

*Dark Harbor:  
Building House and Home  
on an Enchanted Island*  
2003

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ENCHANTRESS

**T**O THIS DAY, I WONDER IF I SHOULD HAVE STAYED away from the eightieth birthday party of the Very Reverend Father Martin D'Arcy, S.J. It was to have far-reaching consequences, and I still cannot work out if they were to my benefit or to my detriment. The party was given in June, 1968. I remember it clearly. It was orchestrated by Jane Brian Engelhard, the wife of Charles William Engelhard, one of the world's richest men, and was held at a private room at the "21" club, in New York. From the very start, I felt out of place. Not only did I scarcely know Mrs. Engelhard but the dominant timbre of the party was one of moneyed voices. Still, I reminded myself that we were all there to honor Father D'Arcy. I had met him some ten years earlier, when I was an undergraduate at Oxford. He was a revered figure at the university, indeed in England at large, having served as the Master of Campion Hall, Oxford, and later as Provincial of the English Jesuits. It was common knowledge that he liked befriending the rich—staying in their houses,

being wine and dined by them, and getting money from them for the Church. Apparently he was one of those worldly priests who saw the wisdom in Jesus' injunction "Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations."

I negotiated my way to the head table, where I wished Father D'Arcy Happy Birthday and greeted Mrs. Engelhard, an expansive, coquettish woman; she presented me to the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. To my great relief, the grand gathering included a few fellow-writers and friends—Edmund Wilson, Anne Fremantle, Phyllis McGinley.

The party has everything, I thought—fallen royalty and cultural Pooh-Bahs mixed in with literati and professional Catholics. It's the usual Father D'Arcy crowd, all right. I should be happy to be here and so, I suppose, I am.

I was shown to my table and introduced to Annette, Mrs. Engelhard's daughter. I was seated to her left. The chair on my left was empty, and beyond that, to my delight, were Edmund Wilson and Anne Fremantle. I no longer remember who else was at the table, perhaps because my attention was completely engaged by Annette. Just like an enchantress I had read about as a child when I was learning English (my mother tongue is Punjabi), she was ravishing, flirtatious, but completely unassuming. She had a girlish voice and laugh and sounded younger than she probably was.

I wonder if she's married, I mused. I wish I could take her hand and touch her ring finger. Ah, we sly foxes. Or, should I say, sly bats. We have to be ever alert to pick up small signals that people with eyes take in at a glance. The world isn't arranged with people like us in mind.

"I'm sitting down on your left," a woman said. Her voice was mannish, peremptory, and patronizing, as if she imagined that, lacking in one faculty, I was deficient in another too. But I was at a party, and I had been brought up to think courtesy was second to godliness. I excused myself to Annette and turned to my new neighbor, the editor of *Vogue*. "Hello, Mrs. Vreeland," I said.

"How did you know? Annette, you must have whispered in his ear that I'm Diana Vreeland," she said.

"I certainly did not," Annette said.

Why does she have to call attention to something that I would rather forget? I thought. Keep cool. "I think we met once, with some of my *New Yorker* friends," I said aloud to Mrs. Vreeland.

"I know—you are Mr. *New Yorker*," she said.

"No, I just try to write for it," I said.

Apparently finished with me, she turned to Edmund Wilson, and I turned back to Annette.

"What are you doing next weekend?" Annette asked.

I had a flicker of excitement, thinking that perhaps she was hinting that we could do something together, like have a meal or go to a play; but it was inconceivable that she would be asking an odd duck like me to squire her anywhere. A rich woman like her could have no shortage of friends and admirers—anyway, she was probably married.

"Same as I do on weekdays—try to write," I said offhandedly, trying to cover my confusion and, at the same time, to give a truthful answer.

"What do you do for fun?" she asked.

"I go out a certain amount in the evening," I said. "I'm here at '21,' aren't I?"

"You must go away for the summer," she pressed.

"Not really—I can't travel anywhere unless I pay my way by coming up with a piece to write," I said.

"You sound like a workaholic." She paused. "But that's probably not a word that your beloved editor of *The New Yorker* would allow you to use in the magazine."

"How right you are," I said. "You must be a *New Yorker* reader."

"I'm sure you go out every evening," she said.

"Before I started writing for *The New Yorker*, I imagined that writers and artists had glamorous lives—that they spent all their time consorting with society people." As soon as the

phrase "society people" was out of my mouth, I realized that she might think that I was being an intellectual snob and putting her down.

But she only laughed, a kind of suppressed harmonic giggle that soared like a fast arpeggio.

"I'm sorry that you don't find me glamorous enough," she said.

"*Au contraire*," I replied.

She fired back a whole stream of French, which I did not catch.

"You were brought up in France?" I asked stupidly.

"No, we had a mademoiselle," she said.

For some time, I had been listening with half an ear to Diana Vreeland goading Edmund Wilson on her other side. "You don't want to talk to me, I know it!" she had said to him several times. "You don't give a damn! You think I'm beneath your notice!" She had a strident, imperious voice—clearly she was a woman who was used to being listened to and having her way. At first, Wilson tried to excuse himself politely by explaining that he was getting a little deaf, but she would not believe him and would not leave him alone. In the end he was provoked to say, "I really am getting deaf, but you're right that I don't give a damn."

She now pointedly turned her back on him and asked me in a loud voice, as if to be sure that he heard her, "Is your friend Mr. Wilson always rude?"

I wanted to tell her that she was the one being rude to him, but I bit my tongue.

"What are you and I doing here in this aging café society?" Wilson called across her to me.

I did not want to offend Edmund Wilson, the critic I admire most, nor did I want to insult Mrs. Vreeland at such a gathering. I could sense that Annette was waiting to see what diplomatic ploy I would use. I could think of none, so I changed the subject.

"Father D'Arcy says he has set his heart on converting me," I said. "You know he converted Evelyn Waugh."

Everyone became silent, making me wonder if I had committed a faux pas. Edmund must think my remark absurd, Mrs. Vreeland must think I'm dropping names, and Annette must be disappointed that I couldn't think of anything better to say. Wilson abruptly turned to his left and began talking to Anne Fremantle.

"There is as much chance of your becoming Catholic as of my becoming your friend Wilson's lapdog," Mrs. Vreeland said to me. She seemed stilled to be fishing for Wilson's attention, but he ignored her.

No doubt she's right, I thought, but she scarcely knows me.

"Father D'Arcy is a wonderful priest," Annette said, obviously trying to relieve the tension in the air. "Mummy has him celebrate Mass for us in our chapel, and I love his sermons."

"With your sensitivity, you must have picked up that Annette is a closet intellectual," Mrs. Vreeland said ingratiatingly.

"Maybe that's why I am drawn to her," I said to Mrs. Vreeland. "It's her closeted side that I am trying to explore."

Annette laughed and covered her face with her napkin. If I were in her place I wouldn't try to hide my intelligence, I thought. But, then again, maybe I would in the society in which she must move—a society no doubt dominated by people like Mrs. Vreeland.

"You would like me more if I were shy like Annette," Mrs. Vreeland said provocatively.

I was spared from answering her because, just then, a waiter materialized on my left and thrust a huge platter between Mrs. Vreeland and me, expecting me to serve myself. Annette immediately grasped that I needed help and motioned the waiter to bring the platter around to my other side, and she served me herself. I thanked her.

"You have charmed Annette—how did you do it?" Mrs. Vreeland asked.

"Actually, it is I who am under Annette's spell," I said.



AT THE END of the party, Annette offered to give Father D'Arcy and me a lift home in her limousine. I almost declined, thinking that they must have known each other longer and better than I knew either of them and that I would simply be in the way. But clearly her offer was genuine, and I accepted.

In the car, Father D'Arcy, charming as ever, was courtly and chivalrous toward Annette. If he had been at our table, he would not have worried about himself, as I did, but would have been attentive to Annette and her interests—indeed, would have been equally courtly and chivalrous to everyone, even Diana Vreeland. Charm knows no distinctions; it spreads as evenly as butter on bread. I wished I had his winning ways.

Even as I thought this, I felt I had to guard against thinking that I was always at fault. From my earliest years, it had seemed to me that every mistake I made, big or small, was as irremediable as any damage sustained by my body. Moreover, no matter how much I tried not to want what I couldn't have, I was always reaching for things that were beyond my grasp, even though I knew that all around me people voluntarily renounced things that they *could* have had. Take Father D'Arcy: early in life he must have made a choice to be a Jesuit and to renounce wife and family for the Church. In contrast, I had trouble renouncing anything. Believing in nothing, I never stopped fretting about being unmarried or longing for a wife and a family.

Father D'Arcy was dropped off at the St. Ignatius Residence, a Jesuit lodging house on East Eighty-third Street. Annette made the driver wait until Father D'Arcy was inside.

"It always makes me sad to leave Father D'Arcy here," Annette said distractedly. "I don't know anyone who enjoys the good life as much as he does. After dining with the Duke and Duchess, he comes home to this plain white brick building. He probably has a small, hard bed in some room and has to use a common bathroom."

I was touched by her concern for Father D'Arcy's lack of comfort.

As we pulled up in front of my apartment house on Eighty-second Street, she said abruptly, "You have to come and see me on my island."

"Where is your island?" I asked, trying to sound nonchalant when, actually, I was thrilled at the idea.

"It's in Maine."

There was something exciting about Maine. I had wanted to go there ever since I had come to America at the age of fifteen and had stayed briefly with John and Muriel di Francesco, some family friends, in New York. The di Francescos had barely known me, but they invited me to join them on their summer holiday in Maine and dwelled on the joys of sailing, fishing, and swimming there. I had to pass up their invitation, because I had to proceed to my school, in Little Rock, Arkansas. Now, some nineteen years later, here was Annette, who knew me even less than the di Francescos had, enticing me, with unbelievable generosity, to go to Maine. I accepted Annette's invitation as impulsively as she had given it and agreed to leave in two weeks for a three-day visit.

As I was getting out of the car, she said that she would send a private plane for me. I protested, but she retorted by saying there was no other way for me to get to the island and that it was something she wouldn't think twice about doing for any of her guests.



"ARE THERE NO other passengers?" I asked the air hostess as I stepped into the private jet that was to take me to Maine. It had a pilot and a copilot, an air hostess, and me.

"No, Mrs. Reed sent the plane especially for you," the air hostess said.

"Who's Mrs. Reed? I thought it was Annette Engelhard who was sending the plane for me."

"Engelhard is her maiden name. She's married to Samuel Reed."

Gosh. Am I condemned to commit blindisms? I should have kept my mouth shut and not revealed the fact that I scarcely knew Annette. However much I trained myself to hold my tongue and appear normal, a word here and there always slipped out and betrayed my limitations. How could I have dared to think, just because I couldn't tell whether she was wearing a wedding ring, that an unmarried woman would invite me to her island after just one meeting and then bring me across in a plane as if I were a film star?

Her sheen as a romantic object dulled, but she was left with another kind of lustre, that of an extremely wealthy woman. I had the fascination with money and moneyed people of someone who had been brought up in a poor country and who had to struggle constantly to make ends meet. Like Father D'Arcy, I certainly enjoyed hobnobbing with the rich, as if association with them in itself could be nourishing and there were no price to pay for it, as if I could be wined and dined by them and still keep sacrosanct the plain-fare values of my vocation.

Try as I might, I was unable to rein in my curiosity about Annette. "I didn't know she was married," I found myself saying to the air hostess. "What does her husband do?"

"I'm afraid I don't know. This is her father's plane. It's available to anyone in the family, but we work for Mr. Engelhard."

"From what I hear, he seems like quite a character. He's the fellow who had a birthday party at which a naked girl popped out of his cake."

The air hostess seemed embarrassed. To gloss over my inappropriate remark, I asked if the Engelhards would be staying on the island with Mrs. Reed, as I now tried to think of Annette.

"No, Mr. Engelhard is in Europe, and Mrs. Engelhard is travelling."

"Are the Engelhards a big family?"

"There are five Engelhard sisters, but I don't think that any of the girls are staying with Mrs. Reed just now."

"Then Mrs. Reed is the eldest?"

"Yes."

"Where are the rest of them?"

"I'm afraid I don't know—at school, I think."

Since I had been working as a journalist now for many years, asking questions was second nature to me, but I noticed that the air hostess had suddenly become edgy, as if, having realized that I was not a close friend of the family, she felt she had to shield them from my nosy inquiries. To smooth things over, I turned the conversation in a general direction. "I've never been to Maine. I'm afraid I don't even know where exactly Mrs. Reed's island is."

"It's in Penobscot Bay, near Camden. The island is called Islesboro."

The engines revved up, and the plane started taxiing. It felt grand to be able to hear the squawk coming over the radio from the control tower.

The air hostess buckled me in as if I were too helpless to put on my own seat belt. In other circumstances, I would have insisted on fastening my belt myself, but I let her do it, thinking that such ministrations were standard in a private jet. She sat down in the seat beside me and buckled herself in.

We quickly reached our flying altitude. We were merrily coasting along when, without any warning, the airplane started shaking and weaving, shooting up and dipping. My reason told me that we were merely encountering some turbulence, that in a small plane such unpleasant sensations were magnified. Scril, I clutched the armrest.

"We'll soon be out of this bad patch," the air hostess said, taking my hand.

"You don't have to baby me," I said.

"But Mrs. Reed told me that I was to take care of you."

I had never gone anywhere before with so little information,

and I asked myself how it was that, on the strength of a single meeting, I had decided to go and stay with Annette. It was uncharacteristic of me. "Think of it as an adventure," I told myself. "How many people in this world can fly in a private jet with two pilots and an air hostess attending them?"

I asked the air hostess how long the flight was.

"We should be on the ground in Portland in less than an hour," she said.

"Portland?"

"The runway on Islesboro is too short for a jet to land so we are only taking you as far as Portland. Mrs. Reed has arranged for a small propeller plane to take you on to Islesboro."

I am being carried off to the sticks, I thought.

"How far is Islesboro from Portland?"

"Not too far. The propeller plane will take you to Islesboro in less than an hour, unless the fog sets in."

"And if it does?"

"The people in Portland will arrange a taxi. I believe it's two hours by road to the ferry slip in Lincolnville."

"Ferry?"

"Yes. It's only a twenty-minute ferry ride."

I wish Annette had warned me about all these complications, I thought. For all I know, I could be trapped in Maine for days by the fog. Time probably means little to her, so she doesn't know its value. That's why she can hole up in some godforsaken island. Why did I ever agree to go there? What will I do there all day long? I don't sail—I don't do any country things.

An Urdu couplet of my father's came to me—he always had an appropriate one for any situation:

It's best to keep away from the rich.

Neither their friendship nor their enmity is good.

But then I remembered Annette's bright voice and her suppressed laugh, her warmth and spontaneity, and felt a bit ashamed of my churlishness.

As we were getting ready to land in Portland, the air hostess took my hand again. I felt that I had given her a bad impression. She seemed like a fresh-faced, small-town young woman. I realized that I did not even know her name.

"It's rather late in the day, but I wonder what your name is?" I asked.

She became all bashful. "I can't say it—I'm sorry."

I could not believe that she fancied I had designs on her and was therefore being coy.

"I only want to know your name. My name's Ved."

"Please don't press. You'll embarrass me."

"Now you've really piqued my curiosity—I really have to know."

"You don't want to know—it's obscene."

"How can a name be obscene?"

"Since we've gone this far I have to tell you that it's part of my service agreement with Mr. Engelhard that, in his plane, I can only answer to one name."

"So?"

"Have you ever read any James Bond books?"

"I have. I can't say that Ian Fleming's my kind of writer. Why do you ask?"

"Goldfinger was modelled on Mr. Engelhard. You know what he called his girlfriend."

"Oh God, no!" I said. I dropped the subject.