This story begins with a first date. We had met on Tinder and he was educated, well dressed, raised with strong family values and, from what I could tell from our texting, had great conversational skills. I was not concerned with having a lack of topics to discuss, so all that was left to determine was whether or not we had that in-person spark.

Now, I have been raised with good manners and know when to say “please” and “thank-you.” I offer to help clean up when I’m a guest at someone’s home and I give up my seat on public transit to others who need it more. However, as I was about to discover, this man was a true gentleman. It went beyond the usual manners and became apparent very quickly that he had been raised much more traditionally than I had. Regardless if he noticed it or not, I was acutely aware of my comparable lack of social graces, feeling like I was possibly brought up by wolves in stark contrast to his proper use of a napkin, his knowledge of wine pairing and his self control when it came to drinking said wine. While I am enough of a feminist (and proud member of the BeyHive) to not want to be treated like a delicate flower, it was one of only a handful of times when I have felt like I may not, in fact, be a lady. (On a related note, do not wear shorts in Dubai, even on a camel safari, because you may find yourself in said shorts in someone’s private home for a traditional dinner, eyeing the curtains and wondering if you can quickly fashion yourself a long robe like Scarlett O’Hara in Gone With The Wind.)

Fast forward to me in attendance at a home décor event in Toronto’s Old Town. Being far more accustomed to the fashion industry crowd, I do not know a single soul there unless you count the lovely PR agent who invited me via email. My first instinct is to desperately clutch at my phone, using social media as a veil of protection. However, after tweets were sent and my #selfie securely uploaded as per contest rules, I put my phone away and decide to meet some new faces. One of the event sponsors is the University of Toronto’s Faculty Club, with representation by General Manager Leanne Pepper. Pepper, I learn, is also the University of Toronto Etiquette Program, including eye contact and thank-you notes, can be the memorable difference between potential candidates and will provide an edge in personal lives as well. One of my favourite tips I leave with is one that will undoubtedly come in handy at many a future cocktail party. A simple trick allows one to hold a glass of wine, an hors d’oeuvre plate and a napkin, while still keeping one hand free. I will never again have to choose between drinking, eating, or shaking someone’s hand, or worse, forced to knock back my wine way too quickly so that I can finally eat. Not only am I thankful, so should be my friends and future acquaintances.

The lesson begins as soon as we have sat, but is woven delicately throughout lunch as we enjoy our delicious food and candid conversation. I learn what I am doing wrong (which is basically everything) and I am corrected without criticism. Pepper shares anecdotal examples of exceptionally poor etiquette she has witnessed and I am relieved to know that I do not make any major faux pas. We go through the roles of each utensil, she explains the importance of taking cues from the host and tells me to take smaller bites to be prepared to answer a question more quickly. I now understand how big my bites normally are and also why Pepper has stayed so slender. I am given tips on how to use my napkin, how to place my cutlery and divage to her the feelings I had during my date with the aforementioned gentleman. Before I know it, we have exchanged cards and booked a date.

We discuss the importance of eye contact and some of the lost art of connection due to the emergence of email, texting and social media. Pepper’s courses allow students and staff alike to reflect on how they are representing themselves and communicating to potential employers, members of their faculty and one another. Simple corrections and added touches, including eye contact and thank-you notes, can be the memorable difference between potential candidates and will provide an edge in personal lives as well. One of my favourite tips I leave with is one that will undoubtedly come in handy at many a future cocktail party. A simple trick allows one to hold a glass of wine, an hors d’oeuvre plate and a napkin, while still keeping one hand free. I will never again have to choose between drinking, eating, or shaking someone’s hand, or worse, forced to knock back my wine way too quickly so that I can finally eat. Not only am I thankful, so should be my friends and future acquaintances.

I realize after my educational lunch what having etiquette truly represents. It is not an archaic and class-based method of behaving, but rather a form of communication that demonstrates respect between equals. It captures human interaction in its purest form, living in the moment, paying attention to social cues, savouring every bite and sip. Pepper and I each order an aromatic rooibos tea, arriving in dainty, painted cups. I take out my phone for the first time in two hours just to snap a quick photo with my gloves and the perfect cup of tea, after asking permission first. My hostess points out how coffee can seem so rushed but that taking time for tea really feels like a luxury. I fully agree as I take a slow sip, being very careful not to slurp.

The Faculty Club’s gorgeous, ivy covered building at 41 Willcocks speaks quietly of its history, dating back to the early 1970s. As I enter the doorway, I am promptly greeted and brought through to the main dining room, stunning with its high ceilings and intricate light fixtures. I have brought with me my vintage white gloves to help me dress the part, and I slip those on when I am seated. My generous hostess, Leanne Pepper, loves the added touch and encourages me to keep them on – at least until the bread has arrived.