

Burn

JENNIFER COGNARD-BLACK

The night Edith set Morton's house on fire, she stood far back in the wrecked wheat field that doubled as his lawn, her face smooth as stone, petrol hands in her pockets, and she whispered his name with such force that even the fire now moving from the main room to the sun porch couldn't match the heat of her words. The ground shone with frost. Mitou, the heartbeat at her feet, barked and jumped. Edith's lungs ached as if yanked by breath.

"Morton Fullerton, Morton Fullerton," she said, wanting it to sound like a chant, like the name of a devil. "Morton Fullerton," she repeated, but too soft—the *t*'s more kisses than curse.

The fire had been hard to set, though Edith had thought it would be easy. When stateside rather than a Parisian expat, Morton lived a mile from any neighbor, right in the middle of Berkshire farmland. His family's old house was antediluvian, ill kept, built at the middle of the last century when every floor and doorjamb was hewn of solid oak. Edith knew Morton and his current companion, Miss Luna, had gone to the city for the weekend, and what with the cans of turpentine and all the books, Edith was sure the house would go up fast. At the cinema, arsonists never had any trouble—flames ate up everything, woosh, in a moment. A smoldering cigarette or a tipped candle could consume a curtain, a room, a whole house in nothing but a few seconds. Yet even though Edith's first petrol bomb had swallowed Morton's dresser in glorious orange, after scorching the bedroom wall, the fire had fizzled. She simply didn't understand. She'd followed Wintringham's recipe to the letter: a jam jar filled with fuel, part of a blanket wrapped over the mouth and tied with string, a petrol-soaked end hanging down, ready for

the light. Perhaps the wick had been dry, the petrol thin. Until tonight, Edith had never even lit a bonfire.

Or maybe it had been her pause. After shattering the windowpane, instead of igniting and launching her firebomb, Edith had paused, the room framed like a painting. She hadn't seen the Massachusetts bedroom for almost three years, hadn't been in the Parisian one for nearly two—not since her discovery of Morton's passion for Luna, the betrayal, all of it. It had taken more than a little sleuthing, but when she'd finally found a love letter addressed to "My dear little moon," Edith had already come to know about Morton's clandestine wedding to the French *chanteuse*, his ongoing amour with the Ranee of Sarawak, his liaison with the Paris landlady—even his dalliance with that dandy English sculptor. Dear Henry had put the point on it in one of his novels, how Morton, only five-foot-six with sky-blue eyes, a round chin, a waxed moustache, and fresh-fresh flowers in his daily buttonhole, ever looked "vague without looking weak—idle without looking empty." An *homme de coeur*, his past hazy, nothing clear or sharp, tantalizingly impressionistic, both intelligent and mysterious. Precisely the kind of man who let himself be loved.

Yet Morton could love back, surely. After their first night together—in this very house, this very room, in fact—Morton had written to her, a letter unlike any other. That next morning, Edith had been avoiding her husband Teddy (or, as Morton persisted in calling him, "Mr. Wharton"), skipping breakfast and sitting up in her bed at the Mount, her dogs, Mitou and Nicette, the bedwarmers against her feet. Pretending to catch up on correspondence, she'd written in her diary, "I know now all that I have never known before, the interfusion of spirit & sense, the double nearness, the mingled communion of touch & thought." Her heart drummed terror and rapture, her lips sore, her cheeks rough from Morton's mustache. Then came his note—as beautiful on the silver tray as a winter lamp garlanding an avenue in Paris. "I want this with you," he wrote, his handwriting large and looped. "I want you to know, my dearest dear, that I find you engulfing and beautiful and lovely and womanly and very sensual. Very animal magnetism."

After that, Edith had met him at his old farmhouse as much as she could before he sailed for France, and yet, later, when she tried to recall the details of the place—the walls and floors etched by sweat and breath—what she remembered most were his history books piled against every wall,

stacked like lean-tos, more on the coffee table, the desk, even piled next to the bathtub. His nightstand was all but invisible, merely a scaffolding to support all of his books about war and agriculture and law and slavery in between the novels Edith had given him, the ones she'd written (two of them) as well as the ones by Henry (all of them). So, now, pausing at his bedroom window, Edith expected to see a room built of books. She expected, too, to see her own Christmas gift of a Civil War tintype, an unknown soldier winking silver in the moonlight, which should have been on top of an antique toolbox holding, among other trinkets, a ring Edith had found for Morton's fortieth. Above his bed should have been a painting—some bovine landscape savoring a bit too much of larder and manger that she'd talked him into buying on the one stolen afternoon they'd managed to motor into the city. And then there was the old shirtwaist that should have hung in the closet, what she'd worn their first night together—a shirt Morton had insisted on keeping, to hold her smell, he said, when she left.

After making love, he would hold her from behind, would ask "What are you thinking?" and while sometimes Edith thought about whether he loved her, more often she considered her small gifts—the photograph, the ring, the novels—how they hummed for him when she couldn't be there, when she was writing or entertaining or taking care of Teddy's bouts of melancholy. As if the gifts sang to Morton a small, quiet song without words, the loving, tender tune a mother hums to a child fighting sleep.

When Edith had first met Miss Luna, she'd seemed like a child herself—more like a figure out of a children's book than a grown woman, and one who fit her name: whittled as a waning moon, a bit chilly. Quite out of the blue, Teddy had invited Luna to the Mount for dinner, along with Morton and Henry and the rest. Teddy had said that he found her both "odd and amusing" when they'd met at Brigham's Oyster House, a local place—one where Luna herself had recently finished two murals: a group of wine bottles circled by a grapevine and another with a cluster of lemons next to dead fowl and bowls of pasta. Teddy said the murals reminded him of eighteenth-century *trompe l'oeil*, and much later, when Edith created the opportunity to sip wine and eat oysters under Luna's nests of pasta, she had to admit that the paintings were precisely detailed, so careful with light and shadow they looked like windows—as if the viewer could reach his hand past the sill and pick a lemon or pheasant off the plate.

Yet even before Teddy admitted to having invited this lady painter to dinner, Edith was dreading the meal. Morton had written her a brief note from Paris, explaining about the request to speak at Bryn Mawr on the subject of the New York edition of Henry's novels and asking if he could make a visit—but by the time Edith received it off the steamer, Morton had already arrived. All that past summer and autumn, Edith had been haunted by his silence. From moments of such nearness, when the last shadow of separateness would melt, back into a complete *néant* of silence, of not hearing, not knowing—it was as if she didn't exist. Before Morton left, he'd written like a lover, but then for six months he treated her like an acquaintance. She finally telegraphed him, writing only, "I don't know what you want, or what I am," and still—nothing. The ocean silent as snow.

Such inconsistencies stood out as bas-relief against the memories of their few months together, first at Morton's farmhouse, then the following spring in Paris when Teddy took the Vanderbilt apartment at the Rue de Varenne with the charming old furniture—all those fine bronzes and Chinese porcelains. Months—half a year—later, and still Edith would pass by a dear, old, crooked New England church and relive and relive and relive every moment, every phrase, every look from a happy hour spent with Morton in Notre Dame, where history and romance forged a glad upward rush under her ribcage. Or, too, she would recall the moments when Morton would bark a harsh laugh, tell her something hard or brittle, such as, "You'll write better for this experience of loving," and she would imagine then that his sentimental mood had cooled, that he'd found a younger, comelier woman of wit and wealth. When she felt her most desperate, she'd lock her bedroom door and reread his old letters—the "Darling" and the "Cher amié" and the "I am mad about you, Dear Heart"—and refuse to believe that the man who wrote them did not feel them.

And, then, after six months apart, here Morton was coming to dinner, and so Edith consulted all day with the staff, closely monitoring what evolved into an antique menu. Edith took the risk of being thought a parvenu, bringing back the nostalgic table she recalled from her childhood in old New York, what with a heavy roast, both canvasback and terrapin, two soups, two sweets, and a Roman punch in the middle. She even ordered greenhouse roses and had the menu hand-printed on gilt-edged

cards. The meal would allow for wearing a vintage costume of short sleeves and full décolletage—a Victorian look that flattered her thicker waist and ample bosom, what Morton had once called his “delight.”

The guests had found the Roman punch agreeably quaint. Henry had declared the syrupy, old-fashioned drink—consisting of six cups lemonade, the juice of two oranges, and equal parts rum and champagne—“a time-honored frozen slush of a happy ending.” Everyone had laughed and raised their glasses, save Miss Luna, who had gazed at the punch bowl and held her glass without drinking.

Edith had leaned towards her then, had said, “You may be the only bona fide female painter I have ever met.” Luna had a boyish body, wishbone thin, clearly corsetless, and this evening she was sporting a man’s tie, her blouse buttoned to the neck. “What made you make such a choice? The life of an artist.”

“Oh, I don’t know why I paint,” Luna had said with a small laugh, turning her glass between delicate hands, etched like fossils. “Neither does anyone else, I imagine. No one really cares, in any case. Do they?” Luna’s large, pale eyes bounced light rather than owned it.

“Perhaps,” said Edith. “And yet if I didn’t write, I believe I would die.” She glanced towards Morton, hoping he would hear her emphasis on “die.” Apart from a stilted greeting in front of Teddy, one in which she’d felt ripples of flame all over, she and Morton hadn’t spoken all evening, although she’d noticed every flick of his blue eyes round the table—how they paused every so often at Miss Luna.

“I doubt I would die if I wasn’t able to paint,” said Luna, laughing again.

“I would die if I dined alone!” said another woman, a Miss Jones who had come as the Captain’s guest, her waterfall of Gibson Girl curls forever bouncing, bouncing.

From his end of the table, Henry said, “But women never dine alone,” in his steadiest, deepest, most pedagogical voice. “When they are alone, they don’t dine.”

At this, the group cheered themselves again with a toast, though this time Morton was the one to still his glass, looking hard at Luna. His look held all Edith already knew of him and his women—how in Paris they lived with their lovers in apartments with the rooms all on one floor. For Morton, Luna would be a veritable George Sand. Like a scene from French fiction, Edith could already imagine their first tryst.

When Morton left that evening, Edith did not even show him to the door. The thank-you note he sent the following morning contained nothing but the requisite “I am obliged” and “so very good to see you.” Years ago, when he’d sent her what she now thought of as his first love letter, the cordial formality of his “thank you” for dinner at the Mount was belied by an enclosed sprig of witch hazel—a wet bloom he’d unexpectedly found motoring home across the snowy roads.

But, now, pausing and peering into Morton’s farmhouse bedroom, her feet cold against the foundation, Edith remembered every word of yet another note, the one she’d found to Luna, Morton’s handwriting still looping and open as if sincere. “The letters survive, and everything survives,” he wrote at the close. “All the ghosts of the old kisses come back, my dearest dear, and live again in the one I send you tonight.”

It had taken Edith two full weeks to find that note, evidence of what she already knew was true. Edith—a “lady of talent,” as Teddy called her—had spent plenty of time in Paris salons and English garden parties, and so she knew something of artists. She knew, for instance, that they kept odd hours, that they were often impulsive and vain, and that they were forever trying to capture a fugitive moment—how light dapples the inside of one’s eyelids or the look of lace across a windowpane. So Edith had decided to show up, unannounced, at Luna’s Boston studio.

On the long drive with her chauffeur, Edith had written fragments in her working journal, notes of what she most remembered during the long silence, ever waiting and waiting for Morton to send word across the pond, even a single sentence, a single word. Returning to the Mount after that spring together in Paris—when Teddy went off to the Boston sanatorium for his nerves and the big house creaked for want of voices—Edith had unpacked her own trunk, refusing help. Pulling her dresses out one by one, she’d spread them on the bed, the sofa, the easy chair. Cloaks, too, as well as hats and tea gowns: all that she had worn in America and France for the six months of her *affaire de coeur*. Of the black dress she wore the first time they went to the Sorbonne, she wrote, “Would he like me in it? I wondered and wondered.” Then how many of the other dresses gave her the same thought—how when he noticed an *ensemble*, or praised it, *quelle joie!* All of the frocks and gowns, all of their excursions to Herblay . . . Mountfort L’Amaury . . . Provins . . . Beauvais . . . Montmorency . . . Senlis . . . Meudon. What dear, sweet,

crowding memories. The grey tea gown she'd worn the first night they had dined alone. The aubergine dress she'd put on the day they went to Herblay, when, in a small church, for the briefest moment, she'd first felt complete happiness.

For her surprise visit to Luna, Edith had once again dressed with care—a semi-princess design made of ruby-red *crepe de chine* with bands of pink silk at the waist and hem. The style emphasized all that made her womanly, what in polite circles a gentleman might call “flattering.” Yet when Luna opened her own door wearing a paint-splattered man's shirt and a startling pair of cuffed trousers, Edith felt like a pink flamingo.

“Oh, would you like a slice of cake?” Luna asked by way of a greeting. “I've tried something and made it with pickled mangoes.”

Edith didn't know quite what to say other than she would be interested to see such a cake.

It turned out that the cake was a light orange color, sloped, placed right on top of numerous drawings of squares and circles that littered a table. Having never baked a cake entirely by herself—only assisting her childhood cook now and then—Edith was surprised at how crude it looked, like a hunk of clay before molding.

“You made it yourself,” Edith said, not a question.

“Of course, of course,” said Luna. “My nephew Martin's fifth birthday is soon, and I said I would bake him any cake he wished. He asked for mango. Mango! So exotic, I thought I'd better practice.”

Above the cake there were several other sketches pinned to the wall of even more squares and circles—this time arranged as if the circles inhabited the squares—as well as another drawing of a table, a steaming cup of coffee at its center. It looked like an exercise in perspective, with straight lines radiating from cup to corners, a kind of precision Edith equated with Morton, all those fussy collars and ties. Beyond was another room—a bedroom, Edith assumed, given the rumple of bedclothes she could just glimpse through the doorway (seemingly Luna's rooms were all on one floor)—with a bicycle tire, a baseball bat, and a rugby ball crowded together along the baseboard.

“Martin's equipment,” said Luna, waving her hand as if saying goodbye. “He believes he is a bandit, wears a bandana up over his nose most of the time. The bicycle tire, the bat—well, I'm not sure what they have to do with thievery, but something.”

“I imagine he will find it hard to enjoy his cake through a bandana,” said Edith.

Luna laughed again, asking if Edith wanted a cup of tea with her cake. Luna almost always spoke with a laugh.

“Thank you, yes,” said Edith. “May I peruse your paintings for a moment?”

Luna agreed and disappeared, and Edith moved to the other side of the large room, which consisted of the upper part of an old storage building. Allowing for quantities of liquid light, the two main windows were enormous—giant, blank eyes. Following the arrangement of modern New York galleries, the paintings and photographs were interspersed together on the walls. Morton himself had written of the Photo-Secessionists for a *Times* article, and so Edith knew of their desire for dialogue across artists of all ranks and types.

“Are all of the paintings yours?” Edith called, her voice too high. “Did you paint them?”

“The ones of food,” Luna called back. “The food—the food is all mine!”

The paintings were colossal. A mammoth melon shaped like a giant’s green head, an ice cream sundae heaped as high as a cumulous cloud, a joint of Brobdingnagian meat, a bottle of wine as big as an Elizabethan headboard. “Have you yet painted a mango?” asked Edith, though too quietly for Luna to hear, imagining a citrus circle to eclipse the sun—which is when she glanced down and spied an envelope on the floor of the bedroom, next to the bicycle tire. Edith’s skin turned to ice. Morton’s writing paper, she was sure.

Edith couldn’t see Luna in whatever rough space served as the kitchen, and so she moved quickly. “I have drunk the wine of life, my dear little moon,” it began, “and I have been warmed through.” In one of Edith’s own letters—left at Morton’s Paris apartment with a servant and a bottle of Burgundy—she had written to him, “I have drunk the wine of life at last, I have known the thing best worth knowing, I have been warmed through & through, never to grow quite cold again till the end.” That had been towards the end of Edith’s time at the Rue de Varenne, when she had believed that the compass of their two hearts had turned into one, a miracle.

Though Edith ate every bite of her slice of mango cake and dutifully asked after the receipt, the remainder of her afternoon was a locked door on a bitter night.

“Four eggs,” said Luna, “beaten until quite fluffy, then tip in one and a half cups of sugar. I poured in a half cup of melted butter and a whole cup of honey slowly—slowly, slowly—into the bowl.” At this Luna laughed yet again, this time for long enough that it sounded a bit like crying. “Then, let me see, two cups of cake flour, dashes of cinnamon, nutmeg, some cut-up bits of orange and lemon rind, a few walnuts, a couple of pinches of yeast powder, a fistful of raisins—well, and, of course, two of the pickled mangoes, diced small.”

“And the frosting?” asked Edith, who was wondering if Morton had crossed this very threshold, had sat in this very chair, had tried his own bit of mango cake. Morton Fullerton—who had split Edith’s heart, an apple to a cutting board.

“A basic frosting,” Luna said. “Butter, sugar. A little orange juice.”

A novelist knows how to design a plot, and from the moment she left Luna’s studio, Edith’s planning had been precise. She’d waited ten days—until Teddy was back in Boston, Morton in New York. That evening, she’d retired early, claiming a headache to the servants, then had woken promptly at one o’clock in the morning. With speed and care, she had dressed in clothes worthy of Luna—men’s marauding garb: black trousers, a dark shirt and an even darker jacket, black socks and shoes, finished with a stable boy’s hat and coat and gloves. After double-checking the petrol level in the motorcar, Edith had made sure she had the two firebombs, the rubbish sack, and her change of clothing. She brought Mitou along, for company and nerve. Even the weather cooperated: cold and dry, but with a brilliant moon.

Usually her chauffeur, Cook, drove, but Edith remained confident with the wheel, her grip solid and sure. Once—only once—Edith and Morton had driven without Cook, a dear half hour coming back from St. Cloud. It had been snowing—the first snow of that Berkshire winter—and the flakes had frozen on the windows, shutting them in, shutting everything else out. Edith had felt Morton’s dearest side then, the side that she always thought of as simple and sensitive and true. In that moment, their breath visible, mingling their words, so warm and so cold, Edith had wished to be like a touch of wings brushing by him in the darkness or like the scent of an invisible garden that he would pass on an unknown road at night. She wanted to be his comfort—not a momentary sympathy but the very threads that would weave the fabric of his heart. When she’d finally

confided in Henry—she simply had to tell someone; it was impossible to contain her joy—he had looked at her under that beetle brow of his and had said that while Morton was beautiful and tender and intelligent, he was not kind. “He’s not kind, Puss. There it is.” Henry had pulled down the front of his waistcoat like an exclamation mark. “Fullerton is not kind.” With Mitou curled on the car seat next to her, Edith had repeated, “Fullerton is not kind. Morton Fullerton is not kind.”

When finally she had arrived at his farmhouse, even never having smashed anything on purpose—not one wine glass or china plate—she had no trouble finding a concrete baseball from his crumbling foundation, throwing it hard, and smashing Morton’s pane of glass on the very first try.

But then, then—instead of lighting the wick and hurling her homemade firebomb into the room, grabbing Mitou, and finding a safe distance to make sure that the whole house would burn—she’d paused. Edith had paused and looked for herself in the room, lit by moonlight. The toolbox was gone, as was the tintype. Replacing the bovine landscape, above the bed was what had to be a self-portrait of Luna walking away from her own canvas, her brittle back naked, another scandalous pair of man’s trousers slung low, a shoe hooked on each thumb. Tossed in the corners were her painting smocks, a pair of earrings and an amber pendant lay tangled on the dresser, her bloomers looped the floor. Even the books on the nightstand layered Luna’s over Morton’s, like a kid’s game of stacking hands: his history books beneath her shilling shockers. This room wasn’t a painting, fixed and still. It was a moving, thrumming room, one in which two people slept and dressed and read and talked and fought and laughed and, yes, made love.

It was then that Edith had told Mitou to get back, lit the blanket’s wick and quickly broke her first bomb against the dresser—against that honey-colored pendant given, she was sure, as a gift from Morton. As Edith’s face grew warm, she’d thought of all these humming objects, the songs they sang, and wondered if the pendant’s little tune would start to scream.

But the fire had died almost as soon as it started, the blue-orange light and moonlit shadows transforming the room into something beautiful and strange. If Edith could paint, she’d thought, she wouldn’t paint pasta or mangoes—she would paint this: a shock of lantern light moving across a bedroom wall at night, wells of darkness crowding old corners. She would paint the mystery of looking: how a short, not particularly handsome man

could transform into something gorgeous or a woman with no bosom and a boy's straight hips could become, under this man's body, as greenish-blue fresh as a fish just landed, slapping and quivering on a rock, waiting to be slit open.

The second time, Edith had lit her firebomb more carefully, aiming for Morton's books, that tinderbox of cherished paper. The explosion was tactile, dazzling.

Feeling sore in her shoulders and wrists as if she'd just fought in hand-to-hand combat, Edith had called to Mitou, springing from side to side as if caged, and they'd walked the mile or so between the house and where she'd left the motorcar. There, she'd turned back once towards the fire, watching as the sunporch glowed yellow.

"Morton Fullerton, Morton Fullerton," she'd whispered.

Now, turning away, she took off every piece of men's clothing, one by one, folding each neatly into a rubbish bag. When she went back to the Mount, she would drop the whole down an unused well. She was momentarily naked and outdoors—something Edith had never experienced before and never would again. The wind burned. Would Morton like this gown, she wondered, this particular drape of skin? Then she dressed again in her sober driving gown and called to Mitou.

The roof collapsed. Even at this distance, Edith felt singed. The heat was a push, a hot hand propelling her backwards.

"Come on," she said to Mitou, who'd barked himself raw. "Come on. Come on, now," she said, opening the back and front door of the motorcar together, letting them both in at once.

Driving down the dirt road, fields as empty as her heart on either side, the burning farmhouse was an exploding star behind her.

Edith said, "Goodbye, my dearest dear," and her words were both heard and seen, formed whole from the steam of her mouth.

BOOKS THAT COOK

The Making of a Literary Meal



Edited by

JENNIFER COGNARD-BLACK

and

MELISSA A. GOLDTHWAITE



With a Foreword by

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DAVID CITINO, poet and Professor of English at The Ohio State University for over three decades, was the author of ten books of poetry, including *The Weight of the Heart*, *Broken Symmetry*, *The News and Other Poems*, and *A History of Hands*.

JENNIFER COGNARD-BLACK is Professor of English at St. Mary's College of Maryland, where she teaches creative writing, women's literature, and the novel. The author of *Narrative in the Professional Age* as well as the coeditor of *Kindred Hands: Letters on Writing and Advancing Rhetoric*, Cognard-Black also publishes short fiction under the pseudonym J. Annie MacLeod.

LAURIE COLWIN was a fiction writer and essayist who published across a number of venues, from the *New Yorker* to *Mademoiselle* to *Playboy*. The author of ten books, Colwin is widely known for works *Home Cooking* and *More Home Cooking*. Under the title *Ask Me Again*, PBS aired an adaptation of one of her pieces of short fiction, "An Old-Fashioned Story."

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TENAYA DARLINGTON blogs about cheese under the moniker "Madame Fromage." Her most recent book is *The Di Bruno Bros. House of Cheese: A*