



Suzanne Pollak (l.) with fellow Charleston Academy "dean" Lee Manigault.

# *The Etiquet*

*The child of a CIA agent, the author learned to make a home for h*





# te of Home

herself no matter where she went by Suzanne Williamson Pollak '74



I arrived at St. Paul's School from Monrovia, Liberia, at age 15 with absolutely no academic skills, even though this was my 12th school and I was in the Fifth Form.

Poor Mr. Archer (French) and Mr. Clark (math) did not know what to do. I was one of the first girls in their classes but had never conjugated a verb or calculated a fraction. Let me just say calculus was completely confusing and French, well. . . . But I was nice and I know they didn't want to flunk me. I don't want to give the impression that I was stupid, far from it. I came with expertise, which I didn't know I possessed, but skill I would have considered silly and stupid as a high school junior.

I was born in Beirut and grew up in Africa because of my father's job in the CIA. Like nomads, we moved in and out of houses and various countries all over the continent until I was 18. Sometimes we stayed two years, other times a few months, depending on the political situation in the country and what my father was up to. Living like a nomad gives one skills necessary to survive, like making a house become a home in a day, using that house to connect in a meaningful way with another person, entertaining hundreds of people, and unpacking and packing within hours. At various times, our African houses turned into temporary hospitals or schools, elevated into salons, concert halls, or movie theaters, or degenerated into a war zone.

Inadvertently, I became an expert on how to use a house; I can make a kitchen the engine of a house or the dining room a community outreach center, all because of my upbringing in Africa.

In 1961, when typhoid and its raging fevers infected me, my sister, Cynthia Carter '75, and my brother, Todd Williamson '77, instead of flying from Somalia to a hospital in Germany, our house overlooking Mogadishu became our hospital. My mother filled bathtubs with gin and took turns floating us in the tub to tame our temperatures.

In every county, our gardens were tropical paradises, overgrown with flame trees and bougainvillea vines, inhabited with turtles, goats, pythons, and scarlet-breasted parrots. Neighbors kept cheetahs, lions, and monkeys, so our biology lessons were not what you would call "text-book." In 1967, we moved to Nigeria. One neighbor owned monkeys who continually stole guests' cocktails. Getting to their house was actually a walk in the jungle, a vital lesson in avoiding 25-foot-long rock pythons stretched

across the dirt road. By carrying a long stick and tapping the ground in front as you walked, you knew the moment to step over a boa constrictor.

Our garden in Nigeria grew into a food bank with the vegetables I planted, saving my father's life as the food on which he survived for six months in 1967. He lived in Enugu during the Biafran War, but the rest of us – all foreign women and children – evacuated the morning the civil war started. Soldiers destroyed our house, family photos, and possessions, but the devastation that remains in my psyche is my Nigerian classmates staying behind and perishing.

Accra, Ghana, did not have a good school in 1968 when we arrived, so in addition to his spying duties, my father founded the Lincoln School. Until the school opened, a diplomat's wife taught me in her house using correspondence courses.

Cultural lessons in all our houses were varied: My father always turned one room into his music library, lined with the 10,000 records and recording equipment that traveled the world with us. He presented concerts and lessons with his constantly expanding classical, opera, and jazz recordings. Piazzas converted into movie theaters, where we gathered friends to watch the last year's American movies. Once in a while, visiting dignitaries such as Jessie Owens, Black Caucus members from Congress, Chubby Checker, Pelé, Ike and Tina Turner came and expanded our horizons.

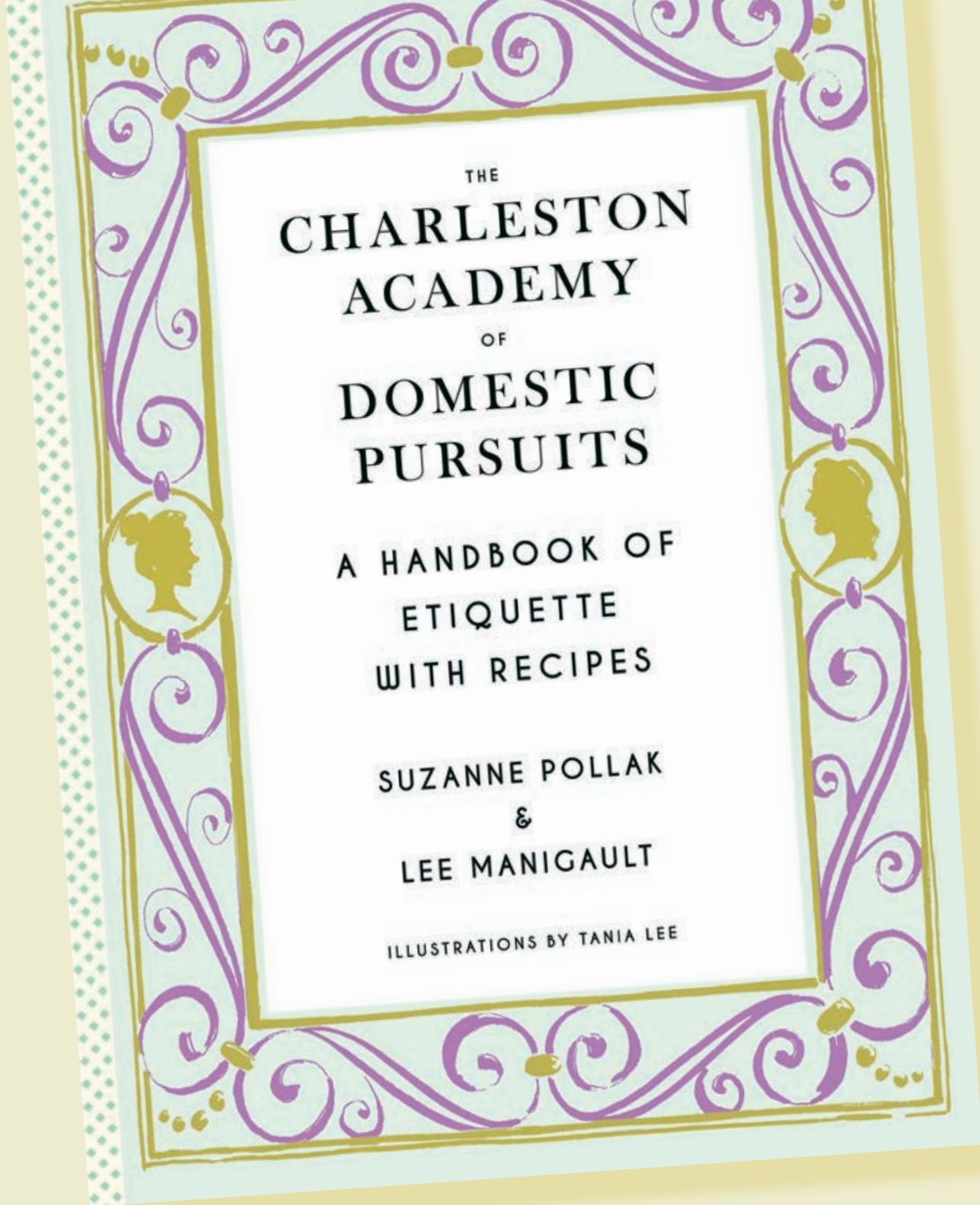
The nightly entertaining that is a part of every agent and diplomat's life was a fascinating education, far more encompassing than the proper way to make a martini. These were parties with purpose – contacts made, information exchanged, plans forged. As a child, I watched the pre-party mayhem of guests arriving, drinking, flirting, behaving badly, getting louder until the stragglers left as the sun rose. As a teenager, I became a participant. Every moment intrigued me, from observing behavior of the African government officials to the European wives of diplomats, from the costumes to the cocktails to the conversations. I learned that a house and the parties held within its confines is the ideal setting for communication, community, and connections. After doing this instinctively for decades, I've come to realize the tremendous power of a house in forging lifelong connections.

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A young Suzanne Pollak pets a neighbor's cheetah in Africa.



Even my observations on happenings in the street outside my African houses became invaluable and sprung into use as soon as my twins were born. Nursing twins and taking care of their 18-month-old brother when I was in my early twenties was not a problem, because inside and outside I saw mothers nursing in the open, not hidden behind closed doors. Who knew that visual lessons seep into a child's unconscious? I thanked my African mentors.

When I finally owned my own house, I put down roots that ran deep. My favorite home was in Beaufort, S.C., where we restored a "tabby" manse built during the Revolutionary War, which turned into a hospital for the Mass. 54th regiment during the Civil War. Hundreds of soldiers recovered or died in the house, and, in the next century, the house became a school, a rectory, and five apartments. My instinct with this historic house was to make it look like one family, my family, had occupied it for 200 years,



and then maybe nobody could yank me away.

It was in this house that my innate knowledge of large parties in Africa came to life. The Beaufort house had a Halloween look and vibe – an exorcist removed remaining Civil War spirits haunting the interior – twice. The exterior walls, constructed of broken oyster shells, made for the ideal Halloween setting. A decade before such parties became popular, 100 people attended our first Halloween party. Consulting the *Farmer's Almanac* and the full moon schedule to set the date, the weather always cooperated. Guests filled the house, ballroom, and gardens in perfect outdoor temperatures and by the light of full moons. But, in the sixth year, my party luck failed. After a long sunny day predicted by the *Farmer's Almanac*, the skies opened up 30 minutes before the party start time so that 300 drenched, costumed guests squeezed inside the house along with bartenders, servers, and the band. That night, the house came alive like our African parties always did. The overcrowded Halloween party was a sensation. In Africa, I saw party guests of every nationality, profession, and age get to know each other quickly when squished together, creating lifelong connections masterminded by the host. This knowledge was my African heritage.

The Beaufort house became a kind of hospital once again during our occupation. When our eldest son, Pete '97, had spinal cancer twice, the house was my refuge. No matter how odd the comparison sounds, I believed that if the house could survive centuries of adversity thrown in its path, Pete would survive his cancer. A few years later, my two younger sons became U.S. Marine officers and were both deployed to Afghanistan in 2010. During this personal siege, we had left Beaufort and moved into a 1780 house in Charleston. Again, a house was my hideout. With two sons in the war, I stayed home to avoid people, questions, hearing news I didn't want to hear, answering questions I didn't want to confront. Pete survived cancer and my Marine sons returned safely from war. I turned my houses into what I needed when tidal waves hit and knocked me to my knees.

My family's financial situation became precarious twice in my life, and both times my first thought was not how to get a job outside my house, but how to make my house work for me and start generating dollars. I

looked at my home as the solution. Since my expertise was managing a household and feeding a family, I turned one of my home kitchens into a bakery. While illegal in South Carolina, it was necessary for me as I had four young children at home. In 1994, the author Pat Conroy came to dinner (by now I was in a different house) and because he arrived early, I taught him how to make pasta from scratch, something I learned when I was seven and watching Hassan, our cook in Mogadishu, while he rolled out handmade pasta dough each morning, something he learned from an Italian ambassador's wife. The evening

after the dinner, Pat asked me to write a cookbook with him, and we ultimately used my home – my kitchen and dining room – as our test kitchen and writing center. *The Pat Conroy Cookbook* was published a few years later.

More recently, my Rainbow Row townhouse in Charleston, S.C., has become the home base for Charleston Academy of Domestic Pursuits, a delightful tiny academy that teaches the most important lesson in the world: How to live at home. Students may go to St. Paul's for academics, but when they need to know how to build a beautiful life, they send their application to the Charleston Academy, c/o the Deans (Lee Manigault and me). We are both authorities in managing a household because we have both spent our lives doing just that. The good news for our followers is that we have put forth the most important information in our book, *The Charleston Academy of Domestic Pursuits, A Handbook*

*of Etiquette with Recipes*. Even if you live in Ouagadougou, Upper Volta, and cannot attend the Academy classes in person, our book will show you how to build a beautiful life no matter what type of house you live in, and utilize the power of your home.

Your own house may pay you back in terms of getting to know your friends or children's friends better, or by being the place where you host community gatherings, or build a start-up from your dining room table. There is a great power in knowing how to use light and space to create a house that becomes more than a museum to good taste or a place to store laundry and eat takeout. A house is most people's biggest financial asset and the most must be wrung out of it. Be sure you extract all the benefits that a house can provide, no matter what you need at the time.

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