

— I REMEMBER CARAMOOR —
Steven Key Meyers

CARAMOOR is the estate in Bedford, New York (Katonah post office, fifty miles north of Times Square) famous for its house museum, year-round concerts and summer music festival. Starting in the late 1920s and through the 1930s, Walter Tower Rosen and Lucie Bigelow Rosen, his wife, built Caramoor as their weekend and summer retreat, incorporating in a large Mediterranean villa eight or ten period rooms pried from European manors and palaces, and filling the place with art and furniture collected over many years. A cultured lawyer, Mr. Rosen was managing partner of the investment bank Ladenburg Thalmann & Co. The equally cultured Mrs. Rosen – descended from the Phelps and Dodge families of copper-fortune fame – toured North America and Europe performing on the first electronic instrument, the Theremin.

What follows are memories of my first job, working – a callow, somewhat callous youth – at Caramoor as underbutler.

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I FIRST STEPPED inside Caramoor's "big house" in April 1970 for my job interview. Mother drove me over. She parked in the lot beneath the West Wing and I walked round to the front and yanked at the bell. Hilton Bailey, assistant to Executive Director Michael Sweeley, stepped out of the house with a severely neutral expression. "Mr. Meyers?" he asked, before opening the courtyard gate and bringing me indoors to the sitting room.

Mr. Sweeley was waiting. He shook my hand and gave me a seat in a Venetian Louis XV chair of tortoiseshell lacquer and green silk. The room was charming, with its bookshelves, reading nook, blue silk brocade on the walls and, over the fireplace, Sir John Lavery's sparkling view of the ballroom of Wimborne House, London. Through the windows—some panes bubbled and faintly purple—were glimpses of the Spanish Courtyard. Beside us, Kuan-Yin carved

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from palest jade stood in intricate balance beneath a boat-shaped, embroidered and fringed silk lampshade on an 18th-century *chinoiserie* table. Mr. Sweeley was a bulky man my father's age—45—with a trim beard, a gaze generally aiming aside from one's eyes and a low, cultivated voice; I immediately knew, homosexual.

What we talked about I forget, but the facts could not have been in my favor. I was tall, articulate and self-possessed, but only 17 years old—a bespectacled, bepimpled high-school dropout with no work history aside from mowing neighbors' lawns and stuffing envelopes for my mother's boss. Mr. Sweeley did perk up at hearing that Daddy was a member of *Fortune's* Board of Editors.

The job I was applying for had just been vacated by one William, whom I'd not met but who had gone to high school with my friend Max, two or three years older than myself. William, a favorite of Mrs. Rosen's—so the Clarks later told me—had worked several years at Caramoor, but grown restless since her death

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in November 1968 and now was moving on. Max told me about the vacancy, and I looked up Caramoor in the phone book, dialed and offered myself for the job. My advantage was that no hiring process had started yet.

In the middle of my interview, Mr. Sweeley was called to the Music Room. He had me tag along. It was, of course, my first sight of that marvelous chamber—vast, lofty, crammed with wonderful things. A tall ladder was set up and Robert Clark—Caramoor’s butler and caretaker—was watching his son Ronnie Clark, the grounds superintendent, replace light bulbs in a chandelier, while Ray Mulligan, one of the gardeners, held the ladder. They wished Mr. Sweeley’s judgment on some point or other.

Mr. Sweeley introduced me to Mr. Clark and the others as they stood ten feet off. I said, “I’ve already met Mr. Clark.”

Mr. Clark was startled. A big man in black pants and short-sleeved white shirt, 60 years old, groaning at every movement—“*Ouch! Ouch!*”—and with broken veins in his face, he creased his forehead and asked, “Did you go to John Jay?”

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“No,” I replied, “but I know George.” George was his younger son.

And apparently that clinched it. Remarking, “I’m glad you know George,” Mr. Sweeley walked me out to my mother, waiting in her Citroën DS 21 Pallas, and liked her right away, as people always did. He sent me away feeling optimistic. Mother was curious as to where we might be—I hadn’t said anything—and impressed. Only the weekend before Daddy had sat me down and told me either to get a job, go back to school, or move out, and I’d been glad to tell him I had an interview scheduled.

Mr. Bailey called a few days later and asked me to begin the following Monday.

MONDAY, APRIL 20, 1970 was thus the most important day of my life, marking my liberation from my family; a beautiful, showery spring morning with forsythia blooming brightly along the back way into Caramoor. I dropped off my cardboard boxes on the screen porch of the

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“chauffeur’s cottage” where I was to live, thanked Mother, walked round into the big house’s garage and pounded on the door. Mr. Clark opened it warily and gave me two keys, one for that heavy, balky door and another for the cottage.

This was the first time I met Martha Clark, his wife, George’s and Ronnie’s mother and Caramoor’s housekeeper and cook. She was a short, plump woman of about 50 with curly hair dyed black and a peaches-and-cream complexion she was rightly proud of. From the start she seemed to find me beguiling; around me she usually bore a secret smile.

Right off she handed me a big old ostrich feather-duster and marched me down a dark, winding way through the cellars beneath the Music Room over to the West Wing. I despaired of finding my way back. We passed storerooms, a laundry room, a bathroom (where I was shortly to see Mr. Clark sitting on the toilet with the door open, laughing at my shock), the boiler room, musicians’ dressing and shower rooms that stored hundreds of red-velvet folding chairs,

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and up first a utilitarian flight of steps and then a grand marble staircase beneath the straight-backed, aureole-haired gaze of Mrs. Rosen's most stately portrait, to the second floor.

My task was to dust and dry-mop that upstairs—the hallway, the four bedrooms off it, the family room at the far end, and the bedroom at the top of the stairs.

That bedroom—which was where William had lived—looked out over the Clarks' attached caretaker's cottage. It had an antique bed of japanned iron, an armoire and one of the house's many excellent bathrooms. During the Festival a few months later Christopher Parkening stayed there, and later such artists as Marilyn Niska.

The upstairs was beautifully detailed and substantial rather than grand like the downstairs. The other bedrooms were spacious and filled with light, each pair linked by a foyer and sharing a bathroom, one tiled in cobalt blue, the other in purple. Floors were teak, and casement windows overlooked the Spanish Courtyard. Several had floor-to-ceiling ceramic stoves and were furnished in suites of 18th-century

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Tyrolean peasant furniture — cheerful, cartoonish renditions of Louis XV — plus a miscellaneous scattering, like a seaside cottage's, of books and objects. But in the first bedroom stood a magnificent bed lately brought out from Mrs. Rosen's city house.

"Hope it doesn't bother you," Mrs. Clark said, "but the Old Lady died in this bed."

Bothered her. Its huge gilded headboard resembled an altarpiece, and the bedspread, also 16th-century, was of stiff red brocade shot with gold thread. Mrs. Rosen had died in her house at 35 West 54th Street — discovered dead by Freddie, her butler, when he brought in her breakfast tray. Mrs. Clark was sure she'd felt ill in the night and rung for help, but that Freddie declined getting up to respond, and consequently found her body lying half out of bed. Sir John Lavery's 1926 *Mrs. Rosen's Bedroom* makes this bed look as big as an aircraft carrier; Mr. Bailey told me it had belonged to the famously flamboyant Marchesa Luisa Casati, who received visitors to her Venetian palazzo lolling in it beside her pet cheetah.

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Mrs. Clark said Mrs. Rosen, 78 when she died, should have lived years longer, but that an accident ten or twelve years previous shortened her life: One night her beige-and-black Cadillac limousine with custom raised roof rolled over on a backwoods Connecticut road, and thereafter she was confined to a wheelchair. Mrs. Clark and her husband suspected that, despite his denials, Joe the Chauffeur fell asleep at the wheel. He'd lived in my cottage; hence its name. Mr. Sweeley told me the Rosens had occupied it while building the big house, coming out weekends with picnic hampers.

One afternoon a few weeks later I found Mrs. Clark feeding a shifty-eyed chap in a cloth cap on a stool in the kitchen: Joe the Chauffeur, back for a final visit.

While I dusted, Mr. Bailey, then about 30, a slender, attractive and invariably pleasant graduate of the University of Virginia, was driving Mr. Sweeley and their colleague Miss Renée D'Arcy out from Manhattan in the white Chevy station wagon. Arriving at lunch time, they welcomed me to Caramoor.

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