

ONE

MARK AND KAREN BREAKSTONE got married a little late in life. Karen was nearly 40 and had given up on finding someone as good as her father and had begun to become bitter about the seven-year relationship she'd had after college with her former Art teacher. In fact, when she was set up with Mark, she nearly turned the date down because Mark's only prominent quality was his potential to be rich. Her friend, long married and on her third pregnancy, mentioned no other qualities. Karen's married friends seemed to be obsessed with the fact that they had never considered money's importance in their relationships, having gotten married so young. Now, deeper in life they were distracted by it, sleepless as they

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debated their long-term security. Karen still wanted someone handsome. She felt it would be an unbearable compromise to stare at an ugly face every day and worry about her future children's orthodontia.

But no one had actually met Mark. The women knew he had a good job and wasn't from Manhattan and Karen could ask someone's husband who knew Mark, but there really wasn't time for anyone to investigate in the days before email or texting. Mark had her number and if he used it, she certainly wasn't going to let her machine answer. And he had a nice enough voice and was a little nervous, which meant he wasn't a serial womanizer. So Karen, unenthusiastic, changed dates on him twice but they eventually went out for a drink, a sexy idea if Karen had not forced it to a Sunday night.

In the dim light of the bar, Mark was not unattractive; he was plain, the way a girl is plain. He didn't seem to have any pronounced features but at the same time they weren't all so similar that he was handsome. His face was fat

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in every way, youthful: his nose was round, his cheeks were round but somehow his body was lean which gave him the look of someone you didn't really notice.

As they debated having another drink, he told a story about someone eating his lunch out of a refrigerator at work. It didn't matter who did it but he had an idea because he saw mustard on the sleeve of some receptionist. He told Karen that most guys say they're having lunch with clients but they always end up watching sports in a bar together and it's costly and a waste of time and he has an edge because he brings his own and usually he's the only guy awake in the afternoon. She laughed and he looked at her, his face kind of changing with surprise and he said, "People don't get me sometimes." For Karen, this was lovely.

Maybe they were meant to be together because she thought he was very funny. A lot of the stories had happened to him and he was frequently the butt of the joke. It was almost like he had the personality of someone very confident, some-

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one who came off so strongly that they felt they had to constantly deprecate themselves. Still, his face said the opposite. They started dating and three or four weeks in, they had sex in his apartment because she might want to leave right after. But she didn't. His rooms were well appointed but not slick and his hands had held her waist so firmly that her hips were pleasantly sore, so she relaxed into his down pillows, soothing and familiar with the scent of lavender dryer sheets. And then they had sex again the same night and she felt that he desired her. And that was very attractive.

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Mark's Father was a high school football coach and also an administrator and civics teacher so he had some status beyond sports in the upper middle class suburb of Newton, Massachusetts. With all the professional families and their well-bred but rebellious children, Mark slowly discovered who he really was: some version of the chauffeur's son. He had everything the others had but of lesser quality: an old-fashioned three-speed bicycle, no trading cards, unexciting and infrequent vacations and

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tennis shoes bought from the bin in the supermarket.

His Father found him lacking in aggression and eventually gave up bullying him, finding him best suited for supporting the real warriors, like a girl. Mark did eventually show some athletic ability in cross-country running, which required psychological discipline but was solitary and dismissive of the teamwork his Father thought most valuable. By junior year Mark knew that he preferred to be quietly competitive and that he didn't get along with men because he hated the anonymous place they assigned him when they were in groups.

Women had been a mystery to Mark. His Mother was an eternal cheerleader and his older, smarter Sister had wrapped the family in the drama of an eating disorder in her early teens, her battle to delay adulthood finally won when she had a heart attack after returning from treatment at seventeen and died. In addition, he learned that he had none of his Father's charisma and his physical appearance, his face

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mostly, was no help to him in developing confidence with women.

He got attention for having a dead sister; still it was normal to him, and her long illness had made him so self-reliant that no girl could imagine his loneliness. His Sister's demise had most importantly made strangers of his parents, as they rarely spoke to him, instead retreating into the mundane: cleaning, painting and repairing the house so worn down by the failure of their years-long rescue mission. By his senior year in high school they had moved on to the yard where gardening allowed them to spend time on their knees in the dirt, no different than the wet vegetables they picked and let rot in baskets by the mudroom. Mark wondered if anything could ever relieve their silent, busy grief and resolved to be the achieving survivor for their benefit, but in equal measure he knew that massive financial success and a high, white collar job would allow him to be reborn into a world where none of this had ever happened.

Mark liked Karen because she had no idea how beautiful she was. She had raven hair and blue

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eyes and her body was fit yet still soft and curvy. When he asked his coworker who'd set them up how he could have left this detail out, the coworker revealed he'd never seen her. His wife knew her and said she was an 8, she'd actually said she was a 7 but he couldn't tell that to Mark, especially after Mark had openly declared her a 10. The coworker was pleased but curious and when he finally met Karen at the Christmas party he was confounded by the fact that she was indeed very beautiful, although not a 10, and she did have a great rack.

The night Mark and Karen finally undressed before each other, he stared at her as she got up to get a robe and go to the bathroom. It was a bright moonlit night and her nipples were almost purple in the blue air, her skin so milky, her thighs so full and ankles so narrow. He thought he would never get tired of having sex with her and he took that thought very seriously and knew they would marry.

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You might think a man like Mark who was not rich by 40 would never be rich, but he worked

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in a field of finance where a big score was still possible. While Mark and Karen were engaged, there was a promotion available which included a bonus that would have catapulted him into wealth. Now that they were a couple and enjoying the social fruits of dining with other couples and the joy of guaranteed company on New Year's Eve and Valentine's, they held the unspoken status of being on the verge of success. The promotion hung in the balance throughout the entire planning of the wedding and both of them were thinking how much bigger a party they could throw but also worrying that it might not happen and they could be in debt and Mark might even have to find another job.

Karen was prepared to give up her years accrued in publishing because it was a repetitive, gossipy business and she rarely had contact with writers. Also, she wasn't exactly in publishing. It was the reason she came to New York, but the competition was impenetrable and so she migrated through temp work into the adjacent world of public relations, where in addition to the mild glamour of independent films and restaurant openings, she was brought tantalizingly close to

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a publishing house. Eventually, she told people she was in publishing because no one understood publicity, especially the freelance kind and someone had once misheard her and the reaction was noticeably more enthusiastic. Deeply behind the scenes, she booked travel and appearances for authors and editors and after once covering for her boss with a perfectly purchased apology of handmade chocolate and ash-striped cheese, she began to design themed gift baskets so specific and exquisite that many urged her to start her own business.

The praise she garnered in this unexpected sideline only highlighted her clear lack of enthusiasm and drive for the career she had fallen into. Unlike her boss, she was incapable of shaking her suburban manners or showing sudden charm to strangers with her sunglasses on her head and thus upon realizing that Mark might insist she change her profession to wife and mother, she was pleasantly excited. Karen knew that there were no housewives in Manhattan in the traditional sense and that she could be quite fulfilled by becoming a volunteer at the school, a nest builder, and a manager of servants.

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When Mark was passed over two weeks before the wedding, Karen was crushed to the point that she debated if she could get out of it. As she sat in her kitchen in the middle of the night and wrote down the pros and cons on a piece of paper, she considered the horrible fact that maybe she was only marrying him for money. But she knew she was a better person than that. She knew that what she had come to know as love had become love when she was around him. She didn't just want to have a child before it was too late; she wanted to have a child with him. That was very important; in fact, it was the only thing on the list she'd made and she was glad for the whole exercise and wondered why she had never been brave enough to distill her ambition on paper before.

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Mark did become rich by any standard other than his own. At work he was known for having the enviable skill of recognizing when an asset was distressed. With stocks, bonds, real estate and especially companies, he was able to substantiate through mathematical analysis the lack of value that made things vulnerable and frequently gave

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tips that made money or at least encouraged trades. Nevertheless, it was not his talent that enriched him in the end, but his luck at being part of a group that shared a gigantic commission from landing a university endowment. And damn it if missing that promotion hadn't almost ruined his wedding but he happened to be in the right place at the right time and they had a big year. And then they had another. And then they had another and he had plenty and there was no reason to worry anymore. He wasn't the richest guy in New York, but he could still do most of the things that they did except for appearing in magazines.

He of course wanted more, at least enough for a country place and one of those awards people got for being generous to causes, but he felt lucky that Karen didn't have social aspirations and took their wealth as a given as if she were born with it and had nothing to prove. He loved and even envied that about her and finally asked her about her natural inclination towards privacy and thus private satisfaction. One night, after a very expensive bottle of wine, while they lay spent in the after, Karen told Mark that other women had

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never used her as a measure because she easily receded in groups, most comfortable as an approving spectator. And yet she wondered to Mark, her voice soft, eyes welling, why this was not enough. She refused to gossip, having once been the subject of a particularly vicious rumor that claimed she had arrived and stayed at a summer beach house share without being invited. This rumor then evolved into the insinuation that her nose or her breasts were fake, painting her permanently as desperate. Why they had singled her out was a mystery to her but most likely the group had decided she was perfect for shouldering their insecurities, her natural shyness and silence having been perceived as confidence. As she rested her head on his chest, clasping him with her nakedness she revealed that like Mark, she had suffered from the cruelty of the mob, but she had come to understand that you could never see yourself the way others did, and it was okay to appear isolated as long as you remember that you are not the way you are seen.

Karen woke Mark on his 41st birthday with her head under the blankets and her mouth on him. After, when she came back from brushing her

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teeth, she curled up next to him and told him she was pregnant. Mark's enthusiasm was immediate despite his depleted state but his feelings deepened as Karen spoke in a strategic tone about their need for a larger apartment. She had planned for a week to deliver the news that way and was giddy with relief that he reacted with sufficient excitement.

Mark enjoyed all of it: he was giving beautiful Karen the life she wanted, he was creating a family, a legacy; and what he enjoyed most was her shift from carnal to practical in the course of a few minutes. It made him want her again although he wasn't sure if it was healthy in her condition. Karen laughed at him. She still thought he was funny and as they made love he noticed that her body had changed some to his liking. When she came he felt her drain of all anxiety as she disappeared into the warmth of expectation.

Karen's pregnancy was uneventful with the exception of their move to a ten-unit apartment building west of Park Avenue, an area known as one of the last real neighborhoods in Manhat-

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tan. The 3-bedroom had no balcony but was one floor below the penthouse and had a view over the rooftops of brownstones with almost nothing postwar in sight and there was a chain coffee shop or optician on every corner and a grocery store that felt like an old-time market and a few tall buildings, which still had shiny brass elevator doors.

The co-op board was rigid and testy, and stalled until Mark recused himself, allowing Karen's belly and glow to win them over. Their daughter was born at Lenox Hill Hospital at a reasonable hour and Mark was there and she was brought home to a stocked nursery and a few new friends Karen had made as she entered the world of birthing classes and stroller selection. They named her Heather. Mark liked that it reflected his Scottish heritage, but it was really a coincidence since Karen had picked it from a book, believing she had never met a Heather who was not beautiful.

Unlike her friends, Karen dismissed the baby nurse early, finding that breastfeeding, sleepless-

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ness and tracking milestones were no burden to her. In fact she welcomed even the most extreme intrusions, viewing any contact, even at three in the morning, as an opportunity to touch and smell her baby. The pleasure of Heather overtook all others and she continued to refuse help as the baby grew, documenting every day with pictures and notes but never needing to show them to anyone because they were always together and Heather could be experienced firsthand. When Heather was four and finally entered the most caring and progressive nursery school, though not necessarily the most prestigious, it was Karen who spent the day crying. And as the days passed she would occupy those few hours while Heather was in school heartbroken in bed, then spring to life at pickup time when she could hold her daughter's hand again as they made cookies or watched videos or simply walked through the park.

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About ten years before Mark and Karen's first date, Robert Klasky was born in Newark, New Jersey, to a single mother in the public hospital. Bobby, as he was called, was a miracle unnoticed by the medical staff, since they were unaware that

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his Mother had rarely consumed anything other than beer during her mostly unacknowledged pregnancy. He was born with his Mother's last name since his father could have been any number of people who had Bobby's mousy brown hair and blue eyes.

Bobby's Mother stayed in the hospital as long as permitted before returning to the small clapboard house in the town of Harrison, where she had spent most of her unhappy life. Harrison was originally filled with Polish immigrants and was now poor but still mostly white which was unusual for that part of New Jersey and would be quaint if not for the visual cues of poverty: the flimsy screen doors, mounds of garbage, strewn scrap metal and the black knit of telephone lines that cluttered the horizon.

Having Bobby did little to alter his Mother's belief that heroin was the best thing in her life. She had never intended to spend her adult years in Harrison with all the "lowlifes" as she called them. Despite her judgment, she took up with a series of bums, violent addicts and drunks who

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liked a meal and a roof and then a woman for kicks. Bobby had eaten cigarette butts and drunk beer before he was ten and even helped her boyfriends and some of their friends shoot up when they were too sick.

He was frequently awakened in the middle of the night and dragged into the living room, never knowing if he was going to be a punching bag or a parlor trick. His Mother survived on government assistance and stealing, especially in the good years when they were building the stadium and construction was everywhere, but she mostly worked in local beauty parlors sweeping up hair and sometimes as an unlicensed cosmetician, which was ideal since it allowed her to follow her soap operas, skim from the register and evaluate others' appearance with authority.

It was a relief to both Bobby and his Mother when he started school. He enjoyed it because it was structured and there was something to eat other than Taylor ham sandwiches, but soon he realized he was smarter than all of the students and most of the teachers. He discovered that he

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could get anything he wanted by simply telling the truth about his Mother or his poverty, particularly to the younger teachers whose eyes would fill with tears and buy him fast food and promise things would change. Nothing did, of course. The worst that would happen was his Mother would get a visit, but she was impossible to get in trouble because she had no shame and would frequently greet bureaucrats and do-gooders in her oversized T-shirt nightgown or a ratty kimono.

Bobby spent most of his time alone. It was hardest in the summer when the house was full of junkies and the TV had to be watched on mute. He would go down to the river which was littered with abandoned appliances and tires and feel lonely and sick because “he, too, felt thrown away,” as a prison psychologist would one day tell him.

Nothing really held his interest except animals. They were like people to him, dumb and helpless, especially the roadkill he would pick up and hide in the garage for later inspection. Only by accident did Bobby finally discover his own power when he saw a bird trapped inside the window air

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conditioner and turned it on and watched in awe as the animal was battered by the fan until blood sprayed out the vent.

Bobby dropped out of high school and got a job at a lumberyard loading trucks and eventually pallets once he figured out the forklift. He continued to live at home after staking out his own room with a padlock and in his off-hours he would watch TV and drink vodka and absorb the meaningless talk and explosive laughter of his Mother's friends and lovers at her spontaneous nightly gatherings.

Sometimes a fight would break out and he would just leave and sit on the stoop or walk to the corner store for more beer. A neighbor girl, known as Chi-Chi, would frequently be on her stoop as well and he thought her very beautiful and could tell she was finding a way to talk to him. Once, on a particularly overcast Saturday afternoon, he crossed the street early so he could pass closer and said, "Nice sunny day, huh?" She smiled back and he was pleased that he had said one of those things people say.

