

# Eleven Madison Way

“Nothing is so common as the wish to be remarkable.”

Quote by  
William Shakespeare

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George and Sara smiled politely as the waiter did his best to explain the menu and describe each dish served during the eleven-course meal. Although George pretended to nod along and make out like he understood what was meant by the term *blanched*, he was more captivated by the lavish surroundings suddenly within his reach, raptured by the surreal environment he had finally found himself a part of. In every direction, Manhattan's professional and social elite sat basking in the glittering things the rich take for granted and the poor wistfully lust over. The sparkling bottles of champagne, designer cocktail dresses, twenty-four-dollar martinis, power suits, and the breathtaking view of Manhattan from forty-two stories up all now coalesced into a fantastical and almost divine setting that George had only ever dreamt about. George's time had come. George had made it.

The waiter could spot the first-time diner a mile away and waited patiently for George to return his attention back to the menu. "Have you decided, sir?"

“Uh, yeah,” said George, the interruption from people watching a cold bucket of water on his otherwise elated spirits. “We’ll have the Duck Confit Risotto with the best champagne.”

“Very good, sir,” replied the waiter, still waiting for George to answer the question he actually asked. “And for the first course, sir?”

George reddened a little in the face and looked across the table at Sara.

“No worries, sir,” said the waiter, a smile forming at the edge of his mouth. “I will bring over some Vichyssoise. It is a perfect complement to the Duck Confit.”

George averted his eyes to the table as he handed the menu back to the waiter.

“Thank you,” he mumbled, irritated, embarrassed.

“What’s the matter, baby?” Sara giggled, charmed to see her *big-shot* boyfriend still so easily flustered. “I thought this was your *new scene*.”

George smiled, transfixed again, but this time on his girlfriend. The last three years had been difficult for both of them. George had worked two jobs while taking night classes at Columbia, and Sara had dropped out of college back home to work and help pay for his graduate schooling. But even if that weren't hard enough, they had spent the better part of the last three years separated from one another; George in New York, Sara in Michigan. Now though, it was all worth it. Every hour spent in school, building a career so Sara could move out to New York, every tear cried over the phone about not being together, and every penny saved just to keep the lights on in his one-room apartment seemed like a distant past. Now they could be together forever, and money or opportunity would never again become an issue.

“So, what do you think?” George glanced around the room, hardly able to suppress answering the question for himself.

“It’s nice,” said Sara looking out over the city, distant.

“You don’t like it, do you?”

“No, it’s not that I don’t like it,” replied Sara. “I think that it’s unbelievable, but...”

"But what?" The two had been together for years, and George could see something was off. It didn't require mind-reading to see that Sara wasn't as enamored with the restaurant's ambiance as he was.

Sara ran her hands nervously over her lap, smoothing out her dress. "Nothing," she said, forcing a smile. "I like it. And I really like this dress you bought me. I think it's worth more than my whole closet."

George smiled and looked again about the room. From the moment they entered, he had been blown away by the atmosphere and mood of the environment; the people, the money, the spectacle. He simply couldn't get over the extravagance of the glowing scene around him, that the years of dreaming and craving success had finally paid off. The late-night walks and naïve dreams he had shared with Sara back home had finally been realized. No longer were they destined to a dead-end, rural town and life of worrying over every dollar spent. Never again would George have to fear going to work for his dad at the bottling factory where he spent every summer in high school, hating every minute spent within the crumbling walls of the decades-old building. Never again would he have to relive how it made him sick just to walk into it every morning, and the only thing that kept him going was the dream of a better life, the life he now had and could share with Sara.

The factory's plain, worn white walls had been replaced with expensive tapestries and stylish modern art. The mildew reeking breakroom with its torn couch had been replaced by a 57<sup>th</sup>-floor office with leather couches and a view of Central Park. The rolling and monotonous plains that made up the memory of George's childhood were now just that, a memory. This new world offered George excitement, opportunity, and independence from the one-track future his

old life could provide. Here, there were no restrictions, no ceilings, and best of all, no roadmaps leading to where a person could, or would, end up in life.

George swept the room from side to side intently with his eyes, lustful of the room itself and what it meant to be there, to be a part of it. "I bet you these people here have more money on them right now than what either of our parents make in a week," said George.

"Probably," said Sara, nodding, glancing back out the window. "I thought that maybe one night this weekend, we could rent a movie or something."

"You've only been out here a week, and you already want to stay in a night?" It was a thought that had never even crossed his mind. "I haven't shown you even close to everything I want you to see."

"I just thought that it might be nice to stay in and watch a movie like we used to do," said Sara. "We're gonna be here a long time, and I'm sure I'll have plenty of chances to see everything."

"How about next week sometime?" George may have asked it as a question, but the words certainly didn't come across that way. "I already have plans for us this weekend."

"Next week is Thanksgiving," said Sara, pressing again at her dress. "I thought we're going home."

George fixed his attention on a couple entering the room. "I don't think I'm going to go home anymore," he added casually, admiring the man's watch.

"What do you mean you're not going home anymore?" There was a firmness in her voice now, resolute. "I already told my mom we were coming, and she really wants to see you."

“Well, I just don’t see the point in flying home now when we’ll be going home for Christmas in a month,” said George, still fixated on the couple that had walked past their table.

“You told your mom you were coming home last week,” said Sara, irritated. “You haven’t been home for over a year, and it’s not like you can’t afford it.”

“It just doesn’t make sense,” said George. “Besides, my boss asked me if we wanted to go to some corporate dinner party on Thanksgiving. It could be a big chance for me.”

“Well, I wanted to go home for Thanksgiving. It’s the only chance I’ll get to see my aunt.”

"I'm not going home next week," replied George, disappointed that the couple he had been watching was seated in an adjoining room. "I already told Jeff that I would go to the dinner party."

“Fine,” said Sara. “I guess I just won’t get to see my family.”

“You can still go home if you want,” said George. “I’ll pay for your ticket.”

“That’s fine,” said Sara. “I’ll just wait until Christmas.”

The two sat silently. George continued people watching over Sara's shoulder while she gazed out the window shaking her foot back and forth, a nervous habit she'd started back in the eighth grade when things were tense with George. Minutes passed before Sara finally pointed at a row of lights out the window.

“What bridge is that?”

“That’s the Queensboro Bridge,” said George. “It connects Manhattan to Queens.”

“What’s Queens?”

“Where the poor people live,” said George laughing. It was an ugly and cruel snicker that Sara didn’t recognize or appreciate.

"Not everyone makes as much money as you do, George," she said, wondering when he had learned to sound so entitled.

George caught the discord in her words and pulled back his response. “I’m just joking. I used to love Queens. That’s where I lived when I first came out here.”

“I thought you lived in Brooklyn?”

“No, I lived in Queens,” said George. “It was a great place, very working class.”

“Why don’t you like Queens anymore then?” Sara hardly needed to ask the next question. “What’s changed?”

“Nothing’s changed,” said George. “I still like Queens, but now we live in Manhattan, and it’s way better.”

“Why is it better? Because it’s more expensive?”

“I didn’t say that,” said George, getting defensive. “It’s just a matter of fact.”

“A matter of fact to who, rich people?”

“I don’t understand why you’re making a big deal about this,” said George. “Didn’t we always dream about being successful and moving to New York and living in Manhattan?”

"For you, that was the dream, not for me."

“I don’t understand you. We can afford to do anything we want for the rest of our lives.”

“Except the things that don’t cost money,” said Sara quietly. She turned away, tired, hurt.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Maybe I will go home for Thanksgiving,” said Sara, eyes gloomily looking out on the Manhattan skyline.

The two sat silently as the waiter brought over the chilled potato soup he so elegantly called earlier, Vichyssoise.