

I

“The road to good intentions is paved with hell.”
—Variation on Samuel Johnson quote

Cocktails at Five

The minute I met Éclairé I wanted to bump her off. There was something about her that exuded what I detest most in a woman: perfection. She had that sleek, well-pampered look that came from years of self-indulgence. Then there was her husband, Harry, who just happened to be the leading plastic surgeon on the upper East Side—a husband who, when he wasn’t removing fat from the thighs of the rich and famous, was salivating over a rack of lamb or a crème brûlée in a restaurant that was Zagat-approved and lived up to his culinary standards. No wonder Éclairé was a vision of loveliness. Harry left no laugh line untouched, no wrinkle un-Botoxed. Éclairé was a walking advertisement of Harry the Miracle Maker’s masterpieces.

But I digress. Before Harry came along I was moving at my usual clip, married to Parker Harding, living in our house in the burbs, and conducting a nonorgasmic sex life that guaranteed a large dose of ennui would kick in as soon as we hit the sheets. It wasn’t that Parker wasn’t a good man. God knows he provided me with a lifestyle that bordered on extravagant. I was free to indulge myself on all levels. Parker asked no questions. He wanted me to be happy, and if happy meant my blowing a wad of money

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on incidentals, he was more than willing to comply. One might say I had it made: During daylight hours I wrote my humor columns for our local paper, *The Seaport Gazette*, which paid me a pittance for trying to evoke a laugh from thirty thousand of Seaport, Connecticut's finest residents.

Each week, I sat at my picture window, looking out on our three acres of lush lawn, composing satirical essays on any subject that happened to move me at the time. If Parker and I argued, if my twenty-year-old daughter, Eliza, drove me to distraction, if a conversation with a friend seemed particularly amusing, it showed up in my column the following week. I had free rein to toy with other people's lives as I deemed fit, and while I usually tried not to overstep the bounds, I would stop at little to be perceived as a droll and witty writer. And so, when I was asked by my editor, Gillian, on a bright, sunny day in May, to cover a story on vegetables, I was puzzled.

"Coco, we want to do a piece on La Chaîne des Rôtisseurs," she said. "And you're the perfect person to do it. Our focus is vegetarian."

"I'm a humorist," I said. "Vegetables aren't funny."

"Make them funny," she said. "Your assignment is to do dinner and mingle with some of the finest diners on the east coast, many of whom will be present at the Chaîne banquet on Friday evening at the Briarwood Club in Greenwich. You might want to brush up on its history."

Clearly, there was no arguing with her, so all week I buried myself in research. After all, if I was going to be hobnobbing with the culinary greats, I had better know what I was talking about.

La Chaîne des Rôtisseurs is an international gastronomic society founded in Paris in 1950. It is devoted to promoting fine dining and preserving the camaraderie and pleasures of the table. The Chaîne is based on the traditions and practices of the old French royal guild of meat roasters, whose written history has been traced back to the year 1248. Today, the society has mem-

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bers in more than one hundred countries around the world. In the United States, there are nearly one hundred and fifty “bailiages” (English “bailiwick”) headed by a “bailli” (“bailiff”) and other officers who plan the individual chapter’s activities. Each bailiage holds one gala event each year to celebrate the induction of new members, who receive a distinctive ribbon worn at all Chaîne gatherings. The Briarwood Club was the perfect place to host such an event: It not only boasted outstanding cuisine, but a view of Long Island Sound to die for.

The following Friday afternoon, I slipped on my favorite tobacco silk pantsuit, got into my Range Rover, and with notebook in tow, I headed toward Briarwood and my first Chaîne dinner. As I tooted down the Merritt Parkway I asked myself the big question I had been mulling over all day: How could I take the subject of veggies and turn it into a laugh riot? Of all the assignments Gillian had thrust upon me, this was the worst.

“Handle it any way you want,” she had said. “The idea is to bring vegetables to the forefront and give them a lot of press. The Chaîne is doing an all-vegetable banquet, proving that one can dine eloquently and well without being carnivorous.”

I recalled the 1920s Carl Rose cartoon from the *New Yorker* with a mother and small daughter sitting at the table, eyeing a plate of vegetables. In E. B. White’s caption, the mother said, “It’s broccoli dear,” to which the child replied: “I say it’s spinach and I say the hell with it.”

If a vegetable-based cartoon was good enough for the *New Yorker*, I guessed I could equally follow suit with an article on the same subject.

High on a hill, a winding road led me to the clubhouse just as the sun was setting. The valet greeted me at the main portico where I deposited my car and watched as he whisked it away to an area filled with BMWs, Mercedeses, Lexuses, and a lone Ferrari. My little Range Rover was in good company. Adjusting my clothes and giving a shake of my wild, silver mane, I went over to

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a small table on the side to register. A well-coiffed and pretty blond matron greeted me with a set of perfectly laminated teeth.

“So you’re Coco, the one from the paper,” she shrieked. “I simply adore journalists.”

The writing was on the wall: This was going to be the evening from hell.

I immediately grabbed my name tag with “Seaport Gazette” emblazoned in bold letters and slapped it across my chest to alert the gaggle of gourmands that anything they said could be used against them. And then, without missing a beat, I turned around to scope out the bar. A nice glass of Chardonnay would take the edge off what could be a disastrous night ahead. The room was filled with men in tuxedos, all of whom resembled penguins bobbing around and nodding at one another.

“I don’t think this is what you want to be drinking.” A hand reached over, removing my glass and replacing it with a Sapphire martini.

I looked up at yet another penguin in full regalia. Around his neck was the distinctive medallion hanging on a ribbon, bearing the coat of arms of the Confrérie, signifying membership into La Chaîne.

“I’m Harry Troutman.” He extended a hand, holding mine longer than protocol required. “And you must be Coco.”

“Yes,” I said, staring back into a pair of eyes that held me momentarily captive. “I’m from the *Seaport Gazette*.”

“I know all about you,” Harry said, “and I’ve been looking forward to meeting you all day. I’m hosting this Chaîne banquet. Welcome to our inner sanctum of fine dining.”

I took a sip of the blue martini, feeling an immediate flush of warmth penetrate my throat. In the distance, a lean and lanky figure emerged, moving closer as Harry and I exchanged pleasantries.

“And here she is.” Harry welcomed the gorgeous creature that descended upon us. “This is my wife, Éclairé.”

My immediate impression of Éclairé was that she was put to-

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gether like a magnificent ice sculpture, except, unlike ice, Éclairé never melted.

I studied her, noting first her name, deliciously reminiscent of French pastry. Then my eyes moved in with telescopic accuracy on her face, her body, and the designer dress she wore that cost more than my two recent root canals. She was the epitome of perfection, a well-chiseled work of art sculpted by the hands of her husband—the very same hands that only moments ago rested in mine.

His name echoed in the back of my mind until it became clear who Harry Troutman was and why that name was so familiar. *New York Magazine*, the ultimate Bible on the Best Doctors in New York, had touted him as one of the finest plastic surgeons in Manhattan.

Éclairé peered out from her striking blue orbs, which, like Days of the Week underpants, I would come to learn, were interchanged daily. Éclairé didn't stop with matching shoes and bag. Tonight, she had obviously chosen her colored lenses with great precision to coordinate with her cobalt blue designer cocktail ensemble. It was obvious that her hair was styled by Charles of the Beautiful, her body toned by her personal trainer. Her nails were recently manicured into ten painted stilettos and with a voice that sounded very Five Towns, Long Island, she offered a limp wrist.

"I'm Claire," she said with a nonchalance that bordered on aloofness. "But Harry insists on calling me Éclairé. As you might have gathered, he's into food."

Looking at Harry, it was hardly obvious how much food and wine ruled his life. He was just under six feet two and looked fit from his daily workouts at the gym. He had an aliveness about him that, from the get-go, made me melt. His searing brown eyes danced, as he looked me over, checking out, I imagined, every flaw on my face. He had a square jaw and his straight black hair was styled casually, barely touching the collar of his Ralph Lauren suit jacket. Halfway through my martini, which I was ordinarily unaccustomed to drinking, I felt relaxed and uninhibited, taking

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in the charm that Harry draped over me like my pumpkin-colored pashmina shawl.

I can say with utmost certainty that I had never fallen so fast and furiously for a man as I did that night at the Briarwood Club. The minute Harry and I exchanged hellos, I was hooked. In between the first course of braised artichokes in a tangerine sauce, and a chilled gazpacho with a dollop of crème fraîche, I was in extreme lust with Dr. Harry Troutman and nothing or no one, not my husband, Parker, or the lovely Éclair, would keep my emotions at bay. But I was here to write an article, and mixing work with pleasure was a dangerous combination.

Harry had made sure that I would be seated next to him during dinner. He was my Chaîne coach, asking me to interrupt with questions whenever the mood struck. I placed my napkin on my lap, and with pen poised, I began waxing eloquent on the allure of the artichoke, scribbling notes along the way.

The artichoke, I reminisced, can fool unsuspecting souls. I recalled my first married dinner party when our cleaning lady, who was filling in that evening as server, had removed all the leaves on the artichokes, so that when our guests moved in from cocktails to dinner, all that remained on their plates were large, unadulterated, naked hearts.

“What happened to the leaves, Lucille?” I asked in amazement.

“Oh Missy,” she explained, “everyone always plucks those leaves so I thought I would save them the trouble. I threw them in the garbage.”

I told Harry, who was on my left, the story and he guffawed out loud, revealing a set of pearly whites that were lined up in perfect symmetry in his mouth.

Tonight’s artichokes were a different story. Each one was perfectly snipped and sat atop an emerald green glass plate, blending in with the artichokes themselves. Tiny crystal bowls were off to the left, receptacles for the tangerine sauce in which to give each leaf a delicate dip before scraping it between the teeth and consuming the pulp. I watched Harry eat. He pried loose a leaf,

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and nonchalantly whisked it through the sauce, coating it ever-so-slightly before raising it from bowl to lips. His movements were deliberate, but subtle, almost as though he weren't eating at all, so that the artichoke became an appendage to our conversation.

Éclairé, who sat on Harry's left, was another story. She poked at the vegetable as though she was pulling apart a dead animal's innards. I might be mistaken, but I believe she even winced.

"The last time I ate one of these," she said, "I pricked my palate. My dentist told me to stay away from sharp legumes. They can be very dangerous. I hate food you have to work at."

I suddenly imagined Harry and Éclairé in bed, Éclairé trying her best to gingerly give her husband a blow job, but being ever so careful lest, with one false move, Harry's seminal fluid might, in Monica Lewinsky style, soil her 450-thread count percale sheets. My guess was she never swallowed—that was a definite no-no for a woman as well put together as Éclairé. If she was having difficulty maneuvering an artichoke, how could she handle something as messy as sex? Perhaps I could write about that for the *Seaport Gazette*.

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“My mom is very possessive. She calls me up and says:
‘You weren’t home last night. Is something going on?’ I said,
‘Yeah, Mom, I’m cheating on you with another mother.’”
—Heidi Joyce

My Mother, the Siren

The Chaîne des Rôtisseurs is as fastidious about its wines as it is about its food. It has a society within the society: l’Ordre Mondial des Gourmets Dégustateurs, for those who have a special knowledge of, or interest in, wine and spirits. Members of this inside group organize special events, including trips to wine-producing regions around the world, many of which Harry and Éclaire had visited. Harry had gone to great lengths to select only the finest wines for tonight’s dinner. As the evening progressed, the wine flowed, starting with a light sauvignon blanc from New Zealand during the first and second course, which blended nicely with the slightly tart gazpacho. Harry was in charge of it all. He regaled me with stories of their adventures to some of the best resorts in the world and I was lapping it all up with the same gusto with which Harry consumed each delicacy that lay before us.

A zucchini and leek mousse was presented to us in a light dill sauce. This delighted Éclaire who, after grappling with her artichoke, could now partake of more user-friendly food. As Harry and I chatted away, occasionally pausing to draw her into the conversation, I scribbled away voraciously in my little notebook, noting key words that I would later work into my article.

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And then, from nowhere and with relevance to nothing, Éclairé suddenly blurted out, “Did you know that marriage can make you fat?”

I stopped midway between my mouthfuls of mousse.

“Really?” I said.

“Yes, a recent study in a leading women’s magazine has confirmed that one’s weight is contingent upon the number of years one is married. The longer couples are married, the fatter they become. Isn’t that amazing?”

“Uh, yes,” I said, but what was even more amazing was Éclairé’s six-carat emerald-cut diamond ring, which nearly blinded me as she gestured to emphasize her point. I reached over for a sip of Pellegrino. There was no doubt: Harry’s magical hands kept his wife happy. Clearly, being a “cutting-edge” plastic surgeon meant keeping his trophy wife in perfect working order with the finest clothes money could buy and accessories that had Harry Winston written all over them.

Parker certainly kept me in style, too, but unlike Éclairé, I had never been one to worry about being fat or having wrinkles. I used the latest creams and walked three miles every day, but I wasn’t visiting my plastic surgeon every month or sporting giant sparkles on my fingers.

The rest of the evening went off without a hitch. Altogether there were seven courses, each one cooked to perfection—a cornucopia of vegetarian delights ranging from cabbage stuffed with eggplant and calabaza puree to grilled shiitake mushrooms in a wild herb sauce that tasted mildly like meat. The dinner was punctuated by a fresh Mista salad with an avalanche of pine nuts and warm goat cheese. Scattered about were a few dandelion greens that gave it a slight bite. By the time we got to intermezzo, a key lime sorbet, Harry had actually turned his attention away from the food and was now ingesting my each and every word, as though they were cultured pearls of wisdom.

“So, how did you get to be Coco?” Harry asked. “It can’t be your real name?”

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Dare I tell him that my mother, a woman who was as eccentric as she was original, had actually chosen that name because of her passion for chocolate? While other children were named for deceased or cherished family members, I was being honored for her four favorite and essential food groups: milk chocolate, dark chocolate, white chocolate, and cocoa.

“Your mother must be an interesting woman,” Harry said.

He has no idea. A few years ago, I had devoted an entire column to my mother, Yvonne.

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MY MOTHER, THE SIREN

My mother had flair. She had style. My dad affectionately called her “The Siren” long before I understood what the word even meant. That’s because she dressed in black. To her, black was chic. Black was correct. Black was sensual.

“You can never go wrong with the little black dress,” she had drummed into my head.

Little did she know that some of my “wrongest” moments happened during a few of my black periods. At age twenty, I leaned over a table in a dimly lit Manhattan bistro and stared into the eyes of a handsome cad who plied me with wine and ordered dinner in perfect French. That’s because I looked alluring in my black dress—the very one my mother made me buy at Saks because she had said, “It’s very slimming.”

Slimming though it was, the dress was to die for. That cad took one look at the plunging neckline with a hint of cleavage and spilled his burgundy all over himself. Yes, men couldn’t contain themselves. I turned heads in that dress. I was perceived as mysterious and provocatively wicked. Like my mother, I, too, was fast becoming a Siren.

Her wardrobe consisted of an array of black clothes, all divine and respectively seductive. The only time she deviated from her “noir chic” was at my wedding when she wore emerald

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green and broke her ankle tripping over a pat of butter that had fallen from her roll. As she was carried off on a stretcher, champagne in one hand, her green gown trailing behind her, her words reverberated through the Grand Ballroom of the hotel.

“I should have worn my black Balenciaga.”

After that, her fashion statement consisted of only black suits and dresses adorned simply and elegantly with a string of pearls or a diamond brooch. I recently met a childhood friend who remarked:

“Whenever I remember your mom, black comes to mind.”

How could it be any other way? While other mothers wore flowered housedresses, my mother served me breakfasts in her black silk robe. When I came home from school, she was baking cookies in a black-and-white checkered apron. When we dined out, she wore an appropriately black dinner dress and kissed me good night in her black nightie. Her dresser drawers spilled over with black lingerie and black nylon stockings. Let’s face it, the woman had a monochromatic wardrobe that defied imagination.

In summers, she bathed in black swimsuits. On vacations to tropical islands, while other women wore dresses in muted pastels, she sat poolside, nibbling canapés and looking engaging in black linen. Her look, dark though it was, seemed more genteel than somber, and though I always felt that I had a mother who was strangely different, others considered her unique and ahead of her time.

It wasn’t unusual then that my road to adulthood was paved with an array of black dresses: long-sleeved, short-sleeved, cap-sleeved, sleeveless, and haltered. When Vogue and Bazaar introduced their spring fashions in bold prints exploding in color, Mom and I walked away from shopping expeditions with yet another black dress. I was the only girl to wear black to my senior prom.

My mother thought that black spoke volumes—a back-

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drop from which the personality could emerge and not be overshadowed by clothes that screamed, "Look at me!" In black, I could be completely myself. I learned to understand that black looked good on everyone. Blondes in black were captivating. Brunettes were sultry. African-Americans in black reeked of animal magnetism. When my redheaded friend Paula wore black, her hair cascading down her back, every man in the room took notice.

"It must be her hair," her boyfriend, Jim, remarked.

"Trust me, it's the dress," I said. "Black is beautiful."

With that in mind, I regularly rummage through my closet deciding which of my thirty-two black ensembles I should wear. My choices are endless.

"A black dress can change a woman's life," she said, as I wiggled my adolescent body into a formfitting sheath that made me feel both beguiling and naughty. It was a time when life was fraught with exciting possibilities at every turn and black helped it along. Now, years later, the little black dress doesn't seem quite as magical as it did when I stood on the rim of adulthood ready to take on the world.

But to my mother, black was always sensational and in her understated, charismatic way, she was a Siren. And so, I tried following in her footsteps.

"Wearing black makes me want to dance," she once said.

Now, I slip into a black bodysuit and black skirt, toss my hair over my shoulder, and I'm out the door. My mother taught me well. Let the dance begin!

Harry was fascinated. "But, I see that this evening you've chosen to wear brown. What would your mother say?"

We laughed frequently that night and by the time dessert arrived and a lovely ice wine was served, I felt I had known Harry longer than a few hours. There is a strange comfort one often

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feels at first meetings. After the initial charge of introduction and small talk is over, one settles in to that easy place where pretense is shed and the confines of congeniality are replaced with genuine interest in wanting to know the other person. I didn't want the evening to end. I was certain Harry felt the same, for when I went to retrieve my napkin that had fallen from my lap, his hand suddenly reached under the table and found mine. I felt the blood rush to my cheeks. My first inclination was to turn toward Éclair and see if she had noticed. But as I would later come to learn, she registered little emotion over anything. While Harry's hand moved playfully around my fingers, Éclair was applying Chanel gloss to her full, collagen-laced lips, oblivious of anyone but herself.

"If you'll excuse me," she said, "I think I'll use the Little Girl's Room."

Harry released my hand and rose from his chair on cue, the perfect attentive husband. "Hurry back, darling," he said.

I was amazed by how Harry was clearly the great charmer of all time. He could seduce a woman in full view of his wife and get away with it. Or else Éclair was more of a bimbo than I thought. Thinking about it, though, I realized that Harry dealt with women every day and knew exactly how they worked. I could tell that he prided himself on being not just the good doctor who could morph a woman from frump to fabulous, but he possessed the one quality they couldn't resist: He listened. I knew that I had entered dangerous turf and should know better than to succumb to a man like Harry, but by the time I had eaten my poached pear in a brandy sauce and sipped a glass of champagne served with a basket of strawberries dipped in dark chocolate, Harry had touched the most erogenous zone in my body: my brain.

While Éclair was freshening up, Harry reached into his pocket and retrieved a business card. It was simple, white, elegant. Engraved was the name Harry B. Troutman, MD, and his phone number. No extraneous verbiage. Understated and classy all the way, like the man himself.

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“You might have some questions you’ll need to ask,” he said, handing over the card.

“Questions?” I tried sounding cool, detached.

“About tonight,” he said. “For your article. Call my office and we’ll make an appointment to talk. I’m sure you’ll want some more information on the Chaîne.”

Harry and Éclairé walked me to my car. Éclairé offered a weak handshake while Harry kept watch for his SLK 350 Mercedes Roadster with the vanity license plate: NIP IT. By 10:30, I was behind the seat of my car heading back to Seaport and my husband, Parker, who would be waiting up to hear all about my evening with the inhabitants of Food City.

“Meet any interesting people?” he would ask.

“You know how these things are,” I’d tell him. “Just another assignment with a different slant.”

I also knew that with one phone call to Harry, my life could change in a heartbeat.

That night I lay in bed and decided to leave well enough alone. It had been a nice evening where I collected some good material. There were no questions I couldn’t address myself or check on the Internet. Under no circumstances would I call Dr. Harry Troutman. Then I fell asleep in a champagne glow.

I rose early to a clear, sunny Saturday morning. Parker had already left to play golf at the Seaport Country Club. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and in that moment between semiconsciousness and full awareness, I rewound the prior evening’s tape in my head. There was Harry, as big as life, running around my mind. I could recount little snippets of the Chaîne evening, but it all seemed muddled. All I could think of were Harry’s hands, slipping beneath the white linen tablecloth, seeking mine. I should have untangled my fingers then, alerting him to the fact that this was inappropriate behavior and I wasn’t buying into it. Instead, I

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had squeezed back in acknowledgment, letting him know, in no uncertain terms, that I found him attractive. In that split second, I had crossed over from *Seaport Gazette* writer to interested party who was willing to fall prey to his charms, even with his wife sitting only several inches away. Harry obviously “played dirty” and I had signaled back that I was a willing participant.