

## BUCCELLATI

By James Magruder ©

ONE PLACE to look for a suitable husband in the spring of 1983 was the monthly dance at Columbia University. Suitable meant, among other things, *suited*: we were looking for a junior associate at a law firm, a young bond trader or ad writer or public relations exec with money to spend on above-ground transport, illegal stimulants, and surprise packages from the better department stores. We wanted a man at least two desks past entry level, preferably with a summer share.

It was late May, and I had been in the city for less than a month. Contrary to my expectations, I had quickly found a job at R.R. Bowker, “the publisher’s publisher.” I worked for Zoltan Breslau, the man who had invented the ISBN number in 1957, but you can’t eat prestige. My annual salary was \$12,600. I needed nicer shoes. My sublet on Jane Street, brokered through a cousin, would end in September.

David knew where to look for a husband. A college friend who had moved to Manhattan right after graduation while I spent months acidulating as a substitute teacher in the school district of my childhood, David was my initial guide to the city. He had done this thing called “Direct Centering,” a human potential “course” that involved weekly sessions of ego re-integration. It wasn’t a cult, he wrote to me in Evansville—not that I had asked. Whatever it was, Direct Centering had given him the power to convince me to come to New York, as well as the gumption to change jobs twice in ten months, ask for better tables in restaurants, and talk to strangers.

David called us Snow White and Rose Red, as I was fair and fine-boned, and he was swarthy and strong-featured. Moreover, in the game of love and chance, I was the priss and he was the slut. I resisted the feminine implications of his nicknames; I was now a working stiff with four suits of my own and so tried to re-christen ourselves Nord (short for Nordic) and Med (short for Mediterranean), but the names clunked out like cartoon

barbells. We were too young and winsome, David said, to have to worry about being butch or femme.

The name for what we were, archaic today, was Twinkie. We were Twinkies, moist and pliant confections to gulp in three bites, welcome sponges to soak in stronger flavors, with a faint, helpful grit in the aftertaste. Our freshness was hypothetically perpetual. At what point, after all, might a Twinkie, *could* a Twinkie shrivel, sour, melt, or fester?

Owen Teeter called me a Twinkie, decently, hopefully, as he walked me to the 110<sup>th</sup> Street subway stop after we'd had enough of the Columbia dance. My phone number was folded into the small triangular pocket of his jeans, just in front of his right hipbone. It was two o'clock in the morning. At last sight, Rose Red was striking hieratic poses in the center of the swarm, his curls swept into the improvised turban of his Amherst t-shirt.

My Amherst t-shirt—husband bait—had stayed in my khakis. David had talked me out of wearing shorts, a mistake. My legs were better than his, and the combination of dried sweat and prickly heat from four hours of dancing made them feel rolled in cracker crumbs. I realized a train might take half an hour to show up, there would be no express stop until Seventy-second Street, and I had no air conditioning. Irritation flowed into the hand I offered Owen. “You can call me,” I said. He smiled and shot his arms up in a sudden stretch of victory.

Far from being a priss, I was an easy, almost predictable lay, but Owen wouldn't find that out until the third date, should we get that far. We'd get that far, I grumbled to myself on the platform. I was a blond, baccalaureate Twinkie, and Owen, thirty-one with thinning hair, had my phone number. Sticking to the first man who'd said hello wasn't effective husband hunting, and David would chide me for it. It was like accepting the first job offered, which I had. It was like buying a madras shirt at Lord & Taylor, which I had. It's the Indiana in you, David would say, shaking his head.

Indiana of me as well to have waltzed with Owen Teeter. Once the crowd discovered that the violin figure in three-quarter time wasn't a false start to the latest British import, the floor emptied with comic haste. Owen held out his arms. I placed my hand on his shoulder and said he should lead. His fingers tapped, then curled around my flank just below my ribs. The trick, Owen half-shouted, was not to lean in. Don't look down, he said. Keep your back straight! As we began to glide to the left, I thought of Edith Wharton, an aigrette in her hair, straightening backs with a thwack of her fan.

We weren't terribly terrific at it, but a waltz with a man was worth a try. Like cold sesame noodles, the culinary sensation of that far-off summer of 1983. Peanut butter mixed with chili sauce, I wrote on a postcard to my mother, hard to imagine.

David was working a plate of them the next day at a Szechuan restaurant off Abingdon Square that we liked.

"Did you go home with anyone?" I asked, launching the post-mortem.

He grunted no and cut the glistening cable of noodles with his teeth before speaking.

"First I mashed with a lawyer in a window seat. But I sent him off for drinks and ditched him when he started smelling like a hamster."

"A hamster?"

"I had hamsters when I was little, ok? He got excited, it *happens*, and the smell of his personal musk mixed with his Eau Sauvage made him smell like a hamster. Or hamster shavings...perhaps," he finished daintily, a tone at odds with the sight of his chin gilded in swirls of peanut sauce. Rose Red had terrible table manners.

"And then after the lawyer?" I asked.

"I let somebody do me in the bathroom."

I frowned. The first to take his shirt off on the dance floor, David was also the kind of guy who managed to lay a groomsman at every wedding he went to. “Hand or mouth?” I asked.

“What do you think?” he said, his thumb bearing down on some egg roll filaments. David didn’t consider hand-jobs sex. I did.

“What did this one smell like?”

“What’s bugging you?” he asked, but then our entrees arrived. David forked a shrimp off my Triple Delight while I called the waitress back for chopsticks.

As expected, Owen’s dossier horrified David. Staten Island. SUNY Binghamton. Five years with the Peace Corps. In Ghana. Owen managed no accounts of any kind. Not even a paralegal, he taught English as a second language to refugees in the basement of St. Bartholemew’s Church. His father was a trigonometry teacher, so a trust fund seemed the longest of shots. What was the attraction, David wanted to know. Owen was cute, I replied, he was Irish, and Irishmen made the best sinners. He wasn’t afraid to waltz. The hand on my back as we threaded our way out of the dance was reassuring. Owen was courtly, not a useful observation when David hadn’t read Edith Wharton.

When I finished, David tilted his head in a manner familiar to me and went to the heart of the matter. I might not adhere to his rulings, but I respected the thinking behind them.

“Karl,” he said.

“David.”

“When are you going to learn how to take a compliment?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, flushing. I knew where he was headed.

“What I mean is, you’re not under any obligation. A stranger comes up to you and says he thinks you’re a beautiful man.”

“I shouldn’t have told you that,” I whispered.

“I admit you were alone and vulnerable, I was off scoping—”

“Mashing.”

“I apologize, but still.”

“But still what?”

He sighed. “You can just accept the compliment. Say thank you and leave it at that. You don’t have to sleep with him.”

“I didn’t sleep with him! I don’t just sleep with people.” I also didn’t let people “do” me.

“You have to own your beauty, Karl.”

I eyeballed the restaurant in a panic. Where was the hissing wok to slip and scar us with hot oil, the slosh of boiling water, the poisoned scallion hiding in a pancake, the thrown cleavers spinning towards our ears?

“We’ll be trolls before you know it,” I hissed.

David dropped a heap of his empty sugar packets into my teacup. “Exactly my point.”

“You don’t even want to meet a man,” I said with as much spite as I could muster. He laughed and suggested spumoni on Perry Street.

I WORKED in a building at Sixth and Forty-sixth, a couple of blocks from Rockefeller Center, where I would go and marvel at my right to eat lunch in the crowd. I didn't much take after him, but I fantasized that first summer in Manhattan that I was retracing my father's steps. In the early sixties, he had worked in midtown as an accountant for the Sealtest Dairy Company. I carried his first briefcase, a simple zippered portfolio with frayed handles, his initials in gold long rubbed off the leather by the second knuckle of his right hand, and I fancied that he might be watching me as I bought fruit from street vendors, made bus transfers, carried home the dry cleaning, and signed chits for scotch-and-sodas.

As for what I did when the sun went down—well, my father had died while I was a sophomore and to that date, there had been signals, but no proof of my preference. Had I thought about it, I suppose I would have hoped the dead went to bed by ten, which was the hour David and I might begin to contemplate our plumage for the club-crawl to come. Or perhaps my father turned his gaze from my follies to revisit the haunts of his youth, the high-toned nightclubs and low-down bars where he had entertained clients during the June moon of Keynesian economics.

One thing was certain: my father would have been bored stiff to watch me at work. R.R. Bowker's most glamorous product was and remains *Publisher's Weekly*. I was part of the team that compiled and maintained the database known as *Ulrich's Serials*, a comprehensive listing of all the magazines known to man. I was the German editor, hired to sort through the piles of new *Zeitschriften* sent to Bowker, classify them, and devise entries consisting of their title, their editors in chief, their frequencies, and, very occasionally, a one-sentence précis of their mission. *Advances in Metallurgical Spectrography* said it all, while a fashion sheet titled *The Blink of an Eye* required my mindful explication. It was big news if a magazine changed its frequency: monthly to quarterly, or semi-annual to annual. If an annual declined to the status of a bi-annual, it

was expunged from the database. I myself would place the weekly list of German casualties on Zoltan Breslau's desk and nod in sympathy to his pained sighs.

These professional excitements were actually some weeks away. When I started at Bowker, the newest database feature was phone numbers for the American serials. The forthcoming *Ulrich's* had a hard June 15 deadline, so for my first month on the job, eight hours a day, I entered thousands of ten-digit phone numbers. Nine strokes of the tab with my left pinkie took me to the area code field, the tenth to the exchange field. Hit enter and clear. The novelty of using a computer faded faster than a nosegay of violets. I took no pride from the fact that I could enter roughly twelve times more numbers in a day than my office mate Tana Waldman, who had started at Bowker the week before me. I was simply the faster of two chimps.

After twenty-three years teaching high school Spanish in Bensonhurst, Tana said she was ready to make a mark in the field of publishing. Tana made me nervous. Her purse remained in her lap at all times, and she gripped it shut with both hands whenever she stood up. On her desk she had placed a Ziggy statue that said "You're the Bestest," and she stored rubber bands in a red crystal apple. The slightest change in the routine—different colored printout, a new pass code, a blinking cursor—could derail her completely. For Tana, each magazine was a brand new world. My attempts to help her log on, my suggestions that she count tabs instead of reading the screen were always met with a defiant, "Yes, I know that." I got used to saying, "Did you hit enter?" when I heard her fingers stop and her breathing get louder. If we ever finished with the phone numbers, Tana would be in charge of Mexico and Central America.

"Karl Hedstrom," I said, picking up the phone one Monday morning. From the corner of my eye, I could see Tana leaning intently into her terminal, as if there were aliens within beckoning to make her their queen.

"Good morning Karl. This is Owen Teeter. From the dance." (Snow White, typically, only gave out her office phone number.)

“Owen, I’m glad to hear from you,” I said truthfully.

“Would you like to have dinner with me?”

I laughed. “You know how to surprise a girl, don’t you?”

We decided to meet that Thursday at the Cupping Room Café. After hanging up, I tightened the knot on my tie and opened my weekly minder. I loved filling up its rectangles.

“You’re a gay guy, aren’t you?”

I looked over at Tana. She was rubbing a spot on her screen with a putty-colored handkerchief.

“Yes I am, Tana,” I said, amazed by her powers of detection. David and I screeched at each other by phone at least twice a day. David was working for an ad agency with more queers in it, he said, than a library school.

“You’re fast with your fingers too,” she asserted. It was the first time Tana had acknowledged any difference in our ability to keystroke. I didn’t know what to say.

“How many phone numbers did you enter last week, Karl?”

I shot out my cuffs. “They’re not keeping track, Tana. They’re really not,” I lied. We were already known as the Tortoise and the Hare.

“Yes, I know that.” I flipped a page of my printout. She flipped a page of her printout. “I did seven hundred and thirty seven last week,” she continued, goading me. “So my productivity has increased.”

“I should say so,” I replied heartily. “Way to go, Tana.”

“How many did you do, Karl?”

I halved my figure, then shaved off another hundred. “About thirteen hundred, give or take fifty.”

I rolled backward in my chair to give us room. After a moment, as I pretended to locate something essential in my briefcase, I thought I heard her say, “I’m gaining on you, gay guy.”

WORKING FROM an outdated Zagat’s, David had given me the wrong price range for the Cupping Room. Refusing an appetizer *and* a glass of wine *and* dessert would have been strange on a first date, so I wound up five dollars short on my half of the tab. As Owen’s guest, I could duck it, but I felt bound to display some independence. The trouble was, my American Express account was all of three weeks old, so the options of splitting the bill with a card and cash, or paying with my card and pocketing Owen’s share, exceeded my level of sophistication.

Owen drew first on his wallet; I said oh, let me put it on my card; thumbing bills, he said absolutely not, he’d asked me to dine; I said don’t be silly, why don’t I just give you these three tens and we’ll figure it out later. At that, he struck the edge of the table with four fingers and said with unmistakable temper, “No half-measures, Karl. If I’m buying you dinner, I’m buying you *all* of it.”

I was a rube. David and Edith Wharton and my father could amen to that, but I got even by putting out that night on Jane Street, two dates ahead of schedule.

The next morning, when I opened my eyes, Owen was sitting cross-legged to my left, staring down at me. “What?” I said, rather sharply.

He smiled as a little boy might. “I was just imagining what it would be like to wake up, go to the mirror, and have your face looking back at me.”

I groaned and flung an arm over my eyes. He pulled it away, and I pulled him down to shut him up.

So that’s how a courtly English language instructor became my first New York, three-nights-a-week boyfriend. There was no other option for Snow White. After a time, the flow of his compliments, supported by the movements of his body, ceased to embarrass me. Owen Teeter was fantastic in bed, which was the trump I played whenever Rose Red hooted to hear that I was turning down another investigation of the newly opened Boy Bar in order to play bridge with Owen and his friends. Bridge, it was true, was the apogee of Indiana, but I’d air enough gamy details about what else was in me to bring things to a draw over the sesame noodles at Sung Chu Mei.

Owen was the first man I’d slept with who let things occur, rather than made them happen. He was circumspectly, offhandedly *collusive* in a way I came to find irresistible. He brought dessert into bed. He brought me into the shower. He’d suggest I not wear underwear. I’d unzip and find him in a jockstrap. We’d stand. We’d stand in front of a mirror. He’d rut. Or he’d take his time. Or he’d really take his time. He’d talk about it when we weren’t having it, then change the subject. Baby steps, but ones we all take. Owen’s gift for making sex seem terribly dirty yet perfectly banal was liberating. I knew I had turned some kind of corner when, one day at Bowker, I reminded him over the phone to buy some more lube.

“Yes dear,” he said dryly, letting me discover the moment.

“Wait. Did I just say that?”

“Yes, dear. Now, would that be flavored or non-flavored?”

I hung up, amazed at my dirty, banal, sluttish, housewifely self. I re-squared my haunches on my chair. I smiled to hear Tana jabbering in Spanish with Josefina, the coffee cart lady. The thought of Owen riding the subway down to Fourteenth Street with a drugstore bag on his lap made for a tumid afternoon with *Ulrich's Serials*, Deutsches division.

OWEN WOULD always be taking the subway. That was the tradeoff. He didn't seem to care about money, a philosophy so at odds with Manhattan living as to be Pre-Columbian. And this was back when it only cost twenty dollars to leave your apartment. As for his apartment, I ducked David's every question. Owen had a room on the ninth floor of the Greystone Hotel, an SRO at the southeast corner of Ninety-first and Broadway. (Joseph Mitchell territory, but I hadn't read him yet.) Even at high noon, light stopped at the glass entrance doors, so the yellowing mirror tiles on the walls reduced everyone in the lobby to lumbering ochre phantoms. The reception desk was covered with greasy, peeling contact paper. Taped inside the elevators were pictographs showing how to outwit roaches, rats, and silverfish. The water-stained wallpaper in the ninth floor hallway, a repeating toile of the Betsy Ross House and Independence Hall, barely kept truce with the quince-colored shag carpet that squished underfoot and gave off smells of dishrag and fumigant.

Owen wasn't embarrassed by his room, so neither was I. Housing in New York was always impossible, so I guess I assumed that like his job, the apartment was an improvisation until something better opened up. He must have had more than a hotplate, yet I don't recall taking any meals there beyond bagels with the paper. I remember running gear slung over the shower bar, and his running shoes hanging outside by their laces from a cup hook twisted into the grimy windowsill. The ironing board was out a lot, since he was fastidious about his shirts. It was something the Africans had expected of Peace Corps schoolmasters. I remember the bed frame was bolted down, the stress

fractures and divots in the wall around the headboard attesting to decades of strong fucking. It was louche, but larky. Owen might look up from the board, meet my eyes, and swagger back for more. I liked that there was never more than two feet to cross to get to what needed to be done. Sex and ironing and reading and coffee and pissing and sleep were all of a piece.

At night, cradling me, rubbing my scalp with his chin, he would apologize for how much he talked. He said he had begun to store up new thoughts for me. Most of the time I held my tongue—it is the Twinkie’s prerogative to have nothing to say—but one muggy June night, Owen coaxed me into an historical discussion, meaning the five-week history of us.

I told him about Snow White and Rose Red, and how at first sight I had thought he was Latino and how that had made me nervous. I said I had enjoyed the waltz. I made him laugh when I recalled how a seven-dollar appetizer at the Cupping Room almost sank our relationship. Then, thinking to reassure Owen that I liked how things were, I voiced some of David’s milder misgivings about his prospects.

He pulled away and flipped on the reading light. He bent over the nightstand and from its second drawer withdrew a bundle of green felt tied around the middle with a braided bow. He laid it out like a tiny shrouded body on his pillow, then adjusted the arc of the lamp. I sat up. He untied the ribbon, unrolled the cloth, and laid open a flap. There was a quick gleam of tines and crescents.

Six of the eight pockets in the cloth were tenanted. “Silver,” I said. “Family?”

He shook his head. “It’s Buccellati,” he said. “As they do with everything else, I believe the Italians make the most beautiful silver in the world.”

He slid a dinner fork from its chamber and closed my hand around it.

“It’s really heavy,” I responded, idiotically.

“It’s an Art Nouveau pattern, hand-cast and chased, all made to order. The craftsmanship is the same as it was generations ago.”

“It’s beautiful, Owen, no, no, it’s absolutely gorgeous. It suits you.”

He paused for a moment to stroke my knee and lay his head there. “This is all I have so far. I buy it piece by piece.”

I looked down his back to the pair of hollows at the base of his spine where I liked to press my thumbs. The wheezing air conditioner in the window changed keys. I felt his jaw working against my knee as he raised his voice above it.

“If I wanted to, Karl, I could fly to Saudi Arabia next week. I could teach English to the royal children for an obscene amount of money. I could live in the palace. But right now I want to be in America.”

“I know you do,” I stuttered, cutting him off, “and I for one am glad you’re here.”

“Italians,” he sighed, leaning back again to replace my fork with a soup spoon. He stayed in his crouch. “I can afford two pieces a year.”

“A semi-annual,” I replied automatically.

I didn’t get it, and he knew it. He placed each piece in my hand, hoping I’d get it. (Very Helen Keller, David would later say.)

“I do want things, Karl,” he said, not looking at me anymore. “It’s just that I’m able to wait for them one at a time.”

“HAPPY GRINGO DAY,” said Josefina, making change on her afternoon pass-through. The warp of her wish so tickled me, I tipped her a dollar. My heart was light. I was going away for the Fourth of July weekend. Tucked behind my office door was a new burgundy leather duffel. Inside that was a black leather shaving case, a giveaway for opening a Macy’s charge. My hostess gift was a slim 1948 edition of **Contract Bridge Made Easy**, filled with droll line drawings of women in hats.

Owen was poor, but his friend Jay Strickert, a Peace Corps alum with a trust fund, had a house on the Jersey shore. Jay’s apartment on Sutton Place, the grandest I’d yet seen, was where we went for bridge. My first time there, something stopped me in the foyer. Beyond the hallway, across a drawing room, between two sets of French doors leading to a balcony was a brooding, blocky painting, a portrait depicting the idea of a king. It was another New York first—textbook art in private hands.

“God, I love Soutine,” I said recklessly. “He’s one of my favorite twentieth-century artists.”

“Thank you, it’s a Rouault,” said my host.

(It wasn’t as if I said I loved his Mondrian, I bitched later to Owen. Art historians always pair Soutine and Rouault.)

The rich were supposed to be sleek, and graceful about setting everyone at ease. Jay had a lumpy body and a spiny temperament. Our fourth at bridge, Tony Neville, was my first link to the pre-Stonewall era. He had hitched to New York from eastern Montana at seventeen. A besotted agent got him into the Actor’s Studio and managed a nice stage career for him. In the sixties, he’d had a lucrative second run in print ads, and now he sold space in a Jewish cemetery. I secretly regarded Tony as a template for what I’d hoped I could do with New York. I enjoyed playing the acolyte—the Merman vs. Martin

stuff—with him, Owen smiling over the table at each discriminating question I posed. The Peace Corps queers seem to have skipped right to Sylvester.

From the moment my duffel jounced the bed in our guest room and I lifted Owen into the air, the weekend was my first taste of a different district in the gay community—the fresh-chervil side of the street. Friday night we grilled steaks as the sun set over Spring Beach. Jay, who could afford to be ironic about our surroundings, was hilarious on the topic of his family. He skewered each photo in a graveyard of silver frames on a Steinway until we were helpless with laughter. Collusive Owen lured me onto the dock about three in the morning, and we rocked with a silver moon rippling on the waves.

After a few hours on the beach Saturday, Tony and I went into town for lobsters and strawberries and farm eggs for homemade mayonnaise. We left Jay and Owen reading on the porch, **Contract Bridge Made Easy** riding the swell of Jay's doughy, sun-smudged belly.

Jay got mean at dinner. He started by mocking the way Owen shared his claw meat with me. Then he ridiculed Owen's bedsit until Tony shushed him. When I started to clear the dishes for dessert, Jay put his fist on his plate and said that Twinkies didn't have to do anything.

"I'd like to do my part," I mumbled to the discard bowl of artichoke leaves.

"Twinkies don't have a part," he scoffed. "They don't have to clean or cook or drive. They don't clear dishes. Twinkies have one part, and it better be stiff."

"Enough, Jay," said Owen.

Jay set a napkin ring spinning on his forefinger. The lobster juice from his plate dribbled down his arm. "They only have to put out," he insisted, cracking himself up with his visual.

“I might be a Twinkie,” I said, “but I’m not a gold digger.”

“No shit,” he snickered. Owen, at the sink, bit a nail. “Now if this were Africa, Blondie, it would be different.” Jay ogled the wine, but Tony was quicker on the draw. He shrugged and wedged the napkin ring like a monocle between his brow and doughy cheek. “If this were Africa, I’d be the bwana, and you’d be my houseboy. You’d have to beat my clothes on a rock. Cook for me, repair my netting, brush my hair, boil my drinking water. You’d brush bwana’s teeth if he asked.”

“Why don’t we get some air?” said Owen. Jay waved his arm to nix the suggestion. His monocle fell and dinged against the lobster hull on his plate.

“And you’d be so grateful for those nine stinking American dollars *a month*, you would service your bwana in every way. Of course, you’re too old to be a houseboy. You’re past it. Isn’t that right, Owen? Don’t you think Blondie here is a couple of harvests older than Daga was?”

“This isn’t the place for this, Jay,” said Owen. He shut off the tap.

Jay turned back to me. “We never knew exactly how old Daga was, Blondie.” He swept his plate to the floor; some silver went with it.

Owen was leaning, face-out against the counter, his fingers pushed into his temples, as if a mesmerist’s pose could will Jay to silence.

“I don’t know,” Jay continued, “I suppose we should have split the tab, Owen. Each of us could have paid him four-fifty. A dollar-twelve a week for services rendered. Daga didn’t mind double duty, did he? Young and smooth as he was.”

At that, Owen whipped past me and dragged Jay out of his chair. Despite the fifty-pound difference, he pushed him out the kitchen door. Their shouts trailed to pips, and then it was just the roll of the waves again.

Tony and I did the dishes, then repaired to the music room for brandy. Drawing upon what he had learned from Harold Clurman, Tony began to play solitaire, a trivial activity that masked his serious intention, which was to tell me that Owen had come back to the United States to find himself a husband. My crew cut was two days old, so my trivial activity was to take delight in rubbing the back of my head against the nap of the velvet couch. “Owen’s a great guy,” was all I would allow.

“He’s aces Karl. I don’t want him to go back to Africa.”

I thought of a young black man standing forlornly outside a grass hut. Holding my father’s briefcase. “If he can’t find Daga,” I said, “he could go to Saudi Arabia and make a fortune.”

Tony chuckled, another feint. “They put queers to death over there.”

I followed the skitter of a daddy longlegs along the picture rail behind his head. “Wow,” I said, “that’s insane.”

I picked up the other bridge deck and suggested double solitaire, which I hadn’t played since I was a kid in Evansville. Then I got him started on Mabel Mercer, of whom I’d only just become aware. When Jay and Owen got back, we ate shortcake in silence. That night, the next morning, and twice the next day—Gringo Day—I made sure the sex we had was almost comically noisy since Jay’s room was next to ours.

“What suit are you wearing today?”

“The seersucker.”

“God, I love you in that. The pink tie?”

“I prefer to think of it as ‘dusty rose.’”

“Of course, lover,” said Owen lightly.

I bared my teeth. Since our weekend in Jersey, he had begun slipping that word in, and I’d been letting it pass. I scribbled “lover” on my blotter to remind myself to ask David how to finesse my way out of it.

“Can you knock off at four?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said, with the breeze of Zoltan Breslau. “What’s up?”

“Meet me at 46 E. Fifty-seventh Street, between Madison and Park. That’s the south side of the street,” he added—unnecessarily. I knew my odds and evens.

Before I left to meet him, there was a crisis at work. The office manager, a retired Fosse dancer with a two-foot braid, brought in a plastic tub and set it down directly in front of me, rather than next to my terminal. Atop a fresh pile of German periodicals was my nameplate. Karl Hedstrom, twelve white letters against a black wood-grain finish.

Given the brain-blanching level of the work I did, it hadn’t occurred to me that a nameplate was on its way. This was a milestone, something grave was in order, indeed I felt my father winging close, the forgotten timbre of his voice prompting me to issue thanks to the world of work, but the moment felt silly to me, ridiculous even. “Where did this come from?” was the best I could do. To cover my awkwardness I picked the thing up and slowly traced the grooves with a reverent forefinger.

Tana Waldman stood up; for the first time, her purse fell to the floor. She stepped over it and blocked the open door with her body. According to the office manager, Tana's nameplate had been delayed for "explainable" reasons she wouldn't explain. Tana kept repeating that she had been an employee of R.R. Bowker forty hours longer than Karl Hedstrom, so where was her nameplate?

The tension was so awful, I weakly offered that "H" came before "W" in the alphabet. Tana stamped her heel and snarled "Yes, I know that," but wouldn't let the office manager out of the room. As she grew more strident, the other members of the Ulrich's group gathered a couple of yards beyond the door. When things became too gruesome, after Tana revealed how much she had spent the previous summer on a publishing skills course, how much she had spent on her business wardrobe, how hard she had looked for a job, how involved her commute was, and how proud she felt to be part of the Bowker family, they ducked their heads and peel away.

Owen was waiting for me in his one suit, an olive worsted from Tripler's, custom-made, and his best tie, Hermès. He was bobbing with happiness at my approach. I wished, and not for the first time, I could be what he saw.

"We make such a handsome couple," he said, kissing me on Fifty-seventh Street.

"This isn't the Village," I said.

"I don't care, beautiful. They know me here," he said, tilting his head toward the vitrine of the Buccellati boutique.

They did know him at Buccellati. He was too excited to notice the quick play of eyes around the horseshoe of cases as he bid the staff good afternoon. He stated his intention to purchase his first dinner knife, his voice beating against the cushioned quiet. And what pattern have you, asked a face tightened with surgeries. I should be in the register, he

replied airily. She pretended for several minutes that he was not in the register. When Owen gave the name of his pattern, she pretended not to understand his pronunciation.

I thought of that small green roll in his nightstand drawer, and decided to defend my boyfriend against this covey of Continental closet-cases, gray about the temples, and black-shingled spinsters from the Dalmatian Coast. I wished to remind them that the root word for service is *servant*. Keeping my mouth sealed, I dropped my jaw, let my eyelids droop, and placed them all in the middle distance. I ignored offers of assistance and picked up their catalog as if it were coated in motor oil. I glanced at two pages and sniffed “zu Barockstil” to no one in particular. I recall sneering at an arrangement of sauce boats.

Seated on the couch, I carefully twitched my crossed left foot. Owen buzzed about the cases looking for a piece of his pattern until he recognized, then drew the mocking attention of the man who had handled his most recent transaction.

“Ah, of course, *signor*, the cream soup spoon,” the salesman finally said, tilting a palm upwards.

“Yes, the cream soup spoon of November last.”

“You are ordering à la carte, no?”

“A la carte all the way,” grinned Owen.

I could have smote them both for that exchange.

Snow White couldn't be budged from her throne, so at Owen's urging, the salesman lay a square of green cloth and the knife before me on a mahogany tea table. It had a French blade. I picked it up. It was superb; it was exquisitely heavy, timelessly weighty. It could pay for two and a half months of my sublet. I made some calculations: sometime in the

early years of the twenty-first century, Owen would own enough Buccellati flatware to host a dinner for six in his room on the ninth floor of the Greystone Hotel, provided the salad forks could double for dessert.

“It’s quite lovely,” I said in a bored fashion to the middle distance. I placed my hand on Owen’s forearm to signal my approval, but the excitement in his eyes had gone.

Why was I acting like that, he wanted to know when we were outside again.

“Acting like what?” I said. The reaction of the Buccellati sales staff to his twelve one-hundred dollar bills had beggared description. I had wanted to spear their eyes with pickle forks.

“Like you were beyond it all. You were horrible to those people, Karl.”

“*I* was horrible?”

“I was embarrassed for you,” he said.

I was so stunned, I walked into a parking meter. “You were embarrassed? *You* were embarrassed? For me?”

To this day I don’t know whether Owen was aware of their misconduct, or knew and chose to ignore it. At the time, the rage I felt for having my behavior misinterpreted eclipsed my shame for having spoiled his rarest—and dearest—pleasure.

TO PRETEND that we could travel through a quarrel, we went for brunch the next day at the Hungarian coffeehouse up by Columbia. It was miserably hot. They were out of the babka, and it was the day I learned I hated kasha vernishkes. Owen didn’t understand my ambivalence surrounding the arrival of my nameplate or my confused feelings about

Tana Waldman and her mark in the field of publishing. He said this was because I never talked about work, I never talked in general, which was my cue to grow captious about everything. Finally, rather than pin it all on him, kasha included, *his* suggestion, I shut down.

On the walk back down Broadway, Owen made up for my silence with cheery, dispassionate anecdotes about African heat, thereby releasing me to contemplate why I had gone to Jay Strickert's apartment the night before. Why had I taken a cab to Sutton Place at 9:45? Why had I given my name to the desk attendant? Why had I expected Jay to be home? Why, after he'd shut the door behind me, did I unzip my fly in the foyer and give him my stiff part to suck, watching the Rouault monarch on the faraway wall?

Having reached the southeast corner of Ninety-first Street, I slumped against the Greystone Hotel and stared at the traffic island until my vision blurred. Owen asked me if I wanted to go upstairs. I shook my head. Did I want to walk in the park? Nap in the park? Catch a movie? Go to a museum? Nap at home? Meet up later? So many things to do in New York.

I shook my head against all his suggestions and squinted into the sun. The light burned tangents along the tops of my eyeballs and into my brain. All my information could leach out along the edges of these flaming arrows and sizzle to ash and vapor on the sidewalk if I so chose, but the heat and the light and the smell and his gaze—and maybe even the noise, I prayed—stopped three feet to my right.

Owen spoke again.

“Sometimes, Karl, I think you've got a life going on inside that I know nothing about.”

If I stretched out my arm, I could cool my fingertips in the shade. And if I stood perfectly still for another ninety minutes, I could disappear into it altogether.