

My cubiclemate broke my heart.

By Joel Keller

Karen. Her name still reverberates in my head. I don't see her at all anymore. But there was a time when we were as close as two people could be without ever touching each other.

Sex? No. We never even dated. We were in a "work marriage": two adults, working side by side, who happened to act like a married couple, all the way down to the knowing looks, shared stories and petty arguments. It even reached the point where coworkers who went to lunch with Karen and me would feel the need to inform waitresses who heard us squabble over what to order that we were not actually married.

"You don't want the ranch chicken," she'd tell me in front of the waitress and whoever else was sitting at the table.

"And why the hell not?" I'd retort.

"You had it last week and hated it."

Looking back, it was easy to see how things got to that level. I met Karen when I started working at a telecommunications company, my second job out of college. I was 25 but still sheltered and immature after a sexless life in engineering school. She was three years older, a gap that was significant to a person of my inexperience.

As I wheeled people's new computers to their desks, I'd purposely pass her cube just to get a peek at her. Karen wasn't like the girls I used to meet at fraternity parties in college. She was a woman: mature, together, confident. A natural beauty with ringlets of auburn hair and a big, inviting smile, she was sexy in the mock-turtleneck-and-jeans kind of way that most men secretly desire, even as they outwardly drool over the large-breasted blonde at the bar.

She was pretty damn smart, too. She had a math degree from a prestigious school and worked as a Unix administrator. For a computer geek, that's a rare find: a woman who can perform a differential equation and write a shell script. She could also tell a joke, drink a beer and enjoy a hockey game. Pretty much every normal guy's dream.

Which, of course, meant that she was already in a long-term relationship at the time we met. She had been dating her boyfriend, Brian, for a couple of years. I was okay with it at first, because I saw her only occasionally. But then she was transferred to the desk next to mine. Her easy manner and natural curiosity made conversations a snap. We developed an inside-joke banter that led people to think we were a couple, even though we almost never saw each other outside the office. Soon our relationship reached the work-marriage stage, as we began shooting each other looks during boring meetings and walking through the park at lunch, talking about our lives.

Of course, I wanted more. How could I not?

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might have had with her boyfriend. In fact, Karen would go out of her way to mention to me every little thought that her "sweetie" would have. "Brian thinks that Fords are better cars than Chryslers." "Brian likes watching Ohio State football." "Brian wants to buy a house in Denville." It drove me nuts.

Still, I was so blinded by love or lust or whatever the hell was swimming around in my head that I actually came to think of her constant referral to Brian as some kind of cover, a coded way of telling me that while everything seemed fine, their relationship was in trouble. I mean, this was an intelligent person, damn it! How could she be subsuming her life and opinions to this guy? All I knew of him was that he worked for a bank, but I'd already characterized him as a knuckle-dragger, a dope with a nice suit and a fancy car. I couldn't believe that she



an alluring, down-to-earth woman. I'd hit the mother lode, I thought. She actually liked me! She was interested in what I had to say! She thought I was funny! This matter of a boyfriend was just a pesky inconvenience. Relationships end, I figured, and I'd be there to console her when hers hit the skids.

She might have sensed this, because she never mentioned any problems she

was dumbing herself down to his level.

It wasn't like she was discouraging my company, I thought. If she wasn't interested in dating me, then why didn't she distance herself? It would have been so easy. Just don't go out to lunch with me, don't carry on long conversations with me, don't roll your eyes at me when the boss says something stupid. continued

back stories

continued Obviously, I was confused. But I was in love for the first time in my life.

This weird relationship with Karen went on for two years, and as with real couples, it had its anxious moments. We'd have fights, some of which got pretty intense. For instance, Karen didn't like people touching her, to the point where she would cringe when she had to do the hug-and-kiss social ritual with acquaintances. She didn't go through that charade with me, either because of our familiarity with each other or the fact that she wanted to keep at least some symbolic distance between us. One time, at lunch with a coworker, I gave her a playful punch on the shoulder when she said something that poked fun at me.

"Don't touch me!" she spat.

"Well, don't insult me!" I yelled back, more startled at her reaction than angry at the original insult. I couldn't believe she'd scolded me in front of someone else.

On the drive back to work, I pouted. "You know, you embarrassed me by yelling at me like that," I told her in a wobbly voice.

"You don't listen to me." Her voice was getting louder, as if she'd wanted to speak up about this for some time. "When I tell you not to touch me, you shouldn't touch me! How many times do I have to tell you this? But you keep on doing it!"

"Listen, your hang-ups are not my problem," I replied through gritted teeth. We sounded like my parents, whom I recalled

waiting for them to arrive, afraid that he was going to beat me to pieces the second he laid eyes on me. Yet he seemed okay. A bit too alpha male for my taste, but okay. What I did notice, though, was that she had no problem touching him—even wrapping her arms around him—in public.

Later on during our beer-league softball games, Karen would still cling to Brian, even though he spewed baseball lingo and warmed up for his at bats with the seriousness of Derek Jeter. He just seemed like a typical jerky investment banker to me.

Meanwhile, my work life was suffering. Even though general rules of office decorum would dictate that such a crush be kept secret, I mentioned it to everyone. Even people like my boss, who didn't explicitly know how I felt about Karen, saw how the two of us behaved together and realized it wasn't normal. And since we sat in open cubicles, all of our personal conversations—and arguments—were overheard by everyone. I was so heartsick over my situation that the quality of my work sank; I was curt to people on days I didn't get the attention from Karen that I wanted, and jubilant on days when we had a meaningful talk (or when she wore a skirt...I'm a guy, after all).

I would compare every woman I dated with Karen. I went out with some girls to help me forget her, others to help me "get back" at her. But my loyalty to Karen never wavered. During the two years that I was in

"Nice ring," I said, knowing what was coming but deciding not to let on.

"Oh yeah, that," Karen said. She tried to be as nonchalant as possible, as if to cushion the blow. "I'm getting married."

A ball of tension formed in my chest, then dropped into my stomach. The point of no return, when Brian went from merely a boyfriend to someone with whom she intended to stay for life, was a reality. I'm never going to have a chance, I thought. "Congratulations," I stammered, trying to look as unaffected by the news as I could. After exchanging small talk about the wedding date, I went back to my desk, heartbroken.

I wasn't invited to the wedding. Upset about it at the time, I confronted Karen in the parking lot of our building, thinking that a close friend like me should be there. "You're a work friend," said Karen in response. "I didn't invite anyone else from work. Why did you think I'd ask you?" Ouch.

Over the next six months, I began to forget about Karen, even while I was sitting right next to her. I was hurt by her engagement, but at least I knew I was finally free. Since the door to that "storybook romance" was closed permanently, since there was no hope of getting her to change her mind, I had a chance to reflect. I kicked myself for wasting two years of my 20s chasing the unattainable. Seduced by the seeming closeness of the work-marriage relationship, I got sucked into an emotional vortex that, in retrospect, was both inappropriate and completely understandable.

By the time Karen's wedding rolled around, I'd transferred to another position in the same company. Even though I was a lonely, therapy-addicted mess, I knew it was time to move on, for reasons both Karen-related and otherwise.

Despite the outcome, the experience wasn't all bad. After all, I did fall in love, whether the feeling was reciprocated or not. And now I know that the next time I meet someone who is similar to Karen, I should not let her out of my life. I just have to make sure she's single first.

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having arguments that could be heard down the block from our house. We sat in silence for the rest of the ride.

But we made up later, when I e-mailed her a photograph of a man sitting on a toilet inside his cubicle. Later, we'd have other spats like that one, where there would be regrettable statements, hurt feelings, tears—I refuse to say whose—and reconciliation. Just like a real couple.

The first time I was to meet her boyfriend, I drank myself into a small stupor and wrote stand-up comedy jokes on napkins while

love with my coworker, I didn't see a woman naked that wasn't either on film or in print. Heck, I didn't even get past a first date most of the time. I just wasn't into it, because no one could compare to Karen, and there was no way that was ever going to change. I got so depressed, I entered therapy, where her name would come up at the beginning, middle and end of every session.

Then one day it happened. I was innocently talking to her about TV or something inane, when I saw a suspicious-looking piece of jewelry on her left hand.