

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? There I was, a socially stunted young man who'd barely felt a breast, trading banter and having meaningful conversations with

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