

SIREN CALL: Sedgwick in 1966, near the height of her fame.

She was Warhol's muse, the great beauty of her generation. But before she was an icon, Edie Sedgwick—inspiration for the new biopic *Factory Girl*—was a Brahmin daughter, and her fall marked a singularly dark chapter in one New England family's history.

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

# Elegy for an It Girl

# B

BORN APRIL 20, 1943, EDIE SEDGWICK entered the world with two elements of fame—wealth and beauty—already bestowed by her pedigreed Massachusetts family. But she was also heir to its deep-running mental illnesses: Her unstable father, Francis, was notorious for his racist campaign against the Groton School's desegregation; two of her brothers would be institutionalized, with one hanging himself at 25. Though all their stories are part of the new memoir *In My Blood: Six Generations of Madness and Desire in an American Family* (HarperCollins, \$25.95), it was Edie's that once gripped the nation. In this exclusive excerpt, Cambridge author John Sedgwick remembers his cousin, Edie—a star blazing forth with both incandescent loveliness and flaming mania.

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## CULTURE

### ONLY 20, EDIE HAD ALREADY LIVED

several lives by then. Slim, leggy, doe-eyed, lustrous, she caught everyone's gaze and held it until it hurt. My father was always transfixed by her. She'd been in boarding school in San Francisco as a young teen, but withdrawn after she developed an eating disorder, alternately picking at her food and wolfing it down, and then vomiting up anything that reached her stomach. So she returned to her family's ranch in Santa Barbara, where she was the only child; all the rest were off at school. She thought herself a prisoner there. One afternoon she glanced into a spare bedroom and found her father, Francis, fucking—there is no other verb—a woman from town. He swore at Edie, claiming she was seeing things, irrational, and, when she responded with hysterics, summoned a doctor to give her tranquilizers.

The whole experience tamped Edie down drastically, and it never left her mind. (She can be heard mumbling about it in the documentary-style *Ciao! Manhattan*, heavy on interior monologues, the last film she made.) She was sent off to the private all-girls school St. Timothy's in Maryland the next fall, in 1958. Francis had started to turn against Groton by now, and Edie bore the brunt of some of her father's fiercer delusions when she returned from school. The eating disorders returned with a vengeance, and in 1962, Edie was delivered to Silver Hill, the genteel mental hospital that her brother Minty had already attended.

Silver Hill proved too indulgent for Francis's taste, so he shifted Edie to the much stricter Bloomingdale, the Westchester division of New York Hospital, which had a much more militaristic feel. Towards the end of her stay there, she met a Harvard student and had sex with him at her grandmother's apartment in New York. She got pregnant but had an illicit abortion—"on the grounds of [being] a psychiatric case," she whispers in *Ciao! Manhattan*.

That was when she arrived in Cambridge to study sculpture with our cousin Lily Saarinen, the ex-wife

This article is excerpted from *In My Blood: Six Generations of Madness and Desire in an American Family* by John Sedgwick, to be published in January 2007 by HarperCollins. Copyright © 2007 by John Sedgwick.

of the architect Eero Saarinen, who'd designed the wonderful, floating TWA terminal at Kennedy Airport. My mother, protective of her own brood in Dedham, was a little leery of the "West Coast Sedgwicks," as we sometimes referred to them. But my father remained loyal to his brother's family, and to keep an eye on Edie, he invited her several times to Sunday

**At one family gathering, Edie stripped down to her panties to sunbathe—a spectacular whiteness against the green lawn.**

dinner—roast beef, sangria, and my father's usual stories. She came only once, as I recall, arriving behind the wheel of a gray Mercedes her parents, in a moment of weakness, had bought for her, the sort of car my parents would never own. It was a hot, bright day, and she wore sunglasses, a tight blouse, and short pants. I was spellbound. Edie livened up the meal considerably by skipping out on dessert to slip out through the French doors to the backyard, where she stripped down to her panties to sunbathe half naked—I remember nothing but a sense of spectacular whiteness against the green lawn—while the grownups sipped coffee from demitasse cups, unaware.

**EDIE DEVoured ALL THERE WAS**

to Cambridge back then. Like Boston generally—which had still not recovered from the decline after World War I—Cambridge wasn't much, just sandwich shops, used bookstores, and tweedy Harvard boys. She went to a psychiatrist most days, and did her sculpture, and fended off the suitors—many of them proper, three-named types—who started to fawn over her. She was drawn to what there was of a homosexual scene, partly because the men would make no demands on her. She set up court underneath the Brattle movie theater in the Casablanca bar, where everybody went. She had her first legal drink there the day she turned 21 and came into her grandmother's trust fund. (By coincidence, I had my first legal drink there, too.)

When she grew bored with Cambridge, Edie drove her Mercedes to

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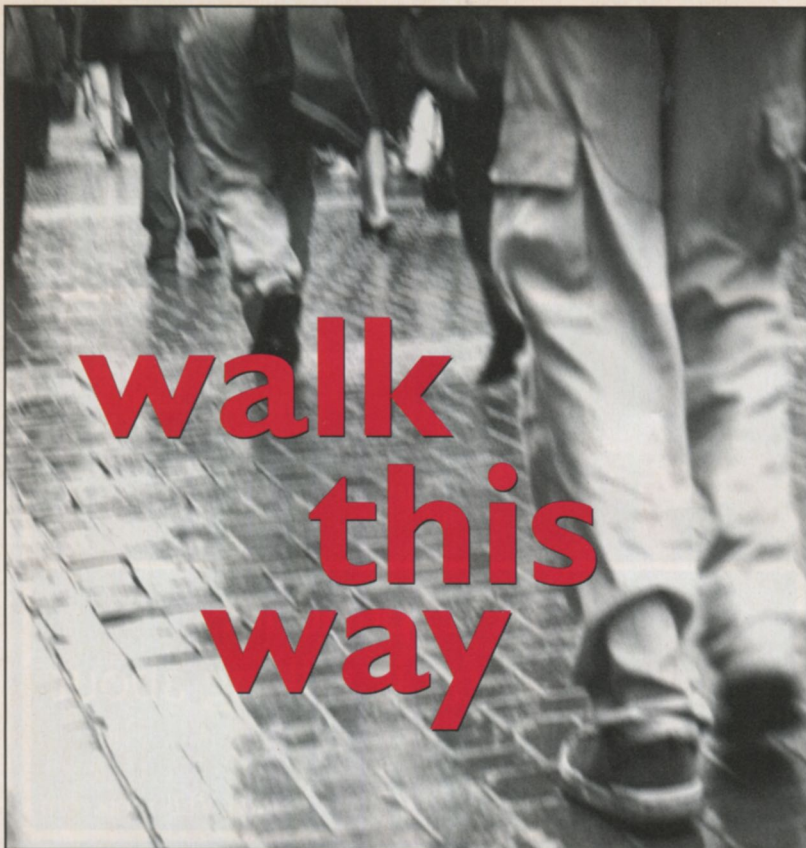
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## CULTURE

New York. After a stint at her grandmother's on Park Avenue, she rented a place of her own in the East Sixties off Madison. Hoping Edie would settle down as a nice socialite, her mother, Alice, came east to help her decorate with embroidered pillows and scatter rugs. But Edie had started to dress more wildly, wearing high-heeled boots and black stockings that drew attention to her legs, topped off with fox-fur waistcoats. It was an outrageous getup by Sedgwick standards, but it was totally her. She developed a taste for bloody marys, and for the new European-style discotheques. After a friend absentmindedly totaled the Merc, Edie got around by limousines. Her trust fund money flowed like water.

Men crawled all over her, but she just laughed at them. All, that is, except for Andy Warhol, whom she met at a party in 1965. A former commercial illustrator who'd been much in demand for shoe ads, Warhol had a fascination with brands that elided into the pop art ideal of life as image, and then into image as icon, that place where mass publicity merges weirdly

**Her Warhol films were fascinating—even though there was absolutely nothing happening in them except Edie herself.**

with total anonymity. For him, Edie was a brand name only, whose selling power came, aside from her cover-girl beauty, from being steeped in associations with old money, New England prep schools, European aesthetics, fine art, generations of breeding, and a certain knowingness—everything, in short, that Edie ran from as *nothing at all*. But it was everything to a bewigged, asexual, pale-faced, hollow-hearted immigrant's kid from the steel town of McKeesport, Pennsylvania, who had, along with an innovative brilliance, an uncanny feel for the class consciousness that underlay a big part of the 1960s zeitgeist.

A year or two before, Andy had moved into a loft on East 47th Street that was called the Factory, ostensibly for the silkscreens produced there. It was a glamorous wreck of a place, with drab used furniture and tinfoil wall-

paper and bare floors, where the new, briefly cool like Ondine, Viva, Chuck Wein, Paul America, and Billy Name had been prominently on display. With her glow, and Andy's blessing, Edie quickly became the Factory queen.

Andy was starting to make his experimental movies when Edie arrived, and he wanted her to be in them. Most were mind-numbing cinematic exercises that, as Warhol himself admitted, were more interesting to talk about than to watch. The ones that Edie was in, though—including *Outer and Inner Space* and *Poor Little Rich Girl*—were the other way around, even though there was absolutely nothing happening in them except Edie herself.

**THAT WAS 1965, PROBABLY THE** height of Edie's fame. *Life* magazine ran a big photo spread on the "cropped-mop girl with the eloquent legs," and the gossip columns couldn't get enough of the starlet they dubbed the "Girl of the Year." Mick Jagger grabbed for her amid a mad crush of groupies at a nightclub called the Scene. The press mobbed her at the opening of the Warhol exhibit at the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art.

We subscribed to *Life* in Dedham, so the pictures came into our house. But the excitement somehow passed me by completely, probably because my mother disapproved. My father got all caught up in all the Edie publicity; he was always interested in any fame that came to the family, and he talked Edie up to his Boston friends.

Francis allowed himself a little enthusiasm, too, and at Edie's urging, agreed to meet Andy Warhol one evening at the River Club, the old-line watering hole by the East River in New York City. It was a collision of eras and mindsets, and it must have been a mind-bender for Edie. The clash of cultures was so complete, there was no clash at all, for there were no points of possible contact. It was like two armies that have mistakenly massed for battle on different continents. Handsome, impeccably dressed, erect, Francis ordered drinks, tried to chat. Decked out in sloppy coolness, the whisper-voiced Andy barely spoke at all. The encounter was over before it began.

Afterward, Francis turned to a friend and nearly shouted with relief, "Why, the guy's a screaming fag!"

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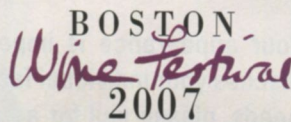


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## CULTURE

**EDIE THOUGHT OF TRYING TO** parlay her appearances in the Warhol films into Hollywood movies, but she didn't have the energy, or the nerve, for anything so career-minded. Before long, Warhol and Edie started getting on each other's nerves; he stopped including parts for her in his films, and she took the hint.

With her looks and fashion sense, Edie might have gone on to become the American Twiggy, were it not for the drugs. Her "vitamins," she thought of them. Which they were, at first, albeit vitamins heavily laced with speed and injected directly into her buttocks. Then it was cocaine, and then heroin. She took her first shot in her arm in her apartment, and it sent her running naked out onto Park Avenue. Drugs were a kind of sex for her, and vice versa. All night, she'd dance and fuck and do drugs and fuck and dance some more. Then she'd sleep all day.

In one heroin stupor, she set her apartment on fire while she slept. Firemen burst in and rushed her to the Lenox Hill Hospital. When friends heard what had happened, they called her parents in Santa Barbara, but neither Francis nor Alice would come to

**Her first shot of heroin sent her running naked out onto Park Avenue. During a later drug stupor, she set her apartment on fire.**

the phone. With two sons already dead, they couldn't face another corpse. My father was in New York at the time, and he hurried to Edie's bedside. She asked him for makeup, and he bought some for her from the hospital pharmacy, and then watched, aghast, as she blackened her beautiful eyes with it, turning her face into a death's head.

Her parents hauled her back to Santa Barbara for Christmas. She was a waif, a junkie, a shell. Stunned, Francis had her committed, but a boyfriend, an artist named Bob Neuwirth, rescued her and brought her back to New York. By then, there was almost nothing left.

In New York, the newspapers that had fed off her every move now published mean-spirited where-is-she-now articles. One of her last acts was to complete *Ciao! Manhattan*, which a direc-

tor named David Weisman had begun a few years before in New York. Half documentary, half hallucination, the film was meant to chronicle a day in the life of the former superstar. For a set, the producers had rented out a castle on the banks of the Hudson and got the poet Allen Ginsberg involved, and the whole thing made sense only if you were stoned out of your mind. The production fell apart, but Weisman persisted, starting in again in California, and Edie made the movie her life and vice versa. The film has a high-1960s depravity, with an obviously drugged-out Edie lounging about most of the time half naked at the bottom of an empty swimming pool, showing off her boob job. It's a film about slow suicide, and when I saw it recently on DVD, I couldn't bear to watch it to the end.

**NOT LONG AFTER FILMING CIAO!**

*Manhattan*, while she was undergoing shock treatment in a Santa Barbara hospital, Edie met a 19-year-old named Michael Post. They wed in the summer of 1971, but their union was not fated to last: Edie died on November 16 of a barbiturate overdose. The coroner ruled it an "accident/suicide." She was 28.

It was a cruel ending to a gorgeous young woman whose beauty was not entirely exterior, and it marked a turning point for the family as well, since it was the last time a Sedgwick held the nation in thrall. With Edie's passing, the family went into a kind of senescence, broken only by an occasional intrusion of one Sedgwick or another into the national conversation, for an art exhibition in New York, a turn with Miles Davis, a book, a movie performance, or TV show, to name a few of these media flurries in the years since. But the time of prominence for us had passed, turning the glory days themselves into something Edie-esque, a spray of light from a comet that briefly dominates the heavens but leaves precious little behind. **B**

*Boston* magazine contributing editor John Sedgwick is also author of the novels *The Dark House* and *The Education of Mrs. Bemis*. Much of the information about Edie in this excerpt that did not come from family interviews or personal observation is taken from the oral history *Edie: An American Biography* by Jean Stein, edited with George Plimpton, now in paperback as *Edie: American Girl*. For a list of readings and talks for *In My Blood*, visit [bostonmagazine.com](http://bostonmagazine.com).

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