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# The Man in White

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## RICHARD GOODMAN

### *The Man in White*

In 1975, I was thirty years old, living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and fairly miserable. I was at loose ends, in one of those becalmed times we have in our lives, not knowing what I wanted to do. I hated Cambridge. Maybe that was because I was working at the Spaghetti Emporium as a waiter. The Spaghetti Emporium was, how shall I put it, a cavernous restaurant in a basement off Harvard Square that served fourth-rate food—spaghetti, obviously, with various uninspired sauces—in dingy, clamorous surroundings to a highly demanding clientele.

The restaurant was cheap in every way you can imagine, but the most inventive way was with entertainment. There wasn't much of it, but one night we had a singer. He was a singer of popular Italian street songs—you know, "O Sole Mio," that sort of thing. He was nine years old. He showed up with his mother. He was dressed in a blue tuxedo with elaborate ruffles and shiny patent leather shoes. A fellow waiter and I looked incredulously as he started to croon—for that's exactly what he did. The sound system was hardly functioning, and the acoustics were like something from the Lascaux caves. After two songs, the boy had unfastened his bow tie and opened the top two buttons of his shirt, Dean Martin-style. When he knelt down before an octogenarian female diner, looked into her eyes, and warbled, "That's *amore!*" I vowed to do something else with my life.

But what? I had a master's degree in English, but I couldn't get a teaching job in one day, or even in one month. Besides, this town was full of aimless young men and women with multiple degrees standing on corners ready to teach. Should I get yet another waiting job? The thought made me retch.

I lived on Gray Street, not terribly far from Harvard Square, and every day I walked to work. I found a shortcut that would take me through a little alley past a small French restaurant called Chez Jean and onto Shepard Street. From there, I walked past the Commons to my dreaded job. When I walked down the little alleyway, I would see the open back door of Chez Jean, with just a screen door between me and whatever was within. I would see a shadowy figure from time to time moving across

the entrance way, obscured somewhat by the screen door's mesh. Who was that? I wondered.

But what really enthralled me were the smells coming out of that back door and floating into my nose and brain. They were rich, deep, complex, and intense. They were new to me. I couldn't tell what they were, ignorant as I was of French cuisine, but whatever they were, I was their slave for the half minute it took me to walk past that open door. So delicious! I could smell skill, care, and subtlety in the air. Then I'd be past Chez Jean and back into the real world, walking to work.

The day after the infamous boy singer episode, his prepubescent voice still ringing in my ear, I got ready, once again, to make my way to the Spaghetti Emporium. I had it in my mind that I was going to get out, but I was stumped as to how. I walked from my apartment and turned down the alleyway to walk by Chez Jean. It was a splendid day, balmy and fragrant. The back door was open. The gorgeous smells came to me, once again.

Instead of passing by, I stopped. I walked to the screen door. I opened it, and I walked in.

Suddenly, as if I had walked through the wardrobe in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, I was in a different world. I was in a natural-light-infused kitchen. The room had a high ceiling, at the top of which were two broad skylights. It was quiet in there, I noticed right away. There was a massive gas stove, heavy and formidable-looking. On it, two giant pots stood with the barest flicker under them. I could see they were each filled to the brim with liquid, percolating slowly away, with the skins of onions and tomatoes and portions of celery stalks and carrot ends on the surface. My nose told me that this was the source of some of the wonderful smells that had enthralled me every day as I walked by.

I was taking all this in with wonder. But here was a man in front of me, dressed in white fatigues with a long white apron. He had a russet moustache and somewhat weary eyes, and an expression of deep curiosity on his face.

"Yes, may I 'elp you?" he said in an accent that seemed to me unmistakably French.

"I...I..." and here all those harried, greasy, plate-banging evenings at the Emporium gave me the motivation I needed.

"I... I want a job!" I said much louder than normal. "I want to learn to cook! I want to be a chef! I want to learn French!"

He blinked. The thing of it was, he hardly reacted to this disturbed

individual in his kitchen with flailing arms. He simply said, "Do you 'ave any 'xperience?"

"No!" I said with great conviction, as if this were the one supreme skill any employer would desire in a worker.

"Oh," he said. Then he rubbed his chin. "Well, it 'appens that my assistant go to a hospital yesterday to have his appendix taken out. Now I am without an assistant."

"Great!" I said. "*Take me!*"

"You are available?"

"Yes! All I have to do is quit my job. I can do that right now."

"Well, then, okay."

"What? Really?"

"Okay. Yes."

"Thank you! *Merci!*" I said.

I introduced myself. The man in white before me said his name was Edmond Landrier. We shook hands. His grip was strong. I could see his rope-thick forearm muscles working. He gave me a basic tour of the kitchen and explained how things went, but it was all a blur. He told me the hours, and we discussed money, but I probably would have worked for nothing. I said goodbye and walked out of the magical back door I had so recently walked through. My life had changed in an instant. I strolled to the Emporium, whistling, and quit my job.

The next day, I returned at the appointed hour of two p.m. Edmond got me outfitted into some whites and an apron. I felt like I had been transformed. What now? I stood there in my unblemished whites, ignorant as a spoon, waiting. First, I had to become acquainted with everything in the kitchen. Edmond showed me all the instruments of cooking—pots, pans, ladles, and so on, all larger than life. He showed me the sharpest knives I'd ever seen. I say "seen," because they were so sharp they shimmered, sending out waves of allure, drawing me toward them like Sirens seeming to say, "Come here. With your finger. One day, you'll be ours."

I looked at Edmond as he explained the kitchen to me. He was a sinewy, medium-sized man who looked fatigued and undoubtedly was. His face seemed to glisten with a light film of sweat. He had a habit of punctuating his talk by sniffing, which would raise one end of his moustache as if it were winking. His eyes were bloodshot. His voice was a baritone, perfect for speaking French, or for speaking French-accented English. He didn't talk much, though, but when he did, I listened raptly.

When he talked about cooking, Edmond was direct and unambiguous.

When I did something wrong—which, at the beginning, was constantly—he simply said, “That is not the way to do it.” He never qualified that. Even if what I did was just marginally wrong, Edmond still said, “That is not the way to do it.”

He had originally been a pastry chef. That was his formal training in France. When he came to Boston, he found that he couldn’t make a living simply as a pastry chef, so he learned to cook everything else on the menu. But he was still a pastry chef at heart. I remember standing next to him as he showed me how to make an apple tart. “What’s a tart?” I asked. Again, I got that quizzical look, this time with a sniff and the raised moustache. I watched as he mixed flour with butter in a bowl. He never looked directly at me but spoke toward the bowl as he mixed the flour and butter into a double fist-sized ball. He talked to me of how dough behaved and how to manage it. I had never heard anyone talk about an ingredient this way. He took a rolling pin. “You put some flour. *Pas trop*. Not too much.” In a motion as if he were tossing seeds to birds, he sprinkled the surface of the table with flour and sprinkled the rolling pin, too. He took the rolling pin and, using the flats of his outstretched palms to maneuver the center of the pin, he began to urge the ball of dough outward.

“You don’t use the handles?” I asked as I watched him work the center of the rolling pin.

“No. You ’ave more control this way.”

And it was true! I saw how the dough obeyed Edmond, splaying outward in perfect measures, this way and that, to a uniform thickness, guided by only the pressure of his palms on the center of the rolling pin. He made deft, small adjustments, pressing slightly on the center of the pin with one palm and then with the other. When the dough was rolled out, he took two fingers and slid them under the pale, flaccid blanket. “You see it is all the same thickness,” he said, holding part of it up for me to see. It looked easy, but God save me, it was not. I learned later how hard it was to use a rolling pin gracefully. When I finally did, I felt as if I had done something heroic. Maybe I had.

Edmond used a knife to cut the dough into a slim rectangular shape, the basic form of a tart. His fingers manipulated the sides of the dough, making swift surgical pinches, first on one side, then the other. This produced a fluted border that, when baked, looked very pretty indeed. He cut another slim rectangle from the remaining dough.

“Now you try,” he said.

I pinched the sides of dough in what I thought was a motion similar to Edmond's. The results looked as if I were trying to harm the dough.

"That is not the way to do it," Edmond said. He showed me again. It took me four weeks to learn to maneuver dough well enough for Edmond to give me his highest approval: "That is okay." That was more than enough.

Edmond showed me how to do the simplest things, the most basic things—like chopping an onion and slicing a carrot in the French way. This consisted of cutting the onion first vertically, then horizontally, and then vertically once again, which produced small, perfect cubes. That was surprisingly difficult. This was because the main difference between doing this at home and doing it for money in a restaurant is *speed*. At home, you can work at your leisure. There is too much to do in too little time in a restaurant for leisure. Edmond took a knife. It bristled with sharpness, nearly hissing at me. He wore his white kitchen shirt with the top two buttons open, showing some wan, glistening skin. He first showed me how to chop an onion, everything going so fast, as if his hand were programmed. Then he showed me how to slice a carrot into perfect, blunt juliennes. He asked me to try. Thankfully, he walked away to work on something else.

I peeled eight or nine carrots. A peeled carrot is wet and slippery, and, most challenging, round. It's very hard to maintain with your fingers. I had to first cut the carrot in half. I grasped the reluctant carrot with my fingertips as Edmond had showed me. I picked up the heavy, sharp knife, but the carrot slithered out of my grasp before I could cut it. I tried again, but this time the carrot sprung from my grip and shot off the table. Edmond, who always seemed to see my mistakes even with his back turned, came over.

"That is not the way to do it," he said. He took the knife from my hand and held the carrot firmly with the tips of his fingers and then cut the carrot cleanly in half with a perfect incision. He gave me the knife. "You must be the boss of the carrot," he said. "You must not let the carrot be the boss of you."

Becoming the boss of the carrot proved difficult. That's when the awaiting knife finally made its move and sliced through my thumbnail without even a whisper. The knife was so sharp I didn't even feel what happened. Then I noticed my carrot was drizzled with blood. Edmond fetched a small first aid kit from a cabinet and took out a few Band-Aids. "'Ere," he said, handing them to me. It was about then that the thumb began to throb, as if it contained my heart. The knife had been the boss of me.

As the tart baked, as the ducks roasted, as the stock bubbled slowly

away, as the *coq au vin* cooked, the kitchen slowly filled with those magnificent smells that had ravished me on my walks by the back door. Those rich, deep, complex, and intense smells. All in the light-filled stillness of a warm summer afternoon. This time, though, I was helping in their creation. This was perhaps the first time I was conscious of the rigors of trying to attain perfection. I was learning from a master. It felt ancient, and powerful, and good.

What I am leaving out, of course, is the actual cooking for the actual patrons. I wanted to give you an impression of my slow emergence out of ignorance first, and what it was like to learn from Edmond Landrier. The restaurant opened its doors at six o'clock. Before that, the three or four waiters who worked at Chez Jean would arrive and begin setting up their stations. Oh, how glad I was I wasn't one of them! Never mind that the restaurant was so much better than the Spaghetti Emporium. It was the idea that now I was in the kitchen, making and creating—and *not* a waiter. Then the dishwasher arrived, and the French woman who seated people and took reservations came with her hauteur. Edmond and I would banter with them a bit, but we didn't have much free time. We were prepping right up until the first order was placed.

The pace picked up gradually, quarter hour by quarter hour, until, at eight o'clock, it was at its absolute height. That's when the place became slightly anarchic and desperate. At its furious height, the kitchen was broiling hot—hot as a windowless tool shed on a scorching July day. I was constantly behind, trying to make up for lost time, and this inevitably made me make mistakes in my rush. Edmond, though, no matter how harried we got, was able to salvage things, adjusting matters here and there to compensate for my overzealousness. Still, it could get like that famous scene in Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* where it's impossible for the Little Tramp to keep up with the assembly line. Pressure, pressure, pressure. Tempers flared. Patrons wanted to know where their food was. Edmond, angry that they didn't understand this was a French restaurant and that dishes were made to order and not pre-prepared, would say, "Well, why don't you tell them to get a *Beeg Mac*?" Somehow we got through it.

I burned myself on a regular basis. It was impossible not to. Pots and pans had to be moved hurriedly, and dishes had to be taken out of the furiously hot oven. When you reach for a pot or a pan on a stove in a harried kitchen, without looking carefully, you don't think about where the handle's been. It may have been over a flame—this was a gas stove, remember. That handle might be nebula hot. When you reach inside an

oven to snatch out a pan, your forearm will more often than not touch a scorching oven rack. Once I burned a wide, translucent path on my forearm. "Look at this!" I said to Edmond. He smiled a small smile. Then he rolled up his sleeve and showed me seventeen or eighteen permanent stripes on his arm, one after another, from his wrist to his biceps, looking like some kind of bizarre rank. Then he rolled down his sleeve. "Oh," I said.

From time to time I would be so hot and depleted, I had to walk outside, out that celebrated screen door, to take desperate breaths of fresh, soft night air. It was almost as if I were drowning in heat inside. I was so grateful to breathe in this outside air. I couldn't stay long. Just a minute or two was lovely.

At the end of the evening, when we had finished cooking and had cleaned the stove and swept the floor and put everything away, Edmond went to the basement refrigerator and got two cold beers, one for each of us. This was the most honest, satisfying beer I've ever drunk, and it went down, cold swig after cold swig, like a delicious dream. Then, around eleven at night, out of my war-worn whites and back into my own clothes, I'd walk the two or three minutes back to my apartment where I would shower and collapse into my bed, spent.

The next morning I'd wake up gradually, but by two o'clock, I was ready to do it all over again.

Then there was the actual moment, like learning a new language, when I shifted from ignorance into some form of workable knowledge. When I was actually more of an asset than a liability—when I was a cook. And one day, Edmond—and I don't remember what prompted this—stopped what he was doing in the kitchen and said to me, "I think you are learning how to cook." I still think about this today, so many years later.

In six months, Edmond Landrier took a raw recruit, a young man who didn't know his head from his aspic, to a level of acceptable competency in a French kitchen. That is not to say that I was ready to open my own French bistro in New York, but it is to say that I knew how to make a proper terrine, a good *tarte au pomme*, and a *sauce basquaise*; I knew how to create a *sauce béarnaise*, a veal marengo, and *riz de veau*. I knew how to make a savory *coq au vin*, how to make five or six crêpes suzettes in a flash, how to turn out a good-looking *sole amandine*.

I learned that failure in a French kitchen can often be declared a victory with a little bit of magic, and so I must never despair. I learned how to be graceful under pressure, how to stand up for myself, how to never

be satisfied with the imperfect, the less-than-right, the ill-made. I learned economy, how nothing was ever wasted in a French kitchen, and that we can exist and succeed with less.

And I could do it all in the blistering heat of an excited, harried kitchen at its peak on a hot Saturday evening in July.

I learned it all by walking through that magical back door, one desperate spring afternoon, from Edmond Landrier, the man in white.