

## “A Bite to Eat with Edwina Huffington”



### Characters

Edwina Huffington, a plump girl of twenty.

Mother Huffington, her stocky, stern mother.

### Setting

An empty, stuffy dining establishment off Ladies Mile, New York City, a stifling, hot summer afternoon in 1895.

*EDWINA and her MOTHER enter, carrying parcels. They survey the empty room.*

MOTHER

*(Points to table with her parasol, then barrels towards it)*

Over here, Edwina, we can look out the window while we dine. Come along. No dawdling now. This humidity is terrible. It took all strength I had to open that sticky restaurant door.

*(Edwina shuffles clumsily thru the empty room, her long skirt banging into empty chairs)*

Edwina, please! Be more careful! My, we can't take you anywhere, can we? If you could only be a little more delicate in your movement, why, you nearly crushed that poor sales clerk back in the sheet music department at Best and Company!

*(Looks about)*

Oh, my, no server to pull out our chairs? I hope the food here is not nearly as lax as the service! They are open all hours of the day and all night, seven days a week. That's what the sign outside said. Perhaps it is busier at other times of the day or night.

*(Pulls out her own chair, then plops gracelessly in seat, putting her water jug on the table)*

This empty jug of water is just as heavy as it is full...oh dear, the dishes have not been cleared! I'll think twice before visiting this establishment, but it is close to the streetcar. We'll back home in Brooklyn before long -

*(She starts to get up, then stops)*

No, I did want to sit near the window and gaze out upon the street. All the finery, the lovely ladies...

*(Takes out piano music)*

And look at my new piano sheet music.

*(Sits back down and snaps her fingers at Edwina)*

Edwina Huffington, come here and sit! Looking out the window will do you good. Just sit and we can watch all the lovely refined young ladies stroll past. Maybe you'll get somewhat of an education, as you watch them and take note of their posture and grace – Sit!

*(Edwina pulls out chair and sits ungracefully)*

What an ox you are, Edwina. My word. We'll never find a young man to court you, if you plan on exhibiting those kinds of manners. Terrible manners. No wonder you hide in your bedroom all day and night, with those terrible manners...

*(Looks around)*

No one to clear the table? I'll just have to do it myself. There may be a very small gratuity left under the butter dish today...

*(Takes plates and stacks them on Edwina's side of the table.)*

There! Now I have a clean place to enjoy my light meal. A nice kidney pie, I think, and a nice iced tea...

*(She looks around room, thinking)*

You know, Edwina, I think I have been here before. Dined here before, with my second cousin, a few years ago. Around Christmas time. My second cousin Harriet, from East Astoria, that dreadful village in the middle of nowhere. Queens, what a miserable place, swamps, mud--

*(Edwina begins to look through the stacked plates)*

You remember her...short, plump, not too bright, no one courting her, no "suitor"...a little like you, I believe...and we had the kidney pie, too. I recall it was very good. Nice and hot. And we had steaming cider. We had just come up from Fourteenth Street, a lovely piano recital at the Lyric, walked all the way up here. I remember the wind was howling and the snow was piling up everywhere and the railcars were clattering overhead on Sixth Avenue.

*(Wipes her brow)*

Of course, I'd rather be where she is right now, out in the middle of a nice breezy nowhere, in East Astoria, instead of in this suffering heat. She has trees and farmland all around her, and she and her family can walk right to Bowery Bay Beach –

*(Snaps at her daughter)*

Edwina Huffington, leave those plates alone! The server will be her any minute. Just sit back and enjoy that overhead fan. This city gets hotter every summer, Edwina. Even Brooklyn is hot, not at all like what it used to be.

*(Edwina chooses a plate and lifts it, looking intently at the remains)*

You're too young to remember, Edwina, but when I was a little girl – before you were born, so how could you remember? Before that terrible war in the South, we would go to the beach too. Pack up our big cooking pot early in the morning and get to the shore by noontime. It was so

cool and breezy, that clean salt air. Father would dig for clams and oysters, Mother made a big fire and we would cook them in a big pot. I would lie in the sand and look at my piano sheet music, in the sun. Then nap and dream about becoming a famous piano player.

*(Remembers fondly)*

I had such ambition back then; I practiced my piano every chance I could get. Early in the morning until late at night. Up the scales and down the scales and up the scales and...

*(Snaps back to the present)*

Well, then we'd pack up and be back at home before midnight. I was too sunburned to sleep; I was in pain for days and days after. Couldn't work on my piano lessons, nothing! There was not a note of piano music in that house for a week.

*(Pause)*

Then, the next week, we would do it again. All summer long. Father would pack...

*(Thinks)*

Funny, now that I think about it, we could have saved so much time back then, if Father just went to the sea market around the corner from our house, purchased a bushel of clams and oysters, brought them back home. Mother could have put the clams and oysters in to the cooking pot right there and I could have stayed inside and worked on my piano lessons. Cool and happy.

*(Edwina begins to lick the plate in her hand)*

My skin would be nice and cool, and Mother and Father would enjoy the sound of my piano playing as they enjoyed their clams and – Edwina! Stop that this instant!

*(Bangs on table)*

Stop it! What an embarrassment you are! You'd be better off locked away! Maybe we should put you on the next ferry over to that Blackwell's Island, along with the other people who are wrong in the head. Stop it this instant!

*(Bangs on table again. Edwina slowly puts down plate)*

Why on earth to you continue to do that, especially here in public!

EDWINA

*(Blunt but polite)*

To shut you up, Mother. For one minute, that's all I ask. Stop talking about the heat, your piano lessons, your second cousin, ME, the lovely ladies on the street. You wonder why I stay in my bedroom all day and night, Mother. Why I take my meals in my bedroom and not with you?

MOTHER

Maybe we should not call you Edwina, but Nellie Bly! I'll send you off to Blackwell's Island with all those sick and crazy women.

EDWINA

*(Continuing her thought)*

And to get away from you and your piano playing. Day and night, night and day. You pay more attention to your sheet music than me! Or father!

MOTHER

Well, I never thought I'd hear this.

*(Takes date book out of her bag)*

I must have forgotten to mark this day in my day planner. I must be too involved with my piano playing.

*(Angrily rites in book)*

*"Tuesday August 18<sup>th</sup> 1896, my lovely daughter Edwina Huffington will forget to mind her tongue in public AND in front of her own mother."*

EDWINA

*(Stands)*

Let us return home, mother. The heat is getting to both of us. The ferry ride will do us good. It is just too hot-

*(Notices piece of paper attached to Mothers back)*

Mother, something has stuck itself to the back of your dress.

MOTHER

*(Haughtily)*

Perhaps it is what remains of the knife you tried to stab me with, with your evil words.

EDWINA

No, Mother. It's a-

*(Pulls paper from Mothers back)*

-note, Mother.

*(Reads)*

*"Due to the extreme heat, we are closing abruptly for the day. We regret any inconvenience this suddenness may have caused you."* Mother, you must have pushed open the door, broken the lock. We are ...intruders!

MOTHER

There was no lock on the door! They are open all hours of the day and all night, seven days a week. What would they need...with...a...lock...

*(Looks around)*

Oh my, we are intruders! We have to leave, at once! If we are discovered, we'll be considered thieves and be sent off to Blackwell's Island for sure! The intruders ward!

*(She stands)*

Let's leave right away, Edwina.

*(Picks up jug of water)*

But first, Edwina, be a dear and fill your mothers water just from those water pitchers on each table. No senses letting good water go to waste. NO sense parching ourselves on the streetcar and on the ferry back to Brooklyn.

EDWINA

*(Takes jug and heads to each table pouring water into the jug)*

Mother, can I tell you a secret? Something I have never told anyone else, ever before.

MOTHER

Are you going to raise your voice to me when you tell me? Be rude?

EDWINA

No, mother and I am sorry about how I spoke before. Forgive me.

MOTHER

I forgive you dear. Now, tell me your secret. I adore secrets! Once, my cousin, Harriet, she told me the most delicious secret about her brother, Clem. It seems that Clem was in the woodshed one afternoon, and the woodman came by to deliver a cord of wood. Well, Harriet needed some kindling for the kitchen stove, so she went to the woodshed, only to find-

EDWINA

Mother! Not that kind of secret!

*(Continues to fill up jug)*

Well, you know that I stay in my bedroom most of the time I am at home.

MOTHER

This isn't about my piano playing, again, is it? How much more do you want to hurt your mother?

EDWINA

No, well not really. Mother, when you are in the parlor playing your piano, well, the music puts me to sleep.

MOTHER

The soothing sounds of the melodies created by my fingers on the keyboard...

EDWINA

*(Ignoring her)*

And when I fall asleep, I have this dream, the same dream over and over again, most of the time.

MOTHER

The playing of the notes on my sheet music make you dreams...aaah...

EDWINA

*(Ignoring her)*

In this dream, I am near a cliff and there is a wooden walkway going up to the cliff. And there are people lined up on the wooden walkway, waiting their turn. The walkway is whitewashed, very clean.

MOTHER

Do you hear my music in your - waiting in line? In a dream? How silly you are, Edwina. Hurry up with my water jug, let's be going.

EDWINA

*(Ignoring her)*

They are waiting their turn to jump! Jump off the cliff. In the dream, I go up to someone, a well dressed woman and ask her why she is in line to jump, and she tells me that she and the rest of the people are so rich; they have so much wealth...I can't explain it. I may have to visit this dream again...they are so rich that if they have nothing to do that day. They can jump off the cliff into the next day! They pay to jump into the next day. But they are never seen again.

MOTHER

*(Gathering her things)*

No one can do that in a dream. No matter how wealthy they are. You need to open a window in your bedroom. Get some fresh air.

EDWINA

*(Returning to mothers table)*

And in the dream, I walk a little further, away from the cliff and there is another wooden walkway. This walkway is different is broken, faded-

MOTHER

Mustn't forget my piano sheet music-

EDWINA

*(Hands jug to Mother)*

And in the dream, I walk a little further, away from the cliff and there is another wooden walkway. This walkway is different is broken, faded, doesn't lead to the cliff, but leads to a pile of dirt and rocks. And there are people waiting in line, just like the other wooden walkway. But these people are poor, dirty, unwashed-

MOTHER

Edwina, how vulgar to have such terrible people in your dream.

*(Glances out window)*

The heat must have sent everyone indoors. There isn't a soul on the streets. We'll be at the ferry and back in Brooklyn in no time.

EDWINA

Just like before, I stop a woman waiting on the rickety walkway and ask her why she is waiting in line. She tells me that the poor people cannot jump into the next day like the wealthy people can.

MOTHER

That's understandable, given their low status.

EDWINA

So they line up on the walkway and when they get to the end, they jump into the pile of dirt and rocks, so they can be like the rich people too! After they jump, they dust themselves off and just go on with their lives.

*(Looks directly at Mother)*

What does it mean, Mother, this dream? Every time I sleep. I go back to this same place and see the same people waiting in line. It is all I want to do, is sleep and visit these two walkways and watch the rich people and the poor people jump off the end of each one. I watch them and I feel so frightened. So unsafe.

MOTHER

I think it means you are eating too much before going to sleep, Edwina. All that food is giving you these strange dreams. No wonder you have that bulbous figure.

*(Heads to door)*

EDWINA

Then, when the dream is finished, I slowly become awake, and I hear your piano music playing in the parlor! And I feel safe.

*(Follows Mother)*

Perhaps, the next time I want to dream, I will rest in the parlor, so I can hear your piano music.

MOTHER

Thank you dear, that means so much to me...

EDWINA

Tell me Mother, which walkway would you choose? In my dream, if you were in it.

MOTHER

I'd choose the walkway with the wealthy people, of course. What do you think money is for, anyway? I'd jump right into the next day...fly through the air, with my piano sheet music...

EDWINA

Yes, and never be seen again!

*(Thinks)*

I'd be in line with the poor people, I wouldn't mind getting a little dirty, a little scraped, then dust myself off and go on with my life.

MOTHER

What a pig you are, Edwina, rolling in dirt like that...what an eyesore you'd be. No gentleman would ever look twice at you...I'll never be the mother of the bride...

*(They Exit. The End)*