant Girlhood, coming in February from Riverhead Books.

Soon after she was born, Silver’s parents and a close friend founded Upstairs at the Pudding, a Harvard Square eating establishment with a magnificent high-ceilinged dining room on the top floor of the Hasty Pudding Club on Holyoke Street. It soon became the festive venue for a meal out. Silver’s father was the head chef, her mother made the desserts at home (the signature dessert was charlotte au chocolat, after which Silver was named), and their friend ran the front of the house. Harvard’s oldest a cappella group, the Krokodiloes, practiced at any hour on the floor below the restaurant, their voices wafting up.

Throughout her childhood, Silver arrived at the restaurant every afternoon by five o’clock with her mother, platters of desserts, and a party dress, into which she changed upon arrival. She was polite to everyone, always. Waiters brought her Shirley Temples. Perhaps she would order shrimp on a skewer and squab with black lentils and bacon for dinner, followed by candied violets. She amused herself as best she could, and when she got sleepy, she curled up under the bar for a nap. Stored there were crates of champagne with bundles of linen stuffed between them. She arranged herself on top of the clutter, swaddled in tablecloths, she recalls. “As ice cubes tinkled and cocktail shakers rattled above me, I rubbed my nose in the linens, breathing in the scent of starch. The sounds of the restaurant faded. I could barely hear the murmur of the customers’ conversations or the scuff of the waiters’ shoes on the carpet, and finally I fell asleep.”

Upstairs endures, as Upstairs on the Square, at 91 Winthrop Street. It is as jolly as ever, but Silver has moved to New York.

Theatrical magician: Peter Sellars ’80, who teaches at UCLA, returned to Harvard in November for a panel discussion about Nixon in China (he was its inaugural director), along with the opera’s composer, John Adams ’69, A.M. ’72, of Berkeley, and librettist Alice Goodman ’80, a former Adams House mate of Sellars who is now an Anglican priest in Cambridgeshire (see harvardmag.com/nixon-in-china). House master emeritus Robert J. Kiely, writing for the Gold Coaster, the Adams House alumni magazine (www.goldcoaster.fdrsuite.org), recalls that Sellars as an undergraduate came to him and begged $25 from the Master’s Fund to clean up and paint an old basement storage room so that it could be used as a theater (named Explosives–B). “The first production...was a Polish satire that involved an enormous hand made of plywood that kept entering menacingly from the only door. The performances, the concept (short plays, no admission charge, limited space, late starting times), and the unbounded creativity and imagination of the director and actors made the place a sensation. Everyone wanted to come!…”

“Theatrical talent and ideas rained down on Adams House,” Kiely continues. “A new play seemed to appear every few weeks. Some were new and experimental, others old favorites. Nothing seemed too ambitious. I went to them all, but some still seem to have been impossibly terrific. Peter decided to do something Russian. Was it Boris Godunov? Anyway, it was a mammoth Russian opera cut down to 40 minutes... Other classics followed in various unlikely places: a 35-minute Macbeth with three actors in the Adams House tunnels; and most memorable of all, Antony and Cleopatra in the Adams House pool (audience sitting around the sides, Cleopatra enthroned on a raft in the middle of the water). They were some of the very best, most original theater I have ever seen at Harvard.” ~ PRIMUS v