

The Dinner Party

By Emilie-Noelle Provost

It wasn't until we were settled into a corner booth at Arturo's, a tapas restaurant that Georgie liked, that I finally got a good look at her. She was happy, glowing even, much more self-confident than I had been at her age. Georgie's handbag, scarf and shoes were perfectly coordinated. She had always been a stylish kid.

Georgie had class until six on Mondays so it was already dark when we picked her up at her apartment, a cavernous, mostly unheated space a half-mile from campus that occupied the entire third floor of a Worcester triple-decker. Georgie gave her father and me each a peck on the cheek before fastening her seatbelt.

"Oh, you got me a balloon!" Georgie said when she discovered the Mylar "happy birthday" balloon waiting for her in the back seat. "You guys are the best."

Georgie's boyfriend, a finance major who'd grown up in Hawaii, the youngest child in a wealthy family, had broken up with her a month before. I knew the shifty little bastard was bad news the first time I met him. But Georgie had been devastated. It was good to see her smiling again.

"Go ahead and order some wine for us," Paul said to Georgie when the waiter came to the table. "You're 21 now. We should celebrate."

Georgie nodded. She had been drinking wine at home since she was 16, but I could tell she was hesitant. All the wines on the menu were from Spain and none of us knew a thing about any of them.

"Well, congratulations," the waiter said to Georgie, perhaps with a bit too much enthusiasm. "Maybe I can help you choose something."

I couldn't have imagined wanting to go out to dinner with my parents on my 21st birthday, not that they would have taken me. They had divorced when I was seven and were both remarried and busy with new families by the time my 21st came around. Georgie was coming home for Thanksgiving later that week, but she had insisted that her birthday wouldn't be the same unless we were all together.

I was only 20 the day I sat down next to Paul in the front row of Professor Rivers' History of Modern China class — a place I never sat, but I had forgotten my glasses. Within a month I knew I would marry him.

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I've told that story to Georgie a hundred times. She never gets tired of hearing it. Sometimes I hope the same thing will happen to her, that she will meet someone wonderful when she least expects it — the old fashioned way, in person, not on one of those dating apps. People, especially women my age, talk all the time about how great it would be to be young again, but I don't think so. Being young is hard. Sure, there's excitement and promise, but there's also poverty and heartbreak, and a lot of worrying about things that, you realize years later, don't make one bit of difference, like whether your silverware matches or what size bra you wear.

As I watched Georgie discussing wine with the waiter, it was hard to not wonder how I had gone from that fateful day in my Chinese history class to this one so quickly. All the things that made up our lives as a family — Christmas mornings, days at the beach, shopping trips, even our dear pet cats buried beside the white oak in the yard, seemed so far away just then, almost as if they had happened to someone else.

The waiter, obviously a professional, talked Georgie into a \$40 bottle of *rioja gran reserva* which he opened at the table with great flourish, pouring an inch of the ruby liquid into her glass. She tasted it and gave her approval, looking sophisticated as she set the wineglass down on the table.

"We're studying Judy Chicago in my contemporary art class this week," Georgie said as she looked over the menu. "She was a very important feminist artist in the '70s. Her work is amazing. I want to go to the Brooklyn Museum over Christmas break to see her installation, *The Dinner Party*. It's this huge triangular table set for a banquet. Each of the place settings is for an important woman, someone who's made a difference for other women."

The waiter was back. A good-looking kid in his late 20s sporting a set of sideburns, he couldn't take his eyes off Georgie. "If you like contemporary art, you should visit the Mass MoCA museum out in North Adams. I went there last summer. It was really something," he said.

As if she was used to this sort of thing, Georgie just smiled at him. "Do you guys know what you want?" she said.

When Paul and I were first married we lived in a one-bedroom apartment in a cardboard box of a building next to an industrial park. The rent was \$575 a month, which at the time seemed like an impossible amount. I was still in graduate school, cleaning rich people's houses part time. Paul had recently earned a masters degree but was still working the retail job he'd had while he was in school. On a good week

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we had about \$40 to spend on groceries — the same amount as Georgie's bottle of wine.

I remember feeling like Paul and I were the only people among our friends who didn't have their act together. Most people we knew had gone to private colleges and had real jobs. Many of our friends had already bought houses or condos, some with their parents' help, but still. We were always worried about money.

When I got pregnant with Georgie, one of my friends from high school, a woman who had been a bridesmaid in my wedding, told me I was crazy. "How are you going to take care of it?" she said.

Georgie's birth was a trial and, if I'm honest, it's most likely the reason I never had another child. But after 36 hours of labor that ended with an emergency C-section in the middle of the night, I was lucky enough to be presented with the most precious gift I would ever receive. When Paul told me we had a girl it was like the heavens opened up. Georgie didn't cry. The first time I saw her, she had one eye open and was busy looking around the room.

The waiter was setting dish after small dish of tapas on the table. A plate of pork meatballs and a dish of tiny grilled eggplants swathed in olive oil landed in front of Georgie. "Tell me about Europe. What did you guys do?" she said.

Paul pulled his cellphone out of his pocket and handed it to her. "Here are some photos I took in Paris. You would have loved it. There are so many museums and beautiful old churches. Lots of good food, too. You could practice your French."

Georgie flipped through the photos. "These are really good, Dad. You should think about getting a real camera. My friend Andy is taking an analog photography class this semester. It's so much work. We hardly ever see him. It's hard to believe that's how people used to process photos all the time. His photos look great, though. They're so much different than digital."

Art has been Georgie's passion since she was old enough to hold a crayon. When she decided to study art history in college, she got a lot of crap from people who felt they were being helpful by asking her what she was going to do with an art history degree. Thank goodness she's learned to ignore them. People said similar things to Paul and me. We were both European history majors. Sometimes I feel like no one in the world has any sort of imagination.

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When Georgie left for college it took Paul and me a while to figure out how to be a couple again. I was always cooking too much food. Now sometimes I don't even bother to close the bathroom door. It's funny how a person can have their life completely upended and find their way back to normalcy, even happiness, in a relatively short time. In some ways I suppose it wasn't that much different from when Georgie was born.

Paul and I travel now, usually in the fall. We've been to Rome and Paris and last year we took a cruise up the Saint Lawrence River from Montreal to the Canadian Maritimes. The first time we went away I was paranoid the whole time that something would happen to Georgie at school.

Maybe it's because she's an only child, but I often forget how old Georgie is. When I was 21 I could take care of myself. I did, in fact. I handled flirting waiters and jerks harassing me at parties, and made sure I paid my phone bill on time. I know she does all those things, too. But I worry sometimes about whether she'll be strong enough to stand up for the things that are best for her, even if they make other people unhappy. There are so many obstacles girls have to overcome. I wish I could tell her that the way she looks isn't as important as she thinks it is. And that sometimes the forces against you can seem too enormous to bear, but you can beat them. You really can.

Instead of birthday cake, Georgie wanted *churros* — sticks of cinnamon-coated fried dough that you dip in chocolate sauce. It's a good thing they don't serve them at very many places because I'd be eating them all the time.

When we got up to leave, the waiter helped Georgie and me with our coats. The poor kid was really desperate. I half expected him to ask her for her phone number right in front of Paul and me. Maybe he did ask her for it. It's not the kind of thing she would tell me about.

It seems ironic, considering how we felt about them at the time, but many of the friends Paul and I were envious of when we were younger are divorced now. Some have been divorced twice. One couple we know just broke up a few months ago, after being married for more than 20 years. It just goes to show that you shouldn't bother too much with comparing your life to other people's.

I want to tell Georgie this on the ride back to her apartment, but when we park the car out front, she says, "Oh, look, it's Molly." One of Georgie's roommates, Molly suddenly appears next to our car holding a grocery store birthday cake encased in a plastic dome, a bottle of cheap chardonnay tucked under her arm.

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“Come on, birthday girl. We’re having a party in your honor,” Molly says. The next course in Georgie’s banquet had arrived, the other guests already seated at the table.

Georgie grabs her balloon from the back seat. “Love you guys. Thanks so much for dinner.”

“Be careful,” Paul hollers out the window after the girls. “No driving, OK.”

Georgie turns around and gives him a look that says *what do you think, I’m an idiot?* Then she blows us a kiss and waves goodbye.