

## Eleanor

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**Y**ou wouldn't think that a nineteen-year-old boy could seduce a seventeen-year-old girl by showing her his mother's china, but that's how it happened that I came to marry Bucky Johnson.

It was 1974, my first date with Bucky who'd been recruited to Yale to play football but had given it up to make monthly trips to Tucson to collect a kilo of pot and a couple of grams of cocaine that he discreetly sold from the small apartment where he lived a few blocks from campus. I didn't know about the pot or the cocaine or even the apartment, only that he had a car and the concert he'd invited me to was in New York where I'd never been. It was February and cold and I didn't have a proper coat or proper boots, just some junk my stepmother had bought me at the Boston Filene's Basement near her job that I only wore if it was desperately cold and some things I'd picked up at vintage stores in Back Bay. I was shivering, but too shy to ask Bucky if he could turn on the heat. He was driving and fiddling with the box of cassette tapes and rolling a joint at the same time and then, forty-five minutes later, we were wending our way through tree-lined streets which even I knew must be a detour on the way to New York.

Bucky turned into a circular drive in front of a white colonial house with blue-gray shutters and brass lamps in the curtained windows and winter greens in pots that led up the steps to the door.

"Where are we?"

"My parents' house. They're on a cruise. I want to stop and get a bottle of wine."

I wiped my shoes on the oversized doormat that said The Johnsons and watched while Bucky disabled the alarm. Then, like a puppy dog, I followed him through the center hall into the dining room and from there into the pantry where Bucky examined the bottles in the wine rack. It was before the days when houses like this, which I wouldn't understand for many years were not where the rich lived but rather where the solidly affluent lived, had wine coolers.

Bucky took a bottle, turned off the pantry light, and circled back into the dining room where he rifled through the break-front. He yanked open the silver drawer lined with maroon felt and outfitted with dividers so none of the knives or forks touched one another, then the lower cabinet doors, behind which were stacks of plates separated by squares of perforated paper, piles of ironed linen napkins, crystal glasses of all sizes.

“Fuck, where is it?”

“What?”

“A bottle opener.”

Bucky left me in the dining room while he went into the kitchen. I peered into the top of the breakfront, where a light had gone on when we entered the room. In the center of the middle shelf was a collection of snow globes, not the cheesy ones I'd seen in souvenir shops with the Statue of Liberty or Mickey and Minnie inside, but intricate scenes of what looked like provincial French towns or cottages deep in the Black Forest. I squinted to look closer at the largest one: a Tudor house with a holly wreath on the door and a girl in a fur hat on a swing hanging from a tree. Snow glistened on the branches, and with the liquid sky, it felt like a hush had settled over the scene.

My own mother had died when I was nine from a bone infection after a nasty cut from slicing souvlaki in my father's restaurant in Lowell. My stepmother, who arrived on the scene two years later, was more kind than unkind, though in a roughened tired way, but she was a slob. The dishes we ate off in our apartment over the restaurant were the chipped ones my father brought upstairs because they were still good enough, he would announce, to use.

I closed my eyes and smelled the room—the furniture polish, the scented candles, the gardenias on the windowsill—and tried to imagine the woman who polished the knives and placed the dividers between the plates and had wanted the girl on the swing.

Bucky—who by then had taken to calling himself Bix and who would not return to Bucky until he started drinking again during our marriage and then stopped drinking after the end of it—and I broke up by the summer. We didn't get back together until my third year of graduate school in English at N.Y.U. By then, he'd returned from Japan where he'd gone to teach English, joined an ex-pat A.A. group, and stopped doing any drugs or imbibing anything other than flat water and green tea he brewed

with musky loose leaves. He'd gotten into the business school at Columbia and was studying Japanese and Japanese martial arts in the basement of the Buddhist temple on Riverside Drive. By the holidays, we were pretty serious, neither of us dating anyone else, and he invited me to come out to his parents' house for Christmas dinner.

I took the train to Larchmont and Bix picked me up at the station, a few minutes from the home where he'd grown up. The lawns were blanketed with snow, and many of the houses had colored lights on the porches and doorways. I could tell that Bix knew I was nervous about meeting his parents but that he didn't want to talk about it because he thought talking would only make it worse.

Bix's father, Roger, a beefy guy with a crew cut and cheeks flushed from eggnog, greeted us at the door in a red plaid jacket and bow tie. He took my elbow as we entered the center front hall. There were poinsettias in gold foil on the foyer table and twinkling lights entwined on the banister leading up to the second floor. Christmas music was playing in the background and the house smelled of ginger, cinnamon, and ferns. The dining room, where I'd stood gawking as Bix rifled through the drawers so many years ago now, was set with special Christmas china. A centerpiece of holly branches with wine-colored berries was flanked by white candles, pine cones, and some of the snow globes I recalled seeing in the top of the breakfront.

"El," Roger called. "Bix and Lara are here."

A woman I assumed was Bix's mother, Eleanor, came out from the kitchen with an apron over her red knit dress. Her porcelain skin was set off by peach lipstick and mabe pearls on her earlobes. Soft light hair curled around her face in a beauty parlor set. She kissed me on the cheek and I realized in that moment that although she must have at one time wanted a blond cheerleader girlfriend for her son, after Bix's misadventures the last decade, which she'd been too reticent to talk about directly with him, she was ready to accept as an alternative a girl with a tall skinny frame and wild curly hair en route to becoming an English professor.

After the introductions to Bix's sister Janine and her husband Ned and the aunts and uncles seated around the coffee table eating shrimp and baked brie, and then to Janine and Ned's twin boys sprawled on the floor of the adjacent family room, their eyes locked on the television and their mouths filled with the pigs-in-a-blanket made by their grandmother, I excused myself.

I found Eleanor alone in the kitchen, mashing potatoes while the string beans steamed and the almond slivers browned on a cookie tray. “Let me help you,” I said.

“Oh, no, dear. Go enjoy yourself with the others.”

I washed my hands. “I’d really like to help.”

Eleanor looked up at me quizzically.

“Why don’t I mash those?”

I took the potato masher and rolled up my sleeves. “I grew up working in my father’s restaurant. I can’t make anything fancy, but I can fry eggs, flip burgers, and make a mean mous-saka for thirty.”

“That’s wonderful. When you have a family, you won’t be lost. When I was a girl, we all learned how to make roasts and pies and custards from our mothers. And to sew and knit and crochet too.” Eleanor smiled shyly in a way that made me realize that she was not accustomed to talking with people outside her circle of intimates—family members and friends whom she’d known since they were young mothers together now decades ago. I wondered if she was inviting me to tell her something about my mother, but there wasn’t much to tell other than that she had cleaned morning to night, first the restaurant after every meal, and then, after midnight, our apartment, always filled with the smells from the restaurant.

There were sixteen of us for dinner, a dinner Eleanor cooked and served and cleaned up by herself save for Roger’s ceremonial carving of the meat and some cursory help with clearing the table from the others and my drying the platters and pots—one of the five or six extended family meals I would learn that she made each year, each one with the dining room table laid with silver and china and crystal water glasses, the food festive and delicious, each one unfolding with a gracefulness that made it seem effortless. It took me years to figure out her method, which was essentially to cook no more than one new dish that required a recipe and to organize herself so that she had the table set and her serving dishes ready and the potatoes peeled and the meat seasoned the day before.

I never saw Eleanor cook dressed in anything other than silk stockings and low pumps, her only accommodation to the labors being the small dish in which she placed her rings and bracelets while her hands were in sudsy water, never heard her utter anything that could be taken as a criticism of anyone other than the Easter evening, the first year of Bix’s and my marriage, after she had served both Easter breakfast and Easter dinner, prepared an egg-hunt for Janine’s children and baskets for all of

us, when, as she kissed me goodbye, she whispered in my ear, “You are the only one who ever helps me.”

After I had defended my dissertation and taken my first teaching job at Sarah Lawrence, Bix and I had our daughter, whom we named Edith after Edith Wharton and took to calling Dee. Dee was born in November, and I went back to teaching in February, a senior seminar that met once a week on Thursday afternoons. Like most new mothers, I was a wreck about leaving my baby; I couldn’t imagine entrusting her to a babysitter, feared since she was still nursing that she would reject the bottles of pumped milk I had been assiduously preparing for the past month.

“You can leave her with my mother,” Bix said.

“I couldn’t ask your mother to do that. Every week!”

“Are you kidding? My mother would be in heaven.”

So I asked Eleanor, who not only said she would love to do it but insisted each Thursday on driving into the city to get the baby and me, waiting patiently in the college parking lot while I nursed Dee, then gently burping Dee while I raced off to class. Bix would drive up after work, pick me up at the college, and we’d go to his parents’ house where we’d find Dee, having finished her bottle, sitting in her bouncy seat happily watching her grandmother cook dinner or napping in the bassinet Eleanor had had Roger set up in the dining room.

I first noticed Eleanor slipping the Christmas when Dee was eleven. For the first time, she seemed stressed in the kitchen. She mis-timed the standing rib roast so that when Roger came in to carve the meat, as he had every year for forty years when the shrimp were gone, he was told it was still too rare and needed another half an hour. By the time the meat was ready, the vegetables, despite my efforts to slow them down, were over-cooked and I overheard Roger snapping at Eleanor, “What’s wrong with you?” Easter dinner that year ended with Eleanor upstairs in tears because the gratin potatoes had burnt and the table was set for the wrong number of people.

Over the summer, Roger started to report that Eleanor was becoming forgetful. They’d had a terrible evening when she couldn’t find her rings. “You always put them in that dish on the window sill,” Roger had told her, but I could tell from the way Roger related the story that he had probably yelled at Eleanor. By the time Roger found the rings, in the kitchen cabinet where they kept their daily pills, Eleanor had locked herself in the bathroom.

Eleanor cried when Bix and I told Roger and her that we were separating. Roger tried to talk Bix out of it with platitudes about how marriage is a sacred vow to stick together through good times and bad, through health and sickness, how all married couples have their problems and maybe we needed to go see the minister of his church. Only Eleanor seemed to get it that I had kicked Bix out because he'd started drinking again, the last straw having been the condom I found in his jeans pocket after one of his business trips to Japan, but the real reason being that when he drank, it was as though he disappeared, leaving me to make all the decisions about Dee and to live my life on my own—which would be less painful, I'd realized, if I were in fact on my own.

"I'll always love you," I said. "I'm not divorcing you and Roger."

"You'll always be my daughter-in-law," she said.

My eyes filled with tears. "And I want Dee to stay close with you. Especially now that she's a teenager, family is so important."

"Bastard," she whispered.

It took me a moment to realize she was talking about her son.

"If Roger cheated on me, I'd do the same thing."

"You would?"

"Janine, she kept Ned after he slept with a girl in his office, and I always thought that was a mistake. What matters is to keep the house, well, I guess for you, the apartment. That's what I told my friend Betsy when her husband cheated on her. Just keep the house and tell him to leave. If you keep the house, you can grow old there rather than in one of those awful nursing places. I told Roger, no matter what happens to me, just keep me here where I can sleep in my own bed and see my roses come out each summer. I made him promise."

"And did he?"

"Yes, he gave me his word, on his mother's grave, he said."

I wanted to ask Eleanor if she believed him but I knew from the fact that the question had crossed my mind that she did not.

Bix and I sold the apartment and he took a job in Japan with the proviso that he work out of the New York office a week each month so he could see Dee. I bought a tiny house in Bronxville, ten minutes from my job and about the same distance from Eleanor and Roger, whom Dee and I took to visiting most Saturday afternoons. Eleanor was slipping in a very Eleanor way: her

speech was going so that she seemed to talk in circles, but she continued to do her housework as always—beds, laundry, dinner, dishes—and her appearance remained flawless. Roger complained that she fed the dog too many times a day and had taken to hiding her purse and then not being able to find it, but he seemed to have no problem with letting her cook his meals, saying after each one, “It’s delicious, El.”

“It’s like he has a demented housekeeper,” Bix emailed after an earful of his father’s complaints about his mother.

“He wants to put her in a home,” Janine would say when I would call to discuss her mother. “She’s driving him crazy.”

“She is in a home. Her home.”

“You know what I mean.”

“She’d go downhill if you took her away from her home. She’s too private, too industrious. What would she do? In her own house, she stays busy, doing the dishes, folding her towels, putting in her garden. The activity is what holds her together.”

Janine sighed. “Well, we have to think about my father too.”

Only once did I get angry and say to Janine, “He promised. He promised her she could stay in her home,” at which point Janine said, “Gotta go. Gotta pick up Ned at the train.”

By Christmas, Eleanor had declined to the point where Roger felt she couldn’t manage the overnight to Janine’s house in New Jersey for the holidays Janine had finally reluctantly taken over hosting. Basically, he meant that she wouldn’t be able to organize their holiday shopping and pack their suitcases. When Dee and I would visit, Eleanor would greet us with her usual hugs and kisses and murmurings so that it took me a while to realize that her words had for the most part departed and that she was relying on her deeply ingrained graciousness. She would nod and smile in the right places so it felt like a conversation though there were no longer any sentences or subjects other than the communication of her love for us.

And then, one Tuesday, after Bix and I had been separated for over a year, Bix forwarded me an email Roger had sent him: *Son, yesterday, your sister and I drove your mother to the Home of the Blessed Sisters, fifteen minutes from Janine’s house. It is a caring, professional environment where your mother will receive better care than I can provide for her.*

“What?!\*?” I emailed Bix in Japan, where it was already Wednesday.

“Yup . . .” Bix replied.

“Why not near him? Why near Janine?”

“Because he dumped her,” Bix wrote. “He’s done with her.”

I texted Dee that I’d pick her up at school.

“What’s up?” she said as she climbed into the passenger seat. She’d just gotten her learner’s permit. “Can I drive?”

“No. We’re going on the highway. To New Jersey to see Nana.”

“At Aunt Janine’s house?”

“Gramp put her in a home there.”

Dee looked at me wide-eyed. I took her hand. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”

I turned on National Public Radio. Terry Gross was interviewing a journalist who’d been embedded in Iraq. Dee put her iPhone buds in her ears and turned on her music. By the time we reached the George Washington Bridge, she was asleep.

“We’re here to see Eleanor Johnson,” I told the woman at the front desk of the Home of the Blessed Sisters. She peered at Dee and me, and then at her computer. It was late January but there were still holiday decorations.

“She’s on the Memory Assistance unit,” the woman said, her eyes on the screen. “That’s a locked unit, so I have to buzz you in.”

Dee clutched my arm as we entered the unit. We made our way down a long corridor that smelled like a potpourri of Lysol and air freshener and dirty diapers. On the walls were tired black-and-white photographs from the thirties and forties: the sailor kissing the nurse on V-J Day, Shirley Temple hugging a doll, the construction workers taking their lunch break perched on a beam high above the city. I imagined the unit administrator telling Roger and Janine, both of their heads nodding in ardent agreement, that the pictures were designed to stimulate memory, but it was hard to imagine they were anything more to Eleanor than a prompt that she was now in a strange place.

At the end of the corridor was a large room with armchairs circled around a television and a nurse’s station in the corner. An aide looked up from her chart, and motioned her head towards a doorway that led into a dining room where a dozen or so women and a handful of men were seated in front of plates of rice and beef stew. There was a low murmur in the room, more the sound of chewing than conversation. The smell was worse than in the corridor.

We looked for Eleanor. "Where is she?" Dee asked with a note of hysteria in her voice.

I scanned the room but could not find my mother-in-law. Then my eyes stopped on a woman slumped in a wheelchair with her chin on her chest. Thick straight white hair fell over her eyes and one hand was crooked as though the wrist was broken. A plate of untouched food sat on the table in front of her.

"There she is," I whispered.

"That's Nana?" I could feel Dee starting to shake the way she does when she's about to cry.

I nodded.

"Is she sleeping?" I knew what Dee really wanted to ask was, "Is she alive?"

"Come," I said.

I crouched next to Eleanor so I could see her face. I had to get on my hands and knees and almost crawl under her head. Her eyes were half closed but she was awake.

"Eleanor," I whispered. "It's me, Lara. And Dee is here with me too."

She did not move. I took her crooked hand and held it. It was ice cold and dry as parchment paper.

"What's the matter with her? Why is she in a wheelchair?"

"I think she's in shock. Get some hand lotion from the aide, okay, honey? We'll massage her hands."

I wheeled Eleanor into the room with the television, and sat on the floor massaging her hands. After a few moments, she moved one hand and I lifted it to my face. I could hear her stomach growling.

"You do this," I said to Dee. "I'm going to see if I can get something for her to eat."

At the nurse's station, I asked the aide if Eleanor had been like this since her husband had left her yesterday.

"Yesterday was my day off, so I can't really say about yesterday. But she's been pretty much out of it since I got here at three."

"Has she eaten anything?"

"No one said nothing to me."

"I'd like to feed her. Could you give me something? Something more appetizing than that stew?"

The aide handed me a package of Oreo cookies and a small bottle of apple juice. Standing behind Eleanor, I lifted her from under her armpits so her shoulders rested on the back of the wheelchair and her head was upright. Her eyes were still half closed. I put the cookies so she could see them. She opened her eyes.

I separated one of the cookies so the white icing was visible, and then broke the icing piece in half.

Eleanor raised her good hand and put the cookie piece up to her mouth. She stuck out her tongue to lick off the icing.

Dee smiled. "Nana, that's how I eat Oreos. And you always told me it was rude!"

Eleanor reached out her hand for the rest of the cookie which she ate in two bites.

I gave her another cookie, then pulled up a chair so I was seated right in front of her. "Your hair is a mess," I said. "You'd die if you could see yourself." I took a brush from my purse and started brushing her hair, which I'd never before seen not colored and curled.

Eleanor chewed and sighed as I brushed.

"Roger just left you here?"

She looked at me. Her head moved but I couldn't tell if she was nodding yes or if she even understood my question. I removed the clip from my own hair and pinned her hair so it didn't fall in her eyes.

"Bastard," I murmured.

"Bastard," she said.

And so we took her. It was remarkably easy. I sent Dee to pull the car up in front of the door and I put my cardigan on Eleanor and wheeled her out of the unit. An aide looked at me but I just smiled as though I were taking Eleanor for a little stroll, and then I wheeled her right out the front door. I didn't even have to lift her into the car. She stood on her own two feet and got right in.

I sat in the back with Eleanor while Dee drove.

"Where to?" Dee asked, her voice hushed.

It had begun to snow, puffy cotton balls that seemed to be floating upwards as much as falling down, falling on Roger who by this hour would have settled into his recliner forty miles away with his gin and tonic and the evening news. Inside the car, though, it was warm. My daughter had known to turn on the heat.

"Home?" Dee asked.

The winter sky was murky with snow and the end of the day, the branches and rooftops still white from last week's storm. I thought about the shingled house in Eleanor's snow dome, the girl in the fur hat on the tree swing, the smell of the gardenias in Eleanor's dining room, and Bucky, her only son, my no longer husband, on the other side of the globe, already living tomorrow.