

The Man Who Ate Me For Dinner

I removed my heels immediately after Eric and I arrived at his apartment, my knees wobbling as I shifted from one foot to the other. Shoes in hand, I stretched my toes, feeling patches of muscle re-awaken in my arches.

Eric sat down on his living room couch. He lit a cigarette.

I cleared my throat to get his attention.

He turned to face me as he exhaled his first puff, holding his cigarette like an old movie star: elbow bent, fingers curved like blades of grass around the smoldering twig between them. He smoked in a way that could get you into trouble nowadays, dangerously decadent and sexy.

“Is something wrong?”

“I hate it when you smoke.” I said, tossing my heels into the basket where he asked that I keep my shoes. I pretended not to notice when one tumbled out of the basket and on to the floor, and made my way over to the kitchen for a glass of water.

Eric paused mid-drag, his lips pursed, cheeks taught. He stayed there, frozen as I brought my glass to my lips to take several distinct gulps, the whole time refusing to break our gaze.

“Fine,” said Eric a moment later, breaking our silence. He removed the cigarette from his mouth and mashed it into the blue turtle-shaped ashtray on his coffee table. “Then I won’t smoke when you’re around.” He then folded his hands in his lap and continued to stare, seemingly unbothered, at me.

The man had to know he was making me crazy. I had driven myself so far up the wall that night, had grabbed hold of every tiny annoyance I could find and sunk my nails into them. And Eric, whether he knew it or not, absolutely refused to give me an outlet. I had tried to find a release: I’d criticized his driving, telling him at different moments to speed up and at others to slow down, I’d made fun of his new haircut, had even told him that his shirt made his skin look pasty, but none of it had worked. The man remained unphased. I had only made things worse for myself, and his unrelenting, completely unperturbed face did nothing to calm my nerves.

“Stop looking at me like that.”

Eric raised his hands, as if in defeat, and shook his head again. “Okay. I’ll just look elsewhere.” He turned his head to look down at his feet, giving me exactly what I had asked for. And I resented him for it.

A week ago, I would have told Eric I was hungry. I would have apologized, blamed my foul mood on an empty stomach and my third gin and tonic, and then asked him in a soft, lilting voice, if he would please cook me something.

Eric would have met this request with wild enthusiasm, would have jumped up off the couch, grabbed a few vegetables out of the crisper, toss them in a wok with a little oil, and create a restaurant-quality entrée for me in under twenty minutes. And I would have eaten it up.

While most couples have makeup-sex, we had make-up meals. We also had breakfast in bed, late night snacks, stir-Frydays, and everything in between. This was our routine, our normal. He cooked; I ate. I was hungry; he fed me. Granted, he was a culinary school graduate and worked as one of the swankier joints in town, but I don't think you can reduce this gender-role-reversal to a by-product of his chosen profession. I think there's something else to it.

The truth is, I was *hungry* when I met Eric.

I was 21 and deep into my "lost soul" phase. You know the type: young and fancy-free folk who are always sort of taking classes at the nearest community college and work anywhere from 2-4 part-time jobs at any given moment. The type who live in a crappy old house with other lost souls who they can talk shit with comfortably. In a word: malnourished.

So of course I was powerless to resist Eric, 26, full-lipped graduate from the Institute of Culinary Education in New York City, who didn't hesitate to tell me, the hot mess in an even hotter dress, that the reason chefs are so sexy is because "food is the only other thing you can put inside of a woman." Of course I went home with him that night and let him make me garlic butter popcorn before tossing off my dress and climbing into his bed. (Note: he didn't even make a move.) And of course I told him the next morning over breakfast (chilaquiles – his favorite) that I would love to see him again. The man had fed me, had left me feeling satiated and whole; I can't imagine who wouldn't want more. My only cause for concern was that I couldn't pinpoint what it was he got from me.

The following weeks were full of midnight snacks of all shapes and sizes. I went straight to Eric's after work (a sales clerk at a children's clothing store) nearly every night, each time arriving to find some new, exciting dish waiting for me. It was at Eric's that I first tried oysters (which I loved) and kimchi (which I hated), and it was at Eric's that I had my first "adult" relationship. The handful sexual encounters I'd had prior to Eric had transpired in basements, mini-vans, and beds whose usual inhabitants were out of town, so crawling under the covers with a gentleman who owned a credit card and paid his rent without outside help was a new, albeit very welcome change of pace. He was the first person who I woke up next to who didn't

have roommates, who had actually *purchased* his cookware instead of inheriting it from family and friends like I did. Looking at how Eric lived made me realize just how far I was from completeness on my own; it made visible the threadbare patches on the furniture my roommates and I had acquired, and challenged their status as “eclectic” or “bohemian.”

So when Avery, my roommate whose blonde dye-job had migrated more than 2 inches from her scalp, decided to ask me, “When am I gonna meet this guy who’s been stealing you away every night for the past three weeks?”, I replied positively, telling her that it’d happen soon, but knowing full well that they’d never meet. Eric and I hadn’t even discussed the possibility of meeting each other’s friends, and I couldn’t see why we would. I thought about him sitting across from Avery, a girl who purchased Wonderbread for Christ’s sake, and who didn’t know anything about wine beyond some of it’s red and some of it’s white. It simply couldn’t happen.

And for what it’s worth, it didn’t.

There weren’t many restaurants up to Eric’s standards. The mention of roughly of 99% of the places in town would prompt him to roll his eyes and inform me of it’s faults, which normally constituted it’s being unethical, dirty, “derivative”, or some combination of the three. The only exceptions were of course his own place, the sacred Lola, and Chow, an Asian-fusion restaurant his friend Eddie, an older guy with whom he’d attended culinary school, co-owned and operated with his wife of 10 years.

Prior to becoming a chef, Eddie had worked as a computer programmer for nearly twelve years. The pay was good, but the job was miserable. After a particularly grueling day at work, Eddie confided in his wife, Christina (to whom he’d been married for about a year at the time) that he’d always dreamed of opening a restaurant that served high-end dishes inspired by the ones his grandmother made during his summer visits to Malaysia. With his wife’s encouragement, Eddie submitted his letter of resignation the very next day.

“Ten years later...” Eric told me on our first date at Chow, pausing to take the last bite of curried filet mignon, “Eddie and Christina own one of the most successful restaurants in the state, their food has appeared in practically every major culinary publication, and...” he leaned in closer, “Eddie tells me the sex has never been better.” Eric grinned while I giggled imagining Eddie, the balding 44-year old man who I had never seen wearing a clean shirt, in the throes of passion with some chubby, faceless woman. (I’d never met Christina, but Eric had described her as a “thick Julia Louise-Dreyfus”. I didn’t bother telling him I’d never heard of her before.)

“By the way,” said Eric, leaning back in his low-backed chair to look me over, “You look sensational.” I smiled. I’d squeezed into a slinky black dress of Avery’s for the occasion, my own LBDs too snug to hold my ever-growing curves. I took another bite of the entrée Eric had ordered for me, not bothered by the fact that I didn’t entirely understand what it was made of.

Later, when our server came by to drop off two servings of mangosteen ice cream, “compliments of the house,” and collect our check, I, the apparent foreigner, opted to let Eric, my interpreter, converse with the natives while I sat quietly and inspect the peach-hued contents in my dish. He handed the server the checkbook, a stack of cash pressed inside of it.

“Thank you, it’s all set.” Said Eric, while I attempted to comfortably arrange myself at the low, Japanese-inspired table (a gesture to Eddie and Christina’s pan-Asian honeymoon) without exposing myself. Eric continued, “Please tell Eddie everything was *sensational*.”

A few weeks later, I invited Eric over to my place for dinner. We were starting to enter the honest, flaw-bearing phase of our relationship, so it seemed to stand to reason that I let him see me cook.

I made the mistake of thinking that cooking skills pass via osmosis, that by watching Eric chop vegetables into uniform pieces, or bake bread without using a timer, I had somehow absorbed those and other, even more advanced skills. My culinary hubris led me to forego recipes and decide against measuring my ingredients, thinking that I, like Eric could simply “follow my gut,” which instructed me to dumped varied amounts of stock, oil, water, and chunks of vegetable matter into a pot on medium heat. I then dumped in a generous amount of curry powder, put a lid on the pot, and waited for it to transform itself into a curry.

“Fancy seeing you here.” Said Avery, inspecting the simmering contents on the stove while I straightened my hair. “What’re you making?”

“Something delicious.” I replied. “I made a lot, so you’re more than welcome to have any leftovers, but I’d appreciate it if you could give us a little privacy.”

She snorted. “Don’t sweat it - I’m on my way out. I’ve got a date.”

“Yeah? With who?” I asked, combing my freshly ironed locks.

“Natalie. You remember her? Dark, wavy hair, brown eyes...”

“Yeah, I remember her.” I said, inspecting my reflection to see if I’d missed any waves. “Where are you two going?”

“Dunno yet...she mentioned going to the mall for the dollar theater, but...” Avery paused, a coy smile creeping across her face, “We usually just end up staying in and screwing around. Kinda like you and the chef.”

“We don’t just screw around.” I said, turning to face her. “We go on dates, we watch movies on HBO...we have an adult relationship.”

Avery rolled her eyes. I realized that she’d touched up her roots and was back to her old, honey-blond self. “An *adult relationship*? Paige, are you hearing yourself right now?”

“I’m serious. He’s a very...*mature* man.” I said, turning back to look at myself in the mirror. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand. By the way, do you mind if I borrow your dress again.”

“Sure.” Avery scoffed, shaking her head as she made her way out the front door. As she shut the door, she called, “Tell the chef I say hi.” Before shutting it. Hard.

By the time Eric arrived, a six-pack of craft beer in hand, my hair was styled into a sleek, silky do, my lips were painted with a perfect, smooth layer of rosey gloss, and my would-be dinner was a disaster. I’d burned the rice, having forgotten about it while trying on different outfits, and had made a royal mess of the main course. I’d either used too much liquid, not enough curry, or had just generated failed to realize that there was more to potato curry than potatoes, curry powder, stock, and salt.

Eric stood at my kitchen window taking long drags on a Marlboro Light and blowing the smoke outside (I’d told him Avery didn’t like the smell of cigarettes) while I stirred the pot’s dismal contents. I felt the steam expanding the pores on my face and condense on my temples, and I wondered if my eye make-up was still intact. I tried to wipe at my mascara as subtly as possible while I ladled my failures into two bowls, and set them on the kitchen table. I sat down. Eric followed suit.

Eric looked down at the brown, soupy mixture, inspecting it for what felt like a lifetime before taking his first bite. He chewed slowly, the not-fully-cooked potatoes resisting his bite, and swallowed, his expression unmoved.

It was terrible, and he knew it.

“What do you think?” I asked, hoping to make things easier for us. Eric paused, perhaps weighing his options, and then smiled.

“It’s great, babe.”

“Eric...” I began, hoping I might ease him into honesty.

“I’m serious!” He went on, spearing another chunk of potato on his fork. “It’s really good. I like it.”

I looked at him, the chef, shoveling mouthful after mouthful of one of the worst dinners I had ever tasted into his mouth like it was the clam linguini he'd dished up two nights earlier. I thought of what we must look like. Him, a veritable bobble-head nodding at me relentlessly, and me, a hot mess in her roommate's even hotter dress, who needed to start cleaning up.

I wanted him to admit that he hated the food, to help me admit it myself. I wanted to act like this had never happened, to throw the would-be curry in the trash and have him whip up something new and delicious, but he wouldn't let me.

And I wanted to do that later, on the night where I finally told him that I hated his cigarettes. I wanted to tell him that my stomach was empty and I needed him to make good on his promise to make me popcorn, but I wouldn't let myself.

"You can look at me."

Eric lifted his gaze from his shoes, locking his eyes on mine. I took a deep breath.

"Eric..."

"Stop – before you say anything else, how about I whip up something..."

"No." I cut him off. He paused, silenced.

"Eric..."

He remained silent as I started to gather up my shoes, walking over to fetch the one that had fallen on the floor.

I wasn't sure what to say next, wondering if I should simply tell him that I'm full, ready for my check, or that his services were no longer needed. But we were never big on talking.

I walked out. My stomach growled.

As I made my way down the street, my fingers trembling while I dialed Avery's number, I felt it spread through me like never before. What used to reside in my stomach was now in my chest, clutching my lungs. It bounced around my skull and rang in my ears. It licked the spot on the back of my neck Eric liked to brush his lips against, and stopped up my throat when I tried to tell Avery what had happened on the drive home.

I never met Eric's family or went on a weekend vacation with him. I never bought him a Valentines Day present or told him I loved him, but we did share a lot of meals together. And now that they're gone, now that I've completely digested them, I find that I am hungry once again. Even more than I was before.
