

THE COUNTESS'S PRIVATE SECRETARY

Although she told me often how much she liked and admired me, I was unmistakably a servant.

By Jennifer Egan

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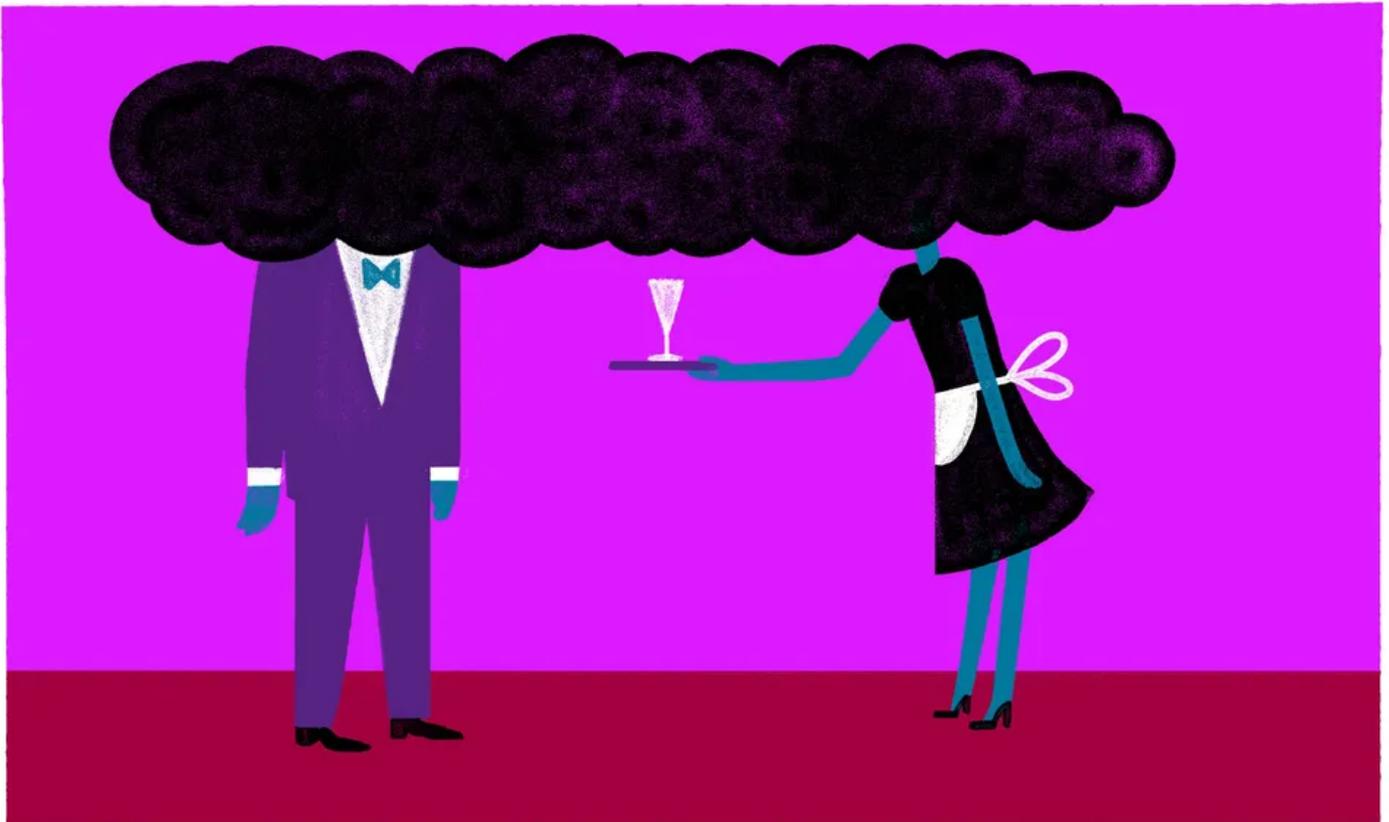


Illustration by Christoph Niemann



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One February day in 1988, I emerged from the subway on Lexington Avenue to find that East Sixty-eighth Street, where I'd recently begun working as a private secretary to a countess, was overrun by fire trucks and acrid with the stench of smoke. "The street is closed," a fireman told me, as I tried to enter the block. Then, among the retracting ladders and dripping cornices, I noticed a head thrust from the window of a grand prewar

apartment house. A guttural voice reached the fireman and me: “Let her through! That’s my secretary!”

I was twenty-five, and had moved to New York the previous fall in the hope of becoming a writer. By the time I found my way to the countess, I had already cycled through enough temporary jobs to know how lucky I was to land part-time work that kept me in frozen yogurt and paid the rent on my fifth-floor studio walkup.

Being a private secretary to the countess meant, in some sense, becoming her. At 1 P.M. each weekday, I lost track of my own life when I stepped into her tiny marble foyer, its table laden with embossed invitations from displaced European royalty. The foyer opened onto a living room, a dining room, and a parlor with sponge-marbled walls and tables smothered with brocade and studded with curios. Through a narrow door, the finery gave way abruptly to a rudimentary kitchen and a wisp of a bedroom, hardly large enough to hold the twin bed where the countess slept. She was newly widowed, an American-born writer of what she charmingly called “faction”: embellished tales of her experiences as an agent for the O.S.S. during the Second World War and, later, for the C.I.A. A striking beauty with an earthy, straightforward manner, she had married a Spanish count and spent most of her adulthood in Spain, numbering among her friends the Baron Guy de Rothschild, Salvador Dali, the Duchess of Windsor, and Jacqueline Onassis.

Becoming the countess was not as difficult for me as you might think. Both of us were tall and slender, raised as Catholics, and febrile with nervous energy (in her mid-sixties, she attended a daily ninety-minute aerobics class). Years of living as a grandee had encouraged in the countess an imperious short-temperedness that I recognized, chillingly, as evidence of a volcanic impatience, which we also shared. My handwriting resembled hers, and this helped me to forge her signature in copies of her first book—a surprise best-seller that had brought her fame and a hefty contract for two more volumes.

I answered her fan mail, carrying on prolonged correspondences in her name—and, I liked to think, her voice. I handwrote invitations to the small dinners she held at her apartment and tallied replies from other private secretaries whose telephone voices I came to recognize. Most thrilling were my occasional private encounters with eminences she knew: delivering a book to Lady (Slim) Keith, grouchy and bedridden by then; telephoning Harold Brodkey (whom the countess thought handsome and once invited to dinner) and having him answer breathlessly, with no idea who was calling, “Is it you?”

On the day of the fire, the countess had planned a dinner in honor of Nancy Reagan, then the First Lady and a close friend. Several others in their circle, including Mike Wallace, Malcolm Forbes, and Betsy Bloomingdale, were expected. The fire, although it had been in the basement, had left the whole building without power. The countess’s walls and upholstery reeked of smoke, and opening the windows only filled the rooms with chilly wind. Some hostesses might have cancelled a dinner party under such conditions, but not the countess. I spent several hours trying to vanquish obstacles and reassure the Secret Service, whose agents telephoned with rising concern. I called the office of Donald Trump, another guest, to inquire about borrowing a generator.

Although the countess told me often how much she liked and admired me, I was unmistakably a servant. In this I resembled Fernando, one in a series of butlers she brought from Spain to serve her meals, his grave, mustachioed face worthy of a painting by Velázquez. And, like Fernando, I was subject to the countess’s lacerating critiques. Garlic, which I loved, was “low class” and, according to her, oozed from my pores for days after I ate it. The “miserable” bouquet of flowers I bought for one of her house guests with the small funds she’d given me for the purchase provoked a paroxysm of rage that left me in tears. My cowboy boots were coarse; I hid my figure in unflattering clothes. My spelling was atrocious. And so on. I had a morbid dread of her anger, but my willingness to absorb it was essential to our symbiosis.

I've forgotten how the countess persuaded the Secret Service that her building was safe for the First Lady to dine in. I've forgotten how the dinner was cooked. I know that it was served by candlelight, which created a singular intimacy. A near-disaster involving an errant flame and a feathered cuff only added a frisson to the evening.

I witnessed none of this. To the countess's ire and bafflement, I refused her request that I stay through the evening to help with coats and the dinner service, citing unbreakable plans. Now, almost thirty years later, I'm more incensed than she was: what, in my rudimentary life, could have been more interesting than the spectacle of that dinner party? I can't recall. All I remember is my visceral wish to escape—a feeling I had often during my more than two years as her private secretary, until an N.E.A. grant finally allowed me to quit. Before the guests began to make their tentative way up the countess's dank service stairs, I slipped out in my worn cowboy boots and resumed being myself. ♦

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Jennifer Egan, a Pulitzer Prize winner, is the author of seven books of fiction, including, most recently, "The Candy House."