Relishing Our Time

What made literary lion Eric Ashworth roar?

April 1, 1998 By Dick Scanlan

I am fretting over a hammered-copper stock pot filled with cranberries and red wine. The berries are bursting at a leisurely pace, one by one with a tiny pop; some throw in the towel the moment they hit the heat, while others remain plump and full after a 20-minute simmer. It's early Sunday morning, weeks before Thanksgiving. I always make the cranberries ahead of time -- not because I'm organized, but because I'm afraid I'll over- or undercook them, so I leave enough time to make a second batch. The color of the concoction that I'm stirring is a deep, regal red that ranks up there with the glow of a perfect ruby, the voluminous velvet curtain at an opera house or the flush in Eric Ashworth's cheek after a brisk October walk.

Eric is on my mind this morning: I've reduced the cranberry recipe from a triple to a double batch. Eric never actually broke (corn)bread with me and mine on Turkey Day. He spent his holidays with his parents, Dick and Amy, and with Rick Kot, his longtime ex-lover. I would jar some of my cranberry relish for them, delivering it to Eric's building the day before, along with milk-chocolate turkeys wrapped in foil for a festive touch. Somehow, the knowledge that Eric and I were sharing the same homemade cranberry condiment at our separate feasts connected me to him.

Eric died last July 20 at the age of 39, after a hospital stay that we all suspected would be his last. After a decade-plus of HIV infection and almost seven years since his first near-fatal attack of PCP, an AIDS-related neurological nightmare had left him paralyzed. I knew that the end of his independence meant the end of Eric. Aside from his parents and Rick -- their relationship was complicated, but the comfort Eric clearly felt when Rick entered his hospital room was love at its most straightforward -- Eric was hesitant to take the bountiful help that his hundreds of friends offered, and there was no way he was going to last long with other people buying his groceries and walking his dog, Sophie. "Too bad the miracle didn't help him," said an editor I know, echoing the popular but premature assessment of protease inhibitors.

Eric *was* the miracle. He was one of the great literary agents of the '80s, which is how I first heard of him. Early in my writing career, a friend told me of Eric's movie-star looks, his eye for young talent, his ability to nurture, sell and still maintain an integrity that made him beloved in the dog-eat-dog world of publishing. I decided then and there that he would one day represent me, and in the bargain we would fall in love and become the glamour couple of the literary world.

Years later, I sent Eric a completed manuscript of my book. He called me the following week, a

turnaround time so quick that I didn't even recognize his name on my answering machine. Once I realized who he was, I returned the call, settling into his praise like into a bubble bath. "I've read your stories, and I'm intrigued," he said in a soft, seductive voice, as if his lips were pressed against my ear.

I met him over lunch at a Mexican restaurant in the theater district favored by underpaid actors. Everyone who came in contact with Eric Ashworth fell in love with him (a little, a lot), and I was no exception. Over time, our friendship took a romantic turn -- not sexual, but romantic -- Saturday nights at the movies, Sundays at brunch, long winter walks through Greenwich Village followed by tea at an English restaurant. If at times my love felt unrequited, I now think it wasn't; Eric reserved his commitment for Rick (even after they broke up), but he lavished a kind of platonic courtship on many others.

Spending time with Eric was like gazing into a mirror and seeing a reflection of the best version of yourself. Everything I'd ever dreamed I could be is what I saw when I looked at him. But I also felt the distance that this looking-glass love bred: Eric remained hidden behind the mirror, one of the many contradictions that kept any sap out of his sweet nature.

His face alone was filled with contradictions: Features more flawless than Kevin Costner's loaded with character a la Karl Malden; brown hair and brown eyes that glowed brighter than any blond/blue combo; a tall, strapping body that conveyed power without any hint of a gym membership. And he smoked heavily yet seemed as healthy as the great outdoors.

It was difficult to locate his life drive. Somewhere in his heart, there was a roaring furnace, because he survived illness after illness, but that room was kept locked -- at least to me -- and what fueled his fire remained a mystery. There were hidden treasures, perhaps dark secrets, that he kept to himself. It wasn't work; soon after he signed me up, he retired from the agency that bore his name. And he *really* retired. Though he continued to read at an astonishing rate and kept in touch with clients who were friends, the daily buzz about who was publishing what and where and for how much seemed of little interest to him. When my short-story collection sold long after he'd left the agency, he told me, "I cherish your book," and I knew he was bursting with personal, not professional, pride.

Eric took advantage of New York City's charms -- museums, theater, concerts -- and at his country house in Pennsylvania he demonstrated that the magic of his appeal worked equally well on plants.

It was there that Eric first cooked for me. I remember we spent most of the day in the kitchen, sitting at an old wooden table and talking, trying to keep my dog Peg from launching another unprovoked attack on Sophie (who was, after all, Peg's hostess). Occasionally, Eric would wander over near the stove, cigarette in hand. He'd chop a carrot or slice an onion. At some point, the gas burner was turned on. There was no recipe, no tasting to adjust the seasoning, no break in our heart-to-heart. But come dinnertime, like a magician pulling a bouquet out of his top hat, Eric took the lid off the pot and revealed a thick, colorful, aromatic stew that he had managed to make

without my noticing it. A salad also appeared, tossed with a vinaigrette he'd whisked to perfection faster than you can say, "Paul Newman."

So here I am, working on my cranberry relish weeks before Thanksgiving to make sure it's perfect, which of course it can't be: Eric won't be here to eat it. Neither is the lover for whom I first made it, and a half-dozen friends for whom it had become a tradition, replacing the ghastly canned cranberry mold on which so many of us were raised. Foolishly, perhaps, I feel safe if I perform certain rituals, cranberry sauce being near the top of that list. I guess when I go -- and I wonder why I haven't already, and why Eric and my other dearly departed have -- my friends will say that I fed them well at least once a year, remembering the fuss I made over my elaborate Thanksgiving feasts. Eric also fed, nourished, loved his friends, but he needed no recipe to do so. You could watch him loving you and still not see it, but you felt it, basking in the glow of his invisible feelings. I feel it now, and though he'll forever remain a part of my life and my Thanksgiving celebration in that I give thanks for the privilege of having loved him, I wish he were here to cook cranberries for.

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