



A chance encounter with New York City society doyenne Nan Kempner led to Patricia Morrisroe's education in the art of having fun.

**T**wo summers ago, while strolling around Piazza San Marco, I passed by Missiaglia, the oldest jeweler in Venice. Prominently displayed in the window were the store's signature items: a silver artichoke pepper grinder and saltshaker. I bought them thirteen years earlier but never used them.

Large and ornate, with tiny snails clinging to the stems, they were beautiful but made too much of a statement for me. I didn't cook and never entertained, so they grew increasingly tarnished in my kitchen drawer. But on that August afternoon, I remembered the flamboyant woman who persuaded me to buy them, and the simple phrase she uttered, which I've since taken to heart.

I met Nan Kempner in 1997, at the Hotel Cipriani. My husband had gone to look for a tennis game and had bumped into Nan and her husband, Tom, on the courts. My husband knew Tom from a semiregular doubles game, but they rarely socialized outside tennis. When my husband returned to our room, he announced that Nan, flying across the court on her long, skinny legs, had invited us to dinner that night. "Are you sure?" I said. "She doesn't know us." Still, I was immensely curious.

Renowned as a couture collector, hostess, and insatiable

partygoer, Mrs. Thomas L. Kempner never turned down an opportunity to travel, reveling in her annual trips to London, Gstaad, Venice, and, most important, to the Paris couture shows. One of the inspirations for Tom Wolfe's "social X-rays," she kept herself rail-thin in order to fit into couture sample sizes. The discipline paid off. Diana Vreeland once described her as the only chic woman in America.

Kempner exuded a manic joie de vivre that was part Auntie Mame, part Elaine Stritch. She knew how to have fun—something that never came easily to me. Raised by a shy Irish Catholic mother who never enjoyed playing hostess, I had developed an almost phobic fear of entertaining. Kempner, on the other hand, craved the limelight so much I'd always found her extroverted personality something of a wonder.

At 7:30 p.m., we all met in the Cipriani lobby. It turned out to be Tom Kempner's seventieth birthday, and the Kempners were celebrating with their three children, a daughter-in-law—and us. Their children must have been thinking, Who are these people? At Alla Madonna, a classic trattoria near the Rialto Bridge, Nan immediately ordered "vino bianco, vino bianco," and then launched into a monologue about another birthday, years earlier, when she surprised her husband by dressing up in an S&M outfit. Apparently, he'd fallen asleep, and she was so mad she tossed the items out the window.

After dinner, we walked back to the Cipriani boat, Nan skipping across the jagged cobblestones in towering heels. She was then 67, but with her frequent cosmetic "touch-ups," she looked strangely ageless, the way godmothers in fairy tales often do. "It used to be that women in Venice only had two career options: courtesan or nun," she said. "Which would you have chosen?" I volunteered "nun" because I figured I'd have access to plenty of books. "Nun?" she practically shrieked. "Oh, my dear, that's a very sad answer. I'd be a courtesan. Think of the clothes, the sex, the fun!" *nostalgia* >132

A couple of months earlier, Nan had hosted a dinner for Princess Diana before she auctioned off her dresses at Christie's. It was held at Nan's Park Avenue duplex, and she was still excited about it. Nan described Diana as beautiful and totally alive. "And fun," she said. "Lots of fun."

**T**he next afternoon, we were walking around San Marco, and in the midst of hundreds of pigeons and children eating gelato, we heard "Diana—morta!" I stopped a British couple locked in a tearful embrace. They told me about the car crash. We left Venice with the unsettling feeling that anything, at any moment, could happen.

I didn't see the Kempners again until the following August, after a stressful summer that left me with a fractured kneecap and torn ligaments. Several teenagers had assaulted me while I was jogging around Central Park, and I geared my recovery to making sure I'd be well enough for our scheduled trip to Venice. More bad luck followed. Landing in Brussels to get a connecting flight, we crashed on the runway, the plane swerving out of control. When it finally came to a halt, the pilot uttered one word: "Evacuate." Suddenly, the chutes unfurled, and I was sliding down in my knee brace. The landing gear had malfunctioned, and sparks were flying. Fearing the plane was going to explode, my husband picked me up and ran for cover.

Several hours later, badly shaken, and without our luggage, we checked into the Cipriani and immediately bumped into Nan. Ignoring our disheveled state, she got straight to the point. "Are you free for dinner?" she asked. I explained that we'd just been in a plane crash.

"Well, that's all in the past," she said.

"Actually, it was only four hours ago."

"Shall we say eight-ish?"

That night, the four of us took a boat to the Hotel Monaco. The sun was setting over the water, and the scene looked exactly like Monet's painting of Venice at dusk. "It doesn't get any better than this," Nan said. At the time, I thought she was referring specifically to Venice, but her comment had a deeper meaning. Striding confidently in leopard stockings and the highest of heels, she commented on my velvet flats. "They're so sensible," she said. I explained that I was recovering from a knee injury. Not to be outdone, Nan said that she'd recently broken her hip while wearing eight-inch Dior stockinged heels. "I fell over," she said, "and crack!" She picked up the pace, and we were practically running. I arrived out of breath, while Nan, who would later be diagnosed with emphysema, hardly seemed winded. Getting a prime table on the terrace, she pre-ordered a chocolate cake and then "vino bianco, vino bianco."

Nan was finishing up her book, *R.S.V.P.: Menus for Entertaining From People Who Really Know How*. It was a collection of recipes from her famous friends—Valentino, Bill Blass, Nancy Reagan, and Oscar and Annette de la Renta. "It's too bad I didn't know you earlier," she said. "You could have contributed one of your favorite recipes." I had no recipes. The only thing I'd ever made was fruit salad. I'd turned my dining room into a library, with books piled high on the table. I smiled and said, "Well, I'm not much of a hostess."

When the chocolate cake arrived, Nan dug in with gusto



**LEADING LIGHT**  
THE AUTHOR AND  
NAN KEMPNER TOOK  
A BOAT AGAINST A SKY  
LIKE MONET'S IN SAN  
GIORGIO MAGGIORE  
BY TWILIGHT, 1908.

and then began discussing the plans for her fiftieth wedding anniversary in four years. "Of course you and your husband will be invited," she said. "I'm thinking of wearing Saint Laurent." On the way out, she introduced me as her "dear friend" to Marguerite Littman, who had helped to orchestrate the sale of Princess Diana's gowns at Christie's.

We talked about Diana on the boat back to the hotel. Nan seemed uncharacteristically wistful. "If this boat sank," she said, "don't you worry that our obituaries would only describe us as 'society hostesses'?" For obvious reasons, that wasn't my worry. I confessed that I was terrified of entertaining. "I can fix that," she said. "Do you know what you need? Silver artichokes! All my dear friends have them." I imagined being indoctrinated into a secret cult of silver-artichoke owners. With them spicing up my table, I'd become the fabulous hostess that in Nan's eyes I was clearly meant to be.

Before we left Venice, I dragged my husband to Missiaglia to buy the artichokes. "Are you ever going to use these?" he asked, balking at the price. "I think they're magical," I said. But he was right; I didn't use them. Instead, I kept them in a pouch, wishing they were smaller so I could wear them as earrings.

The next summer, we went to Spain, and I lost touch with the Kempners. Then, in 2002, we received an invitation to their fiftieth wedding anniversary. When people asked me how I knew Nan, I told them, "From Venice." By then, she was accessorized with an oxygen tank but still looked stunning in white Saint Laurent. When she died three years later, at 74, the headline of her *New York Times* obituary read *N.Y. SOCIALITE AND HOSTESS*.

My husband and I finally returned to Venice two summers ago. As we were walking toward the boat to take us to San Marco, my husband shot a photograph of a couple admiring the view. As we got closer, we saw that it was Tom Kempner and his new wife. We stopped for a few minutes to say hello. Right afterward, I spotted the artichokes in the window of Missiaglia. It was too much of a coincidence to ignore. When I returned home, I decided to make some changes. I bought a new dining-room table, banished the books to a bookshelf, and polished the artichokes until they gleamed.

Several weeks later, I had a dinner party for six of my dearest friends. I served Anne Bass's butternut-squash soup, Robin Hambro's roasted chicken, Deeda Blair's wild rice, and Nancy Reagan's currant cookies—all from Nan's *R.S.V.P.* Though I overcooked the chicken, and the cookies tasted like cement, we laughed and drank vino bianco until midnight. Nan was right. The silver artichokes did make a statement: "It doesn't get any better than this." □

SAN GIORGIO MAGGIORE BY TWILIGHT, 1908: CLAUDE MONET, OIL ON CANVAS, 65.2 X 92.4 CM/CARDIFF, WALES, NATIONAL MUSEUM/FINE ART IMAGES/SUPERSTOCK