

BLOOD AND WATER

By Kim Severson

*Kim Severson is the Atlanta bureau chief for The New York Times. This story is adapted from her book *Spoon Fed: How Eight Cooks Saved My Life*.*

I knew I would meet Edna Lewis from the moment I saw her framed photograph on the long hallway wall in Marion Cunningham’s California ranch house. In it, she is sitting in the sun with Marion, looking the same as she does on the covers of her cookbooks and in nearly every other photograph I have seen of her since—her bun always loose at the nape of her neck, her head just barely tilted back, her face painted with an enigmatic smile that makes Mona Lisa look like Jim Carrey. It’s an odd thing, but somehow, on a purely intuitive level, I knew she had answers—that she knew about family and cooking and life and that, somehow, our very different worlds would come together.

In many ways, Miss Lewis was the last direct link to a way of cooking and eating that began in the soft Virginia soil where she grew up. Just a generation beyond slavery, she was one of six children. She was born in a small settlement called Freetown in 1916 and had a life that was deeply rooted in a sense of place. Miss Lewis learned to cook at a time when what came out of the ground was what you had to work with. As a result, she was always a resourceful cook, believing in the purity of the ingredients and taking a lead from nature on what to eat and when to eat it. Growing, gathering, and preparing food was more than just sustenance for the family; it was a form of entertainment. Without fancy cooking equipment, the family improvised, measuring baking powder on coins and cooking everything over wood.

The life she would later write about in her books centered on cooking for Baptist revivals, holidays or just because it was morning and a family breakfast on a farm in the South matters. Almost every meal was to be shared. In that way, we had something else in common. It didn’t take me long to figure out that the best way to find a place in my family was to be as close to the kitchen as possible.

“Whenever I go back to visit my sisters and brothers, we relive old times, remembering the past,” Miss Lewis wrote in the introduction to her second book, *The Taste of Country Cooking*. “And we share again in gathering wild strawberries, canning, rendering lard, finding walnuts, picking persimmons, making fruitcake, I realize how much the bond that held us together had to do with food.”

Even though my brothers and sisters all live in different cities, we share a tight bond. And the language of that bond is often the language of food. Some of them still fight it, refusing to cook a big holiday meal or picking fast food over their own kitchen, but we are a family that will end up together at the table. And that’s what attracted me to Miss Lewis. James Beard said her food represented a time when American cooking was a series of family events. To me, that’s the best kind of cooking to do. You can cook when

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you're hungry or cook to make a living or to feel creative or even just as a distraction, but cooking for the people whom you wake up and go to sleep with is the best thing ever.

Miss Lewis's recipes, for dishes like minted peas and creamed ham and cucumber pickles and hickory nut cookies, came from a time when ice had only a cameo role and was used mostly to churn ice cream. If something couldn't be eaten right away, it went into the springhouse over the stream or it was preserved and canned for later. Recipes were developed to accommodate tender lettuces that had to be picked young before they "bolted," or became bitter when they went to seed prematurely in the hot sun. That lettuce was best, she believed, served with gently assertive young scallions and a special dressing with vinegar and sugar and a little salt and pepper. Oil would weigh down the tender leaves.

"I feel fortunate to have been raised at a time when the vegetables from the garden, the fruit from the orchard, and the meat from the smokehouse were all good and pure, unadulterated by chemicals and long-life packaging," she wrote in *The Taste of Country Cooking*. "As a result, I believe I know how food should taste. So now, whether I am experimenting with a new dish or trying to recapture the taste of a simple, old-fashioned dish, I have that memory of good flavor to go by."

In that book and in her third, *In Pursuit of Flavor*, you can learn about a kind of Southern cooking that erases all of your ideas about it. I guess I thought I knew about Southern food, but it was a cartoon version. I had eaten plenty of chicken-fried steaks and beans and barbecue in the cowboy corners of Houston when I was a kid. During the few years I spent living around Oakland, I always circled back to a handful of urban soul food spots and rib joints. But that is not what Miss Lewis would consider Southern food. She hated the term *soul food*. Inner-city restaurants that served watery greens and greasy fried chicken and dull macaroni and cheese were a bastardization of real, true Southern cooking and, to her mind, didn't represent anything good. I didn't know how much I didn't know about Southern cooking until I started reading what Miss Lewis had written. Soon it spoke to me in a way that is second only to the food of Italy.

People have come to call Miss Lewis the grande dame of Southern cooking, but the biggest piece of her cooking career was in New York. She had been drawn to the city because of its politics and culture. Politics were very important to Miss Lewis. She had been the first in her family to vote, and said her greatest honor was to work for Franklin D. Roosevelt's first presidential race. Later, she would march with Dr. Martin Luther King at the Poor Peoples March in Washington in 1968. Her last cooking job was at a Brooklyn restaurant called Gage and Tollner, when she was in her seventies and by all rights should have been retired. But the most glamorous restaurant job came in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when she cooked at the Café Nicholson on the ground floor of a brownstone near Second Avenue on Manhattan's East Side. Wendell Brock, the longtime writer for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, talked to her once about café society as she came to see it from her vantage point in the kitchen.

“We had everybody that was anybody,” Miss Lewis told him. Howard Hughes, Salvador Dalí, Marlene Dietrich, Eleanor Roosevelt, Lillian Hellman, and Dashiell Hammett all visited. When William Faulkner came in, the food impressed him so much that he asked Miss Lewis if she had studied in Paris. She was flattered. She had never been out of the United States.

Tennessee Williams lived nearby, so he sometimes walked her home at night. And Greta Garbo dropped in with her two little poodles. “She came on a Monday night when we were closed,” Miss Lewis told Mr. Brock. “They dined by themselves. But by the time they got ready to go, the sidewalk was lined because the word had spread that it was Garbo.”

Truman Capote was a regular. “He was a big mess,” Miss Lewis recalled. “He had on these little pumps. If he got something new, he would come in and say, ‘How do you like my beloved pants?’ He was cute.”

Although she was a great cook, she also had the ability to explain, in the simplest language, the beauty of food. A couple of years ago, Ruth Reichl had the good fortune of coming upon an essay Miss Lewis had written on lined sheets of yellow paper in the 1990s, and published it in *Gourmet* magazine. The essay was Miss Lewis’s attempt to describe what it means to be Southern. She wrote of the way her bare feet felt when they pushed against warm, just-plowed earth and the way a shroud of mist hangs low on a southern spring morning. And she offered up a long and glorious list of dishes:

“Southern is a pitcher of lemonade, filled with sliced lemon and a big piece of ice from the ice house, and served with buttermilk cookies.”

“Southern is a great yeast roll, the dough put down overnight to rise and the next morning shaped into rolls and baked. Served hot from the oven, they are light as a dandelion in a high wind.”

“Southern is leftover pieces of boiled ham trimmed and added to a saucepan of heavy cream set on the back of the stove to mull and bring out the ham flavor, then served spooned over hot biscuits.”

“Southern is a pot of boiling coffee sending its aroma out to greet you on your way in from the barn.”

And, tucked among the lovely descriptions of food and her strikingly clear childhood memories, she writes about the man with whom she would make the most unlikely family: “Southern is Scott Peacock, one of the South’s most creative young chefs.”

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At first, Scott didn't want me at that kitchen table where Miss Lewis spent her last days drinking coffee and watching TV. He wasn't about to let some reporter just parade by her like she was an exotic bird at the zoo.

I had headed to Atlanta originally to write about fried chicken. Although Scott puts out impeccable versions of sharp pimento cheese, summer squash, biscuits and catfish, it was his fried chicken that was packing his restaurant, Watershed, in nearby Decatur. (He has since bought an antebellum house to restore in his native Alabama and left the restaurant.) The mixture of music and chicken was a hard one for me to pass by.

The chicken that comes out of the cast-iron pans in that kitchen is the perfect marriage of the cultures that Miss Lewis and Scott were born into. The recipe starts with a long soak in brine and then in buttermilk, which is how they do it in the part of southern Alabama where Scott was born and raised. Next comes a toss in seasoned flour. Then the pieces get slipped into a pan filled with lard and butter seasoned with a piece of Virginia ham, which is how Miss Lewis liked it.

I had eaten a big plateful of that chicken several months earlier when I was in Atlanta visiting friends. It was so good I had to find a way to get back to write about it. After a little digging around, I figured out that the story might be bigger than just fried chicken. It was about family, really. One that a gay white man from Alabama had created with a straight African American woman forty years his senior, with a famous lesbian folk singer thrown in for good measure.

So I traveled back to Atlanta to report the story. Scott was waiting for me in a coffee shop near his restaurant. He had plenty of reasons to be wary. For one thing, I would be asking a lot of questions, and publicity had not always turned out so well for him. And he knew I wanted to meet Miss Lewis. It was important for the story, sure. But I had personal reasons. She was among the great American women whom I admired because they had cooked their way through life's ups and downs.

By the time I made it to Miss Lewis, she was almost ninety and very frail. She had dementia and spent most of her time in the apartment she shared with Scott. They didn't start out as a family. Miss Lewis was seventy-three when they met and still cooking in New York. He was twenty-six and working as a chef at the Georgia governor's mansion. Scott was one of those young, tender men who thought all of the answers could be found in a bigger city, a bigger place—anywhere else but his small town. He had seen her picture in a magazine once, struck by how lovely she was. He'd even met her a few times, but he was sure she would never remember him. Then he was asked to help Miss Lewis cook at a fund-raising dinner in Atlanta. He was to meet her at the station when she got off the train from New York.

He spotted her at the end of the platform, walking toward him dragging a cardboard box wrapped in blue nylon rope. It was filled with one hundred pounds of pie dough. "I will never forget that," he said. "Here is that regal lady dragging this big ol' box of pie dough down the road."

Miss Lewis, who always tried to perfect whatever task she had at hand, figured there would not be enough time to make good pie dough. So she brought her own. Scott was swooning. Shortly after that, he gave up trying to cook seasonal food inspired by France or Italy—it was the fashion at the time—and decided he should cook Southern. It meant getting over his notion that Southern food was poor food and that cooking it meant embracing his childhood.

“It really was a Paul-on-the-road-to-Damascus moment,” he said.

Miss Lewis had shown him he did not have to run from his past, but that there was strength in embracing it. And that set them off on a lifelong relationship, one that would eventually help me understand how my past—my family—was actually my greatest strength.

Miss Lewis eventually moved to Atlanta, where they worked together to preserve Southern food. They wrote a book. Then she developed some medical problems. Scott took care of her. And it started to dawn on him how much she meant to him.

“Aside from someone I was seeing at the time, she was the person I thought about the most and related to the most,” he said. “I do remember at some point being very clear that she understood me in a way that other people didn’t and later feeling that I felt that way about her, too.”

He began to realize they had the makings of something that looked an awful lot like a family. She was his first phone call in the morning, and they would speak throughout the day. “We became increasingly dependent on each other,” he said. Miss Lewis had come to rely on Scott to record and keep alive her knowledge of Southern cooking, but she was also coming to rely on him for her health and well-being. Scott would worry if she was taking her medicine or if her refrigerator was full. And Miss Lewis liked doing small, loving things for him, like ironing his shirts or making him little gifts. It was unconditional, which is really what we all want from our families, right?

She saw him for who he could be, and she helped him accept who he was. “I was a success as a chef before Miss Lewis, he said, “but I was a failure as a human being.”

His love for Miss Lewis was the power he needed to get over his fears and anxieties. And it was that love that carried him through the slow progression of days to her death, which was in the very apartment the two first moved into and in which Scott still lives.

So you can see why Scott was so wary the day I asked to meet her. “I was worried what you would think if she was having one of those days when she was asleep at the table,” he told me later. “I didn’t want you to see her if she was having a bad day. I hate that—when it’s like walking people through there to see the panda, the icon in a wheelchair. Laying eyes on her just to lay eyes on her seemed creepy.”

Besides, surprise visitors can upset a person with dementia. “People think if they can just make them remember the one right thing it will all come flooding back,” Scott said. “But it doesn’t work that way. It just makes them more agitated.”

Scott had other reasons to feel protective. Months earlier, members of her biological family had challenged Scott’s place in her life. They took him to court. The whole mess started after Alice Waters approached Scott at a wedding they had both been invited to. Alice had been good friends with Miss Lewis. Like so many women in that elite circle of cooks, Alice worried about what would happen to the generation of cooks just ahead of her when they got old. Here they were, Marion Cunningham and Edna Lewis and Julia Child and a dozen other women who were the stars of their culinary generation, and they were all frail and dying. Who would take care of them?

A few chefs with big restaurants or television shows or the special fortunes of Julia Child might be rich, but that’s the exception. Great cooks who mostly cook and write great books, especially ones of Miss Lewis’s generation, end up much poorer than people imagine and can’t provide for themselves once they can’t cook or write anymore.

Miss Lewis’s money came mostly from her books. In the late 1960s, she was sidelined with a broken leg after a fall on an icy New York street. To pass the time, she began writing out some recipes and it turned into her first book, *The Edna Lewis Cookbook*. Her next, *The Taste of Country Cooking*, would become a classic study of Southern cooking, and one that sits on the shelves of America’s best chefs. It helped put an end to the knee-slapping, cornpone image of Southern food among many American cooks. Her last book was with Scott, called *The Gift of Southern Cooking*. It would become her best-selling work. But even lumped together, the books never made enough money to provide for her care as she aged. Scott could barely shoulder the financial burden of taking care of her alone. Alice knew this, and she told Scott that people who admired Miss Lewis wanted to help. So he agreed to set up a fund through the Georgia Community Trust to pay for some of her care. Another supporter drafted a letter appealing for help, a copy of which made its way to her relatives in Virginia. That was a turning point in what had been a distant but respectful relationship between Scott and her family.

Her younger sister, Ruth Lewis Smith, and some other family members, including a son from Africa she had adopted when he was an adult, asked a probate judge in Decatur to decide whether Miss Lewis should live in Unionville, Virginia, with her siblings, or stay with Scott. “I told him I am willing to take care of her, you need not ask for money,” Mrs. Smith told me. “I think he would respect Edna by letting her come home.”

She and other family members and a few friends made it clear that they were very uncomfortable having someone who was not a blood relation caring for an ailing relative. That he was a young man responsible for an elderly woman made them uncomfortable. Perhaps that he was white made them uncomfortable. Perhaps it was that he was a “ho-mo-SEX-u-al”, as some said when I called.

But Scott knew she wanted to stay with him. Miss Lewis had told him so. Now that I have known Scott for some years, I know that he would have taken her back to Virginia in a New York minute if she had asked him to. But that day we met, I had no idea whether to believe him and his story about the court case, about her health and about the family he said they had created, just him and Miss Lewis.

“So would it be possible to meet her?” I asked. “Just to say hello?”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Miss Lewis just isn’t that well today.”

After a couple hours of talk both about work and about ourselves, we said our good-byes outside the coffee shop. There was no need to play hardball. This wasn’t a corrupt government official or someone asking for money. They were just a couple of cooks. My story would be fine without laying eyes on her. I got into the rental car and started the engine. Then Scott was at the window. He had had a change of heart.

“Would you like to meet her?” he asked.

I followed him into their apartment. Miss Lewis sat at the table in their crowded kitchen. A little television sat on a corner of the table, tucked next to a sugar bowl and a glass filled with tiny violets. An episode of *The Little Rascals* flickered on the screen.

“Miss Lewis, this is Kim Severson from *The New York Times*,” Scott said.

“Hello, Miss Lewis,” I said and reached out.

She raised her hand to mine, and I held it. She looked at me with that enigmatic smile. I murmured something about what an honor it was to meet her. She nodded.

“Can I take your photograph with Miss Severson, Miss Lewis?” Scott asked.

She gave him a look and raised her eyebrows. I could barely hear her when she said no. Then she turned back to her show.

Scott explained later that the fade was slow at first, but that things got more difficult almost daily. As she slipped away, his despair worsened. Not much could pull her from that private fog in her last days. Nature sometimes would, but the little bit of moss or wildflowers Scott would bring in from the outdoors had become unreliable mood lifters. Even food, her beloved touchstone, wasn’t doing much to stir her anymore.

As she grew increasingly feeble, Scott took precise care of her. He would tease her when the dementia propelled her out of bed at night. He’d tuck her back in and say, “I don’t want to come in here and find any strange men.” If that didn’t get a laugh out of her, nothing would. But days would pass without even a glimmer of her old self.

One day, in a stroke of pure luck, he discovered something that could reach her. It had an almost medicinal effect on her mood and attentiveness. It was *The Little Rascals*, a series from the 1930s and '40s that featured little children running around and getting into trouble, including the controversial African-American character called Buckwheat.

His first clue came when, watching television together, he noticed that Miss Lewis would perk up when children were on the screen. He tried different child-centric movies with no luck. Then he brought home *The Little Rascals* and Miss Lewis immediately brightened. She was her old self, even if just for the span of a television show.

“It was one of the happiest days,” he said. They’d watch an episode together and laugh so hard they’d nearly hit the floor in tears. Sometimes at night, after he had helped her bathe, they’d walk down the hall, his arm entwined in hers.

“Let’s see what the boys are doing,” Scott would tell her.

Later he told me he thanked God for *The Little Rascals*.

During the trial, when her biological family was challenging Scott’s care, that show became an issue. Her relatives’ lawyer argued that exposing an old black woman to repeated episodes of a show that employed broad stereotypical images of African Americans was cruel and insensitive. It lacked dignity. And it proved Scott wasn’t the right person to care for her. The judge didn’t agree with that argument or others they made.

Miss Lewis would be allowed to die with Scott, which was, as best as outsiders could tell, what she wanted.

He knew the end was coming when her interest in food faded. One day, she poured curdled milk into her coffee and didn’t know it. So Scott started making her beloved coffee for her. It was like communion for him. He would always heat the milk just so, and make sure it was all piping hot, just as she liked it. Then came the morning she had no interest in coffee at all. “That was so heartbreaking for me and so sad because all of that had been part of how we had communicated,” he said.

In her last days, when she was in bed and so close to death he could feel it, he played her favorite music and coated her lips with honey and a bit of Virginia country ham so she could leave this earth with the flavors of her youth. Miss Lewis died on February 13, 2006. She was two months shy of her ninetieth birthday.

“I never fell out of awe with Edna Lewis,” he told me later. Even at the end when I was cleaning her and dressing her every day, even when she was a corpse at the funeral home, I would just look at her and connect. I would think, God, you are an incredible woman, How lucky am I? She was my family, most certainly.

It was kind of inevitable that Scott and I would later end up friends. For one thing, we share some major themes. We both don't drink. We love food. And we both knew we were big ol' homosexuals early on. He wanted an Easy Bake oven. I wanted a catcher's mitt. There's an informal social glue that sometimes forms among gays and lesbians because you are connected at a root level. In a world that expects and often demands heterosexuality, you both know the pain that can come when you just can't deliver. You share the scars from getting called a faggot or a dyke. You know what it's like to feel "other," even in your own family. Especially in your own family.

When you grow up in a family like his, where the threat of being exposed as a homosexual is used as a weapon, or like mine, where matters of sex, let alone homosexuality, aren't really discussed with anything approaching clarity, you quickly develop a secret life. And it can bring on a terrible feeling of never being good enough, of always being at risk of disappointing someone. It's something Scott and I share, and something we have both spent a lifetime trying to unlearn.

"If someone said they loved my shoes, I thought, Oh, they hate my pants," he told me during one of the long phone conversations that usually started with a recipe and ended with mutual psychoanalysis.

"If someone said something nice, of course, it was never enough," he said.

I'd counter with my own special version of the theme.

"Or how about this," I'd say. "No matter how good I am, it will never be enough to counter all the ways I just don't measure up. And if I don't measure up, I will never be seen." I always knew it was safe to talk about these things with Scott. Because, like me, he adores the family he was born into. We both know a lot of our pain comes from growing up gay in a house where there wasn't any room for it. But we also cherish the families that made us who we are.