

A Story of an Unexpected Friendship

Dinner with Edward



ISABEL VINCENT

"Rich with descriptions of meals savored, losses grieved, and moments cherished, it's at once tender, revealing, and utterly enchanting!"

—GAIL SIMMONS, judge on Bravo's *Top Chef* and author of *Talking with My Mouth Full*

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with
Edward*

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UNEXPECTED FRIENDSHIP



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First Edition

Christmas Eve Dinner

I heard about the promise Edward made to his dying wife long before I met him.

Valerie, Edward's daughter and one of my oldest friends, related the story when I saw her shortly after her mother's death. Paula, who was just shy of her ninety-fifth birthday and had been bedridden and drifting in and out of consciousness for days, sat up in bed specifically to address her beloved husband.

"Listen to me, Eddie." Paula spoke firmly, emphatically. "You can't come with me now. It would be the end of our little family."

Paula knew that Edward had already made the decision that he wanted to die rather than face life without her. That was wrong, she said, and exhorted him now to keep on living. When he finally agreed, she serenaded the man she had been married to for sixty-nine years. She began with “My Funny Valentine” and segued into half-remembered lyrics of Broadway show tunes and ballads that topped the charts in the 1940s and 1950s, when they were young and still believed that they could break into show business. Paula sang with a clear voice, unfettered by the congestion that had gurgled in her chest just days earlier and had made it impossible for her to talk. She ended with “All of You,” mangling the lyrics as she went: “I love the north of you, the east, the west, and the south of you, but best of all I love all of you.”

She died twenty-four hours later. It was October 2009. Overcome with grief in the days and weeks after her death, Edward found it almost impossible to keep his promise to Paula. He sat alone in a silent apartment, at the dining room table, which had been the scene of so many animated dinners. Eventually, Edward checked himself into Lenox Hill Hospital, where doctors performed a battery of tests. They couldn’t find anything

physically wrong with him and would be sending him home the next day.

“I’m afraid he’s giving up,” said Valerie, taking a seat beside me in the hospital waiting room. It was Christmas Eve and we had planned to meet for dinner. Valerie had suggested a restaurant around the corner from the hospital, where she was spending time with her father.

Settling into a table at a nondescript Third Avenue bistro, we picked at our lackluster red snapper and both of us cried. It was the day before what would have been Paula’s birthday, and Valerie was still mourning her loss. Now she was also deeply worried about her father’s ability to keep on living.

I’m not sure why I broke down when Valerie described Paula’s serenade. I had never met Edward and, though it was a poignant scene, I can’t help but think that it was also a stark reminder of my own unhappiness. I had recently moved to New York to work as a newspaper reporter and I would be spending Christmas on assignment. My marriage was unraveling, despite my best efforts to pretend that nothing was wrong. And I was more than a little concerned about the impact on my young daughter. When I hinted at my own predicament—I did not want

to burden Valerie with my own problems when her father was ill—she suggested I have dinner with Edward.

“He’s a great cook,” Valerie said through tears, perhaps hoping that this in itself would spark my curiosity, and I would volunteer to look in on Edward after she returned to her home in Canada. Her sister Laura, an artist, lived in Greece with her husband.

I don’t know if the temptation of a good meal did it for me, or if I was just so lonely that even the prospect of spending time with a depressed nonagenarian seemed appealing. It was probably a combination of loyalty to Valerie and curiosity about her father that propelled me to Edward’s door a couple of months later. Whatever it was, I could never have imagined that meeting Edward would change my life.

For our very first dinner à deux, I arrived wearing a black linen shift and sandals. I knocked quietly, then rang the doorbell, and moments later a tall, elderly gentleman abruptly opened the door, his eyes smiling as he took my hand and kissed me on both cheeks.

“Darling!” he said. “I’ve been expecting you.”



Grilled Sirloin Steak, Sauce Bourguignonne

New Potatoes

Chocolate Soufflé

Malbec

I n the beginning I would invariably arrive at Edward's apartment with a bottle of wine.

“No need to bring anything, baby,” he said, although I often ignored the advice, finding it difficult to show up for dinner empty-handed.

And there was no need to knock on the door or ring the doorbell, Edward told me. He always knew when I was coming because the doorman would call up to his apartment when I walked through the front doors of his building. Besides, he usually kept his door unlocked. Still,

soon after we met he insisted that I have my own key, just in case the door *was* locked and I wanted to drop by when he was taking his morning or afternoon naps on the couch. He gave me the key attached to a purple plastic fob. “EDWARD” and his telephone number were written in bold, block letters on the white insert in the key ring. We both knew I would never actually use the key to get into his apartment but I accepted it graciously—a gesture of friendship, a daily reminder that Edward was now part of my life.

Whenever I did bring wine, Edward would write my name on the label, tucking it into his makeshift cellar in the hall closet, where he kept winter coats. By the time I got there, he had already chosen his wines carefully for the meal and would save my offering for a more appropriate pairing.

At one early dinner I had made the mistake of bringing Edward some of the salted cod croquettes that I had cooked from my mother’s recipe. I should never have expected him to serve them with our meal. I sprung the food on him without any warning. In those early days of our friendship I never imagined the amount of thought and effort that Edward put into each dinner. I knew it

was a faux pas as soon as I handed over the lumpy tinfoil-wrapped bundle of croquettes, and I could see Edward was momentarily confused. But he graciously accepted my offering, inviting me to dinner later in the week so that we could enjoy them together.

Edward was neither a snob nor an insufferable foodie. He just liked to do things properly. He cared deeply about everything he created—whether it was the furniture in his living room or his writing. He had built and upholstered all of the furniture himself and wrote out his poems and short stories in longhand, patiently rewriting each draft on unlined white paper until he felt it was good enough to be typed by one of his daughters. He treated cooking much the same way, even though he had started doing it late in life, in his seventies. “Paula cooked for fifty-two years, and one day I just told her she’d done enough work, and now it was my turn,” he said.

Edward had learned from a young age to appreciate fine food. When he was 14, after he failed his year at school, Edward’s parents had sent him from their home in Nashville to spend a summer with his wealthy aunt and uncle in New Orleans. His aunt Eleanor, a teacher, was determined to instill discipline and get him back on

track. But she was also determined to instruct him about French cuisine.

“I had an introduction to a world I didn’t know existed,” he said, recalling a meal at the legendary Antoine’s in 1934. “I will never forget the first time I had soft shell crabs. They were fried in a light batter and served with hot melted butter. They were just delicious.”

When he started cooking, he borrowed from Antoine’s French-Creole menu, but he liked to tell me that he also appreciated the simplest things. He could still remember as a boy eating boiled cabbage, with “a gob of butter on it which elevated it to the heavens!” And he sought inspiration everywhere: He claimed that he picked up his trick for scrambled eggs from St. John.

St. John?

He was a cook on Amtrak. “His whole life people just called him ‘Boy,’” said Edward, who met him on a ten-hour train journey he once took with Paula. “After he joined the Baptist church and was taken under the wing of a cook named Miss Emma, he started calling himself St. John the Baptist.”

St. John had a knack for eggs. When Edward asked him the secret of his scrambled eggs, St. John told him

that he never cooked them all at once; he did it in a few steps. Edward had shared the trick with Paula and now insisted on showing it to me. He took farm-fresh eggs, their yolks glistening orange as he cracked them into a bowl, whisking them with a splash of milk or cream, salt, and pepper. Then he melted sweet butter in a hot frying pan, adding only half the egg mixture to the skillet when the butter was just on the edge of turning brown.

“Never all at once,” Edward repeated. “You do the eggs in two steps.”

After the first part began to sizzle and bubble, Edward gently loosened the eggs with a spoon, reduced the heat, and added the rest, cooking the slippery, pale yellow mixture until the eggs were light, fluffy, and completely coated in butter.

Years of childhood hardship in the South had taught Edward to be resourceful. He saved fresh herbs in Ziploc bags in the freezer, quartered the lard he bought in blocks from his Queens butcher, and carefully wrapped each in waxed paper for storage in his refrigerator. Edward loved to shop at specialty food stores such as Citarella and Gourmet Garage but he happily made do at his local supermarket. He didn't own any fancy kitchen implements,

and the few cookbooks I saw on his shelves had been gifts from well-meaning friends that he almost never opened.

“It’s just cooking, darling,” he said, when I asked why he didn’t use cookbooks. “I don’t ever think of what I’m doing in terms of recipes. I just don’t want to bother looking at recipes. To me, that’s not cooking—being tied to a piece of paper.” He hung his old but immaculately polished pots and skillets on a pressed-wood pegboard coated in tinfoil in his kitchen.

I marveled at his resourcefulness but also knew he had his own rarefied tastes. He used only Hendricks gin in a martini or when making Gravlax, insisting that the cucumber essence brought out the best flavor in a cured salmon. For martinis, he mixed Hendricks with dry vermouth in a Pyrex measuring cup and chilled the mixture and the glasses in the freezer until his guests arrived. Edward’s martinis were neither shaken nor stirred—he simply poured gin and dry vermouth into a measuring cup and allowed the mixture to become ice-cold. He garnished each glass with a small piece of cucumber that he had also chilled until it was cold and crisp.

Whenever his elder daughter, Laura, who brought her own culinary peculiarities back from Greece when

she returned to live in New York, extolled the merits of olive oil in a piecrust, Edward winced. She suspected he was giving away the golden olive oil peach pies she made for him. “When it comes to cooking or baking, he’s very specific about some things,” Laura said.

But the steaks Edward was grilling tonight in a hot cast iron grill pan came from the meat fridge at the grocery store. They had been marinating in balsamic vinegar and now he seared them to perfection, laying them out on dinner plates he had warmed in the oven. The fatty juices from the steak bled across the expanse of the white porcelain, mingling with the small mound of new potatoes that he had boiled in their skins and topped with a dab of butter and chopped parsley. Then Edward swirled a velvety brown sauce on the meat before he brought the plates to the table.

The steaks were perfectly tender and tasted as though they could have come from the best butcher in Manhattan, rather than Gristedes. The sauce was buttery and rich. When I asked him how he had made it he launched into a long explanation, one that required him to take two trips to the kitchen to show me the demi-glace which was the basis for most of the sauces he made.

“Demi-glace is a long process,” Edward said, pulling out a small plastic container from his refrigerator of the brown sauce that he had made from simmering roasted veal bones and vegetables until the mixture had reduced by more than three quarters and was thick and gelatinous. Like many French chefs, Edward uses demi-glace, or “glaze,” as he likes to pronounce it, as a starting point for sauces and even to enrich soups.

“You can’t just wish it there,” he continued, referring to the long prep time. “It’s not going to happen. It just cooks and cooks for days, becoming more and more concentrated.”

I nodded my comprehension and spoke in hushed tones about how wonderful everything tasted. Not because I was trying to please him, but because I was truly in awe. For Edward, cooking was not just about satisfying hunger. Cooking was a passion and sometimes a serious art form, to be shared with a select few. He refused to provide tips or write out his recipes for people who he felt had no affinity for cooking. As he poured some Malbec, he told me about another dinner guest who had raved about his chicken paillard.

Oh, Edward, you must give me the recipe!

But Edward told me he had no intention of sharing his paillard secrets with her. “Real cooking requires devotion,” he pronounced. “And I could tell she was not devoted.”

I’ve learned a lot about cooking from Edward. He has taught me to make the most sublime roast chicken using a paper bag and a handful of herbs, create the perfect pastry (“Butter, and a little bit of lard in the dough, darling”) and to sprinkle balsamic vinegar on pasta to allow the sauce to cling. But from the beginning of our relationship, I knew instinctively that his culinary tips went far beyond the preparation of food. He was teaching me the art of patience, the luxury of slowing down and taking the time to think through everything I did.

When I asked him for a lesson in deboning a chicken in order to make a galantine, I knew that what Edward would end up imparting was far weightier than the butchery of poultry. In hindsight, I realize he was forcing me to deconstruct my own life, to cut it back to the bone and examine the entrails, no matter how messy that proved to be.

EDWARD LIVED ON ROOSEVELT Island in a stately co-op with wide terraces, poured concrete hallways, a sunken swimming pool, and large picture windows overlooking the East River.

I had recently moved to Roosevelt Island at my husband's insistence in a last-ditch effort to save our marriage. Unlike Edward, I was a reluctant inhabitant. A year earlier we had relocated to Manhattan from Toronto with our young daughter so that I could take up an offer to work as an investigative reporter at the *New York Post*. We had been living a few blocks from Hannah's school on the Upper East Side, and a day didn't go by that my husband didn't rail at our confined quarters, the crowds on the subways, the garbage-strewn playgrounds in our neighborhood, and alternate side-of-the-street parking—that once a week municipally ordained torture only New York City vehicle owners understand.

Maintaining a car in New York is a logistical nightmare. If you park on city streets as do many New Yorkers who cannot afford the \$400 or more monthly garage fees, you need to move your car twice a week in order to accommodate the city's street cleaners. Because parking spots are at such a premium, most drivers move their cars across the

street and sit double-parked in their vehicles for the hour and a half that it takes the street sweepers to do their job. Then they quickly slide back to their old spots.

For me, alternate side parking was but a minor inconvenience, a quaint and necessary hardship of city life. It's true I wasn't the one who had to sit in the car for an hour and a half until the street-sweeping trucks passed by. But there were other nuisances, such as lugging heavy bags of groceries on the subway, exorbitant prices for just about everything in Manhattan, rushing the wrong way through the wall of rush-hour crowds to get to an assignment, or to collect Hannah from school. I felt these were small issues, endured by everyone around me—all of us part of an exclusive fraternity of the shared frustration that is life in New York City.

In fact, having spent most of my professional life reporting from the developing world, I loved the chaos of New York. The city is its own third world country, with its snarling traffic, its overflowing garbage cans, its corrupt politicians, and its rats that scurry across darkened streets and subway tracks. On muggy summer days, I kept the windows open in our apartment to welcome the clamor of the traffic and construction.

“You’re crazy,” said Melissa, my colleague and new friend at the *Post*. A native New Yorker, she always longed for peace and quiet.

Those first months in the city, though, I was clearly out of my depth. One day I stood waiting for the #6 train at rush hour. I was in midtown and hurrying to pick up Hannah uptown. The subway platform was crowded three deep, and the approaching train was packed. I turned to a well-dressed and frail elderly woman standing next to me.

“Wow, I really don’t think we’re going to get on this train,” I said, surveying the crowds.

She gave me a look that I can only describe as a mixture of pity and contempt. “Where are you *from*?” she asked.

“Canada,” I said, sheepishly.

“You’re definitely not getting on this train,” she said with a smile.

Then I watched as this refined creature clutched her buttery leather handbag, and gently but purposefully nudged herself into the crowded train. She never had to push to squeeze into the packed subway car. There was an elegance and grace in the way she inserted herself into the train just before the conductor slammed shut the doors.

I waited for the next train. It was also crowded, but in that split second as the doors burst open, I became a New Yorker. Without any fanfare, with no “excuse me” or “so sorry,” I joined the crowd and slipped onto the train.

My husband refused to adapt, and a week didn't pass that I wasn't greeted with a time limit on our stay in what to him was the worst place on earth. “One more year, and that's it,” he would say. But it was more than our move to New York that was threatening our marriage. We had long carried our emotional baggage over two continents. We were constantly in motion, packing and unpacking boxes, arranging furniture at the different houses we owned, filling out long government forms seeking visas to travel to places as diverse as Kosovo and Brazil. All of this prevented us from dealing with our fraying relationship. When the bitterness bubbled to the surface, when the tension increased, we craved new vistas. And so after unsuccessfully settling in a cramped apartment on the Upper East Side, we decided to try another part of the city, both of us still convinced that real estate would save our faltering marriage.

Roosevelt Island had an affordable parking garage, even though it was dilapidated, with a leaking roof and

barely functioning elevator. And the nearly two-mile-long island seemed to be a pleasant retreat from the chaos of Manhattan, yet easily accessible by tram and subway to midtown. In the spring, the promenade facing Manhattan's East Side is crowded with parents pushing babies in strollers, joggers, and couples holding hands. On summer nights, the smell of grilled beef lingers in the heavy air as residents gather at the barbecue pits that line the northern end of the island. There is a riverside café, which affords spectacular views of the United Nations, and tugboats chugging back and forth under the Queensboro Bridge.

And so a few months after I ate dinner with Valerie in the Upper East Side restaurant on Christmas Eve, I found myself living just blocks from Edward. Our meals gradually became weekly events. I knew he looked forward to them as much as I did. He spent hours writing out recipes for me and giving me rather frank opinions about how I was leading my life. He was still mourning his beloved Paula and I was starting to see just how unhappy I was in my marriage.

But whatever happened in the world outside Edward's Roosevelt Island apartment, dinner was a magical interlude. We shared cocktails, a bottle of wine, and whatever

Edward was inspired to cook that day. Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, and Ute Lemper sang in the background, but sometimes there was just comfortable silence and the wind whistling outside his fourteenth floor windows.