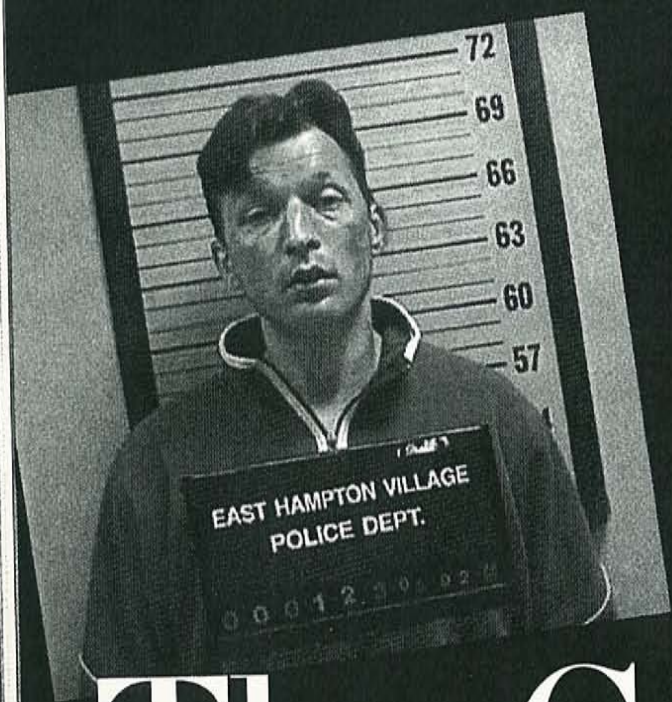


Often posing as the scion of a famous family, Christopher Rocancourt—alias Rockefeller (or De Laurentiis or de la Renta)—swindled millions from marks around the world: there was the diamond-smuggling scheme in Zaire, the alleged perfume fraud involving Jermaine Jackson, the fleecing of a Beverly Hills boutique owner. Yet somehow he kept slipping through the arms of the law. **BRYAN BURROUGH** tracks a master of audacity from Los Angeles, where Rocancourt left a mysterious corpse in his wake, to the Hamptons, where he ran afoul of a genuine heir, to France, where his poignant masquerade began



# The Counterfeit

THE WILD BUNCH

From left, Christopher Rocancourt's bodyguard, actor Mickey Rourke, wine salesman Charles Glenn, Rocancourt, and his girlfriend, Rhonda Rydell, March 1997. *Inset*, Rocancourt's East Hampton mug shot from August.



Rockefeller



**TO CATCH A THIEF**

From top: painter Gines Serran-Pagan at his Southampton studio; Rocancourt at the July 29 dinner given by Pagan; the Mill-Garth Country Inn, Amagansett; masseuse Corine Eelink; Kevin McCrary, outside the Mill-Garth.



**F**

rom Nancy Drew to Miss Marple to *Murder, She Wrote*, amateur crime solving among the bourgeoisie has been as popular in literature and film as it has been unusual in the real world. In Hitchcock's *Rear Window* and Woody Allen's *Manhattan Murder Mystery*, to cite but two examples, upscale Manhattanites band together to snoop out murderers. Great story lines, you've probably observed at some point, but it would never happen in real life, especially not in New York. Hard-core New Yorkers, everyone knows, are too busy, too street-smart, to stick their noses into a real criminal's business.

Unless . . . unless there's money at stake. Unless they've been conned. Unless the police don't seem to care. Or unless they have time on their hands, say, on a dark, drowsy summer evening in the Hamptons. Then, well, then anything could happen.

A few blocks up Main Street from the elegant strolling alleys of downtown Southampton, a gravel lane leads to a secluded artist's compound. Inside, next to a paint-splattered studio and a 300-year-old red barn, chickens and goats wander among the parked Jaguars and Mercedes. This is the domain of the Spanish-born painter Gines (pronounced "Hee-nez") Serran-Pagan. A rakish 51-year-old with flowing black hair and a pirate's black beard, Pagan is a playful caricature of every artist who ever dreamed of repairing to the Hamptons. He is the kind of world-weary Euro-philosopher who, in his lilting Andalusian accent, says things like "I am

an artist. I get bored with normal people." On Saturday evening, July 29, Pagan was holding a dinner party he was certain would bore no one. The first four guests arrived at seven: Pierre, a mysterious art collector; Maria and Clea, daughters of a filthy-rich Greek shipping magnate; and Natsuko, the daughter of a top executive at Sony International in Tokyo. Not until almost nine, after Pagan had placed a worried call, did the guest of honor appear: Christopher Rockefeller, the handsome, French-raised heir to the Rockefeller fortune. Stepping out of a gold Mazda 626, Rockefeller was blond and thickly muscled, in his early 30s, with a prominent nose and a thick Gallic accent. Hovering at his side were his aide, Joseph, a balding 50-ish man with a cell phone pressed to one ear, and Laurent, Rockefeller's buxom French lady friend. "You should really paint Laurent," Rockefeller told Pagan. "In the nude."

Although Rockefeller had been frequenting Pagan's studio now for a week, the artist insisted on showing him the barn and his bleating menagerie of farm animals. Pagan was mired in a legal fight with the village of Southampton over their presence on his property, and Rockefeller had promised to get New York governor George Pataki to intervene. They strode into Pagan's cavernous wood-floored living room, where, amid a tableau of African idols and his own brightly hued works, the host introduced Rockefeller to the other guests. Rockefeller had told Pagan he was in the process of buying a \$34 million yacht, and the artist lingered as Rockefeller chatted with the shipping heiresses. "These girls, they can help you [with] your new boat," Pagan offered enthusiastically. Eventually they all took seats at the dinner table, where at one end Pagan had placed an easel holding a smoky oil painting called *Sunset in Quilín* that he says Rockefeller had pledged to buy.

At first glance it was just another Hamptons dinner party in high summer, with a simple soup, salad, and pasta served by Pagan's assistant. But almost nothing about the evening was what it seemed. Pierre, the art collector, was actually Peter Fazio, a local contractor whose son played with Pagan's son. Maria was actually the New York bureau chief at *People* magazine, Maria Eftimiades. Her friend Clea was a lawyer for the U.S. Navy. Natsuko Utsumi was a photojournalist working on a book about African genital mutilation. They were all part of an elaborate parlor game Pagan had constructed to study the impostor who called himself Christopher Rockefeller, a man who Pagan had concluded was without a doubt

PHOTOGRAPHS: SECOND FROM TOP, BY CLEA EFTIMIADIS; ALL OTHERS BY JUSTINE PARSONS

the most fascinating con artist he had ever met.

His suspicions had arisen the first afternoon Rockefeller had dropped by the gallery, escorted by a mutual friend, a Dutch-born masseuse named Corine Eelink. Rockefeller had swept through the gallery with confidence, pointing to a half-dozen paintings he said he intended to buy. He boasted of the Pink Period Picasso in his living room, and of the Pissarro beside it. Offhandedly, he mentioned three separate dinners he had attended with President Clinton. Needless to say, he made a powerful impression. When Eelink left for a massage appointment, Pagan asked Rockefeller to stay for dinner.

They ate in the garden, accompanied by Pagan's babysitter, his assistant, and a houseguest from Hong Kong. All went swimmingly until Pagan checked his pantry for red wine. He was out. All he had was a cheap bottle of jug wine he normally used to make sangria. Hoping no one would notice, he emptied it into a ceramic jug and poured a glass for Rockefeller. To his surprise, Rockefeller rhapsodized over it. "Wonderful," he said. "A Bordeaux, no?"

"Uh, no," Pagan said. "California."

**B**y the end of that first evening, after listening to Rockefeller hold forth on the best hotels in Hong Kong, the future of the Chinese economy, and his dislike of Kant, Pagan was convinced his new friend was a fraud—a likable, well-read, well-traveled fraud. For all the names he dropped, Rockefeller had, as Pagan put it, "the whiff of the street about him." His car was the final giveaway; Pagan doubted a Rockefeller would drive a Mazda. Still, in the ensuing days Rockefeller dropped by often, discussing with Pagan his love for Nietzsche and Picasso and the game of tennis. "He's a fake, but I liked the guy," Pagan explains today. "I like the unusual."

And so Pagan, like a scientist studying a new life-form, arranged the fake dinner party to examine his new fake friend. He had no way of knowing how dangerous a game he was playing. Had the artist known the truth about "Christopher Rockefeller," he might not have been so eager to hatch his little scheme. Pagan knew nothing of the string of victims the con man had allegedly bilked in Rome, Hong Kong, Bangkok, Paris, and Los An-

geles. He knew nothing about the shooting in West Hollywood, nothing of the strange death in California—and nothing whatsoever about the hand grenades in the space heater. "I just wanted to have a little fun," Pagan says with a shrug.

Once the dinner began, they were barely into the soup course before Eftimiades, the shipping heiress/*People* reporter, began peppering Rockefeller with questions.

"So, Chris, where do you live?" she asked, according to Pagan.

"On Further Lane, in East Hampton," Rockefeller replied, mentioning

"I called the F.B.I. almost as a joke. . . . Within five minutes they were at my house."

the Hamptons' toniest address.

"How would you describe your house?" Eftimiades pressed.

Rockefeller thought a moment. "Pretentious," he said.

When Eftimiades pressed further, asking what he meant by pretentious, Rockefeller grew curt. "You know, big," he said. Pagan, sensing Rockefeller's irritation, and not wanting him to grow suspicious of the charade, kicked Eftimiades under the table.

The conversation lapsed into long soliloquies, with Rockefeller expounding on the nature of women, the incredible returns he earned in the stock market, and the art world; he pronounced Pagan's paintings "passionate and free." But then, midway through the soup course, the dinner came to an abrupt halt. Suddenly Clea, using a disposable camera borrowed from Pagan's babysitter, snapped a picture of Rockefeller, soup-spoon poised beneath his chin.

Immediately Joseph, the aide-de-camp, leapt to his feet. "No! No! No pictures!" he barked. "Gines, tell them, no pictures."

"Clea," Pagan said after a moment, "please, no pictures." To Joseph, Pagan whispered, "Forgive them, they're tourists from Greece. They just want a picture of

a Rockefeller." But Joseph was insistent. He produced an envelope he showed to Pagan. Inside were stuffed \$100 bills, as much as \$10,000 by the artist's estimate. "I'll buy the film," Joseph said.

"Forget about it," Pagan said soothingly. "Just sit down and enjoy your dinner."

The tempest passed. For the rest of the evening, as conversation and red wine flowed freely, the closest anyone came to unmasking the charade was a moment when Pagan, a twinkle in his eye, pronounced Rockefeller a "genius."

"Why?" Rockefeller asked.

"You are a genius. You just are."

"Well, Gines," Rockefeller replied, as Pagan recalled, "Einstein was a genius, and he lived with very few clothes and very few shoes. What do you think a genius is?"

Pagan leaned in close. "A genius is a person who has control, who has no fear," he said. For the briefest moment their eyes met, and Pagan sensed that some part of Rockefeller's elaborate mask had fallen away. "Then he knew," the artist speculates today. "He knew that I knew, and he knew I would keep his secret, that I wouldn't turn him in."

Around midnight Rockefeller and his entourage departed. "When he left," Pagan remembers, "we laughed like crazy." The next day Rockefeller telephoned to express his thanks for a wonderful evening. Then he asked Pagan for the number of his overseas bank account, so that he could wire him several hundred thousand dollars for a half-dozen of Pagan's paintings.

It was a moment Pagan had been expecting. "If you don't mind, Chris, cash is better for me," he purred. "You're a Rockefeller. You don't have any problem with cash, do you?"

"Oh, no," the con man replied. "No. Of course not."

**T**hree nights after Pagan's dinner party, just past midnight on August 2, a blue Volkswagen Cabrio coasted to a stop at a Mobil station on Highway 27, the two-lane blacktop that bisects Amagansett, the leafy beach town alongside East Hampton. A fine drizzle was falling as the driver, Kevin McCrary, a lean, boyish 52-year-old wearing khaki shorts and a T-shirt, stepped out into the parking lot and began craning his head around, peering into the inky night. Mc-



### ORPHAN IN THE STORM

From top: Christopher Rocancourt with his wife, Pia Reyes, mid-90s; the TriBeCa loft where Rocancourt and Reyes lived with their son, Zeus; Reyes, a November 1988 *Playboy* Playmate; the Saint-Germain-Village orphanage where Rocancourt lived; Rocancourt, aged nine; George Mueller, supervising investigator for the Los Angeles district attorney, October 27, 2000.



Crary is the son of the renowned John Reagan "Tex" McCrary, a Republican Party fixture who had parlayed a postwar career in broadcasting and public relations into friendships with presidents from Eisenhower to Reagan. Kevin, whose godfather was financier Bernard Baruch, and who grew up on a first-name basis with such people as Jock Whitney, was, like Pagan, a Hamptons archetype, a foot-loose heir who spoke vaguely of his work in "investigative journalism" and Internet investments. He talked about spending time in the Amazon and St. Barts.

That night, standing in the rain at the Mobil station, McCrary was searching for Christopher Rockefeller. All evening he had talked with police in nearby Hampton Bays, explaining to two detectives how Rockefeller had taken \$14,000 from his friend the masseuse Corine Eeltink, promising to triple her money. McCrary, who knew nothing of Pagan's dinner, told the detectives he had been suspicious of Rockefeller from the outset; he didn't think a Rockefeller should have a French accent, much less a Mazda. McCrary's suspicions had hardened into anger when Rockefeller refused to return Eeltink's money. When Eeltink abruptly returned to Holland to care for her ailing father, McCrary took her case to the police. The detectives, however, weren't sure what laws had been broken, and McCrary had left the meeting frustrated, not at all convinced the detectives would pursue the case.

So, McCrary figured, he would; maybe he could come up with evidence that would spur them to action. His first step, McCrary decided, was to locate his prey. Though Rockefeller haunted some of the Hamptons' hottest nightclubs, no one had seen him in days, nor did anyone know precisely where he lived; despite references to a mansion on Further Lane, McCrary felt certain that couldn't be true. While sitting with police, he remembered that Rockefeller's friend Laurent had once taken a taxi home from the house where McCrary and a group of friends were staying in Water Mill. McCrary telephoned the taxi company, and to his surprise a dispatch-

er dug up the information that the friend had been dropped off at the Mobil station in Amagansett.

Which was why McCrary now found himself studying the shadowed storefronts up and down Highway 27. Somewhere nearby, he suspected, Rockefeller and his entourage were holed up, probably sipping champagne he had bought with Corine Eeltink's hard-earned \$14,000. McCrary walked down the road into town a bit, unsure what he was looking for. He spotted a policeman outside the Stephen Talkhouse, a local bar. "I'm looking for a guy," McCrary told the cop. "Probably staying at a hotel or a B&B around here."

"Check down there," the cop said, motioning toward a darkened street called Windmill Lane. "I think there's something down there."

The rain was picking up as McCrary walked down Windmill Lane. When he reached a wooden windmill on the left side, he stopped. Ahead he spied a sign for the Mill-Garth Country Inn, a cream-colored bed-and-breakfast. Sensing he was onto something, McCrary walked by the inn and flattened himself against a high hedge that fronted its small gravel parking area. Slowly he crept forward.

And then, while pondering his next move, he heard a sound. A voice. Someone was talking on a cell phone on the other side of the hedge, in the hotel's parking lot. McCrary froze, straining to make out the conversation. After a minute he recognized the voice. It seemed to be Joseph, Rockefeller's rough-hewn aide-de-camp. "Call me Joey D," Joseph had told McCrary when they first met.

After a minute Joseph stopped talking. Not wanting to be seen, McCrary returned to his car. Sliding behind the wheel, he drove back to the Mill-Garth and, taking a deep breath, eased his car boldly into the parking lot. When his headlights shone on a man standing in front of him—he was almost certain it was Joseph—McCrary hit the brakes, backed into the street, and returned to the Mobil station.

His heart pumping, McCrary picked up a tape recorder he had brought along—he wasn't sure why—and began trotting back toward the inn. Suddenly, halfway there, he saw a group of people walk out of the Mill-Garth's driveway and stop beneath a streetlight a hundred yards in front of him. It looked like Rockefeller. With him were Joseph and someone McCrary didn't recognize. He ducked into the bushes.

He stayed there, CONTINUED ON PAGE 152

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BERGUS GREER (MUELLER), JUSTINE PARSONS (LOFT), MICHAEL MOORE (ORPHANAGE)

## Bill Clinton

White House, were free from sexual escapades themselves? Not likely.

Ordinary voters now understood in some intuitive way that the overwhelming ego which created the need to run for the presidency—was it a glandular condition?—and which caused a man to reject the rewards of a normal life, often had a downside as well. They shrewdly sensed that sexual excess was often the flip side of such an ego.

As he leaves office, we are left with a certain awe of Clinton's gifts and a certain wishfulness about the uses to which they were put.

His natural political talents were simply dazzling. When he was first elected, I thought he represented a rare combination of the better parts of John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson—the intellectual ability and intuitive capacity to sense historical trends that distinguished Kennedy, and Johnson's physical energy and his ability to lever the

political processes. Now, as I reflect on the Clinton era and the odds he overcame, I am inclined to think he had even more talent than that, that he may be, in the words of Clinton enthusiast James Carville, the best horse I've ever seen.

Because of the conservatism of the country, and the odds against him, it is surprisingly hard to estimate his achievements, other than winning twice and surviving again and again. He wrestled early on in his first administration with immense budget deficits left by his predecessors, and he said of his early policies, accurately enough, that he had become an Eisenhower Republican. His interest in foreign policy was for a very long time sporadic—his administration was driven from the start by the campaign phrase "It's the economy, stupid." Only late in his career—after the Lewinsky scandal and as he was increasingly in search of some sort of legacy—did he become more involved in foreign policy. How much risk Clinton was willing to take on in order to defend any policy decision was always in question; sometimes it seemed that he was so closely

connected to the country that his greatest capacity was to feel what the country felt, rather than to lead it.

Bill Clinton stood tall on a small landscape; as he leaves, his popularity tops a staggering 60 percent. But that raises the question of whether it's a good thing to leave office so popular. Harry Truman was not afraid to take the heat for a cause he believed in, and he left office at the nadir of his popularity; his high standing with historians is largely posthumous.

Of Clinton's years, it can be said that he generally resisted the angriest and least generous forces in the nation, that he smoothed America's way into the global economy, and that in time the American economy exploded. Some of the credit for this last is his, for having taken on the deficit in the early months of his administration. The Dow eventually went up a miraculous 7,000 points, but America does not treasure its leaders for what they do for the Dow. The truth may be all too poignant: Bill Clinton came to us full of promise, and he leaves us full of promise. □

## Christopher Rockefeller

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 94 trapped. Every time he looked out, he saw the men under the streetlight. Nearly an hour later, now thoroughly soaked, McCrary looked out and saw that the coast was clear. By then it was almost two. McCrary resolved to give the inn one more try; if he could just get Rockefeller's license-plate number, he was certain the detectives would find an excuse to pull him over.

He crept back to the parking lot and, seeing no one nearby, soon spotted Rockefeller's Mazda. Now what? What good would a license-plate number do, after all? He tried the car door and to his surprise it was unlocked. He slid inside, opened the glove box, and found a sheaf of papers identifying the car as a Hertz rental from Newark Airport. His mind raced. What could he do to get Rockefeller arrested? He thought of the bar up the road. Maybe he could go buy some drugs and plant them in the Mazda. Too dramatic, he finally decided, not to mention illegal. After jotting down the license-plate number, he gave up, trudged back to his car, and began driving home to Water Mill.

Two miles down the road he turned around and headed back to the Mill-Garth. He had to do something. Back in the inn's parking lot, McCrary squatted down in front of the Mazda, unscrewed the license plate, and threw it into the bushes. Maybe if the car was missing a license plate, he thought, the police would pull Rockefeller

over on a traffic warrant. No sooner had he cast the plate aside, however, than he realized how far-fetched his plan was. Rockefeller would just replace the plate.

McCrary waded into the bushes, retrieved the plate, and laboriously screwed it back into place. Then he removed some screws. Maybe the plate would come loose, he thought, forcing the police to pull the car over. McCrary stood and surveyed his handiwork, satisfied. Now all he needed was for the police to do their jobs.

And so the dashing old-money heir tracked the master criminal to his lair . . . er, his bed-and-breakfast. Yet something was missing. Even though McCrary had found where the con man lived, even though Pagan's guests had carried off their real-life parlor game, none of them had the first clue who "Christopher Rockefeller" really was.

A continent away, in sunny Southern California, George Mueller knew, or thought he knew. Mueller, a chiseled, broad-shouldered cop fond of blinding-white dress shirts, is a supervising investigator with the district attorney's Bureau of Investigation in Los Angeles. In his tiny unmarked office beside an elevator shaft in the L.A. County Criminal Courts Building, he kept boxes of the con man's papers, the product of a 1997 search warrant. Mueller knew "Christopher Rockefeller" by several names, including Christopher Reyes, Christopher Lloyd, and the name on his passport, Christopher Rocancourt. His investigation of Rocancourt's activities in L.A. between 1996 and 1999 had gen-

erated enough evidence to yield scores of indictments.

Even Mueller got confused sorting through it all. Bribery of federal passport officials. A diamond-smuggling scheme in Zaire. An alleged perfume fraud involving Michael Jackson's brother Jermaine. An estimated quarter-million dollars conned out of an Iranian clothes merchant. Another half-million or so swindled from a French singer. Abortive attempts to buy a \$9 million mansion, a private jet, and a Bentley. Tens of thousands of dollars in unpaid hotel bills. Not to mention a shooting at an intersection in West Hollywood involving Dodi Fayed's Hummer. Oh, and the dead body. And the hand grenades in the space heater.

When Mueller first crossed his trail in May 1997, the mysterious Mr. Rocancourt had been living in Suite 1090 at the Regent Beverly Wilshire hotel for six months. He was chatty and brash, a little arrogant. With his heavy French accent and bedroom eyes, women adored him. Yet no one seemed to know who he was. To some he was Christopher De Laurentiis, nephew of the filmmaker Dino De Laurentiis, or Christopher de la Renta, nephew of designer Oscar de la Renta. To others he was Christopher Reyes, Pia Reyes being the name of his wife, a former *Playboy* Playmate (Miss November 1988). With still others he went by Christopher Rocancourt. He drove a gray Ferrari—wife Pia had a Jaguar—and cruised the streets of Beverly Hills wearing Armani and Versace. He said

he was part owner of two Beverly Hills boutiques, Iceberg and Sir Oliver.

Through Suite 1090 marched a parade of L.A. oddballs, fringe dwellers, and wannabes, even the odd movie star and an actual law-abiding citizen or two, most of whom Rocancourt befriended at nightclubs, bistros, and fashionable boutiques. His bodyguard Benny Amghar was a beefy Algerian who moonlighted as a security man for Anna Nicole Smith. Lea Bongo was Jermaine Jackson's assistant and lived at the singer's house; she said she was an African princess, supposedly talked up the Zairean diamond-smuggling scheme, and introduced Rocancourt to a motley collection of supposed African royals, one of whom lent Rocancourt another Ferrari. Carlos Pinho was a Beverly Hills police officer who apparently joined the crowd after stopping Rocancourt for speeding. Rocancourt's pal Charles Glenn was a fast-talking French expatriate in his 60s who claimed to have once been a major Paris fashion designer. ("The Nehru jacket? That was mine.") They all came to Chris and Pia's lavish parties, for which Rocancourt kept detailed lists of his guests' needs. ("Asian girls, drugs..." went one.)

As a con man, Rocancourt developed an M.O. that was simplicity itself. Masquerading as a wealthy French investor, he tried to put together business deals—almost any kind—and would then walk off with whatever money he could wrest from his investors. As Christopher De Laurentiis, he entered into talks with a group of Yugoslav investors to open a nightclub in Beverly Hills. Financial documents that later fell into the hands of police show Rocancourt was due a payment of \$850,000 for his part in the deal, which never happened. Not all his schemes were so grand. A film extra named Buddy Ochoa gave Rocancourt \$15,000 to invest in the stock market; when neither the expected profits nor the money itself was forthcoming, Ochoa wrote Rocancourt a plaintive letter, begging for its return.

There was nothing Rocancourt wouldn't try, and failure seemed only to embolden him. In December 1996 he entered into negotiations to buy a \$21.1 million private Gulfstream jet; the talks apparently collapsed when Rocancourt couldn't come up with a down payment. He had a Bentley delivered to the Regent Beverly Wilshire, but the driver returned to the dealership with it when Rocancourt couldn't pay. He took two meetings with Brian Adler, developer of the Beverly Park section of Beverly Hills, in an attempt to buy a \$9.5 million Italianate mansion he had seen advertised. Over drinks at the Polo Lounge at the Beverly Hills Hotel, Rocancourt told Adler he was a French heir resisting his father's demands that he attend Harvard Law School.

"Quite frankly, he was almost impossible to have a conversation with because his accent was so thick," Adler remembers. "He could barely speak English." Adler endured one more meeting at his home with Rocancourt, who brought along Pia, before dismissing the muscled young Gaul as a fake.

Despite Rocancourt's rough edges, not everyone was so circumspect. His two major benefactors, it appears, were Michel Polnareff, an aging French pop singer, and Shahram Moussazadeh, the owner of the two clothing boutiques Rocancourt claimed to own. Neither man will comment, but George Mueller estimates their losses to Rocancourt at more than \$250,000 apiece. Rocancourt met Polnareff one evening at L.A.'s Cafe Maurice, and a friendship blossomed when the con man promised to obtain a gun permit Polnareff was seeking. Authorities estimate the singer forked over several hundred thousand dollars. According to documents later found in Rocancourt's possession, Moussazadeh was nearly as generous. Mueller uncovered a handwritten list of items Moussazadeh gave or lent to Rocancourt, including more than \$200,000 in cash, \$25,000 in clothes, and the gray Ferrari Rocancourt drove. Yet Mueller got nowhere when he tried to question Moussazadeh about their relationship. "That guy wouldn't tell us a thing," says Mueller.

Moussazadeh was the fulcrum for two of Rocancourt's more ambitious schemes. In late 1996, when Rocancourt met Jermaine Jackson and his assistant Lea Bongo in a Beverly Hills boutique, he invited the pair back to his suite. Afterward the con man brokered a deal in which Jermaine, on behalf of his brother Michael, agreed to allow Moussazadeh to market a string of perfumes based on Michael's best-selling songs; the scents would be named Thriller, Bad, and so on. Jermaine, who declines all comment on Rocancourt, ultimately backed out of the deal. Other than a signed photo of the singer, it's unclear what if anything Rocancourt got out of it.

Another venture, however, proved far more profitable, at least for the con man. Together Rocancourt and Moussazadeh entered into an agreement with the Regent Beverly Wilshire to open an Italian men's clothing boutique called Pal Zileri at the hotel. The store never opened, but it did give Rocancourt an opportunity to solicit prospective investors. The scheme drew the interest of one of Rocancourt's newest friends, Carlos Pinho's sister Lillian, a tough-talking redhead in her 40s who owned a small business that processed mail for larger companies. Lillian Pinho met Rocancourt the night he drove up to the Beverly Hills Police Department's Black and White Ball

in his gray Ferrari. She was soon a fixture at Rocancourt's hotel suite and grew close to Pia, whom she helped through the birth of their son, Zeus, in the spring of '97. She gave Rocancourt more than \$125,000 to invest in the Pal Zileri store, only to have second thoughts once he began pressing her for information on her own firm.

"He had lots and lots of questions: how much money my business had, which accounts I used, the account numbers," she recalls. "He said, 'I can help you triple and double what's in there....' [At one point] he said, 'If I gave you money, how could you legitimize it?' ... It got to the point where I said, 'Wait a second, this is not the way I want to conduct my business.' [He said,] 'Don't worry, don't worry.' This is when I started to draw back."

Pinho wasn't the only one having doubts about Rocancourt that spring. His bodyguard Benny Amghar, already irritated by Rocancourt's failure to secure him a promised green card, grew alarmed after the con man allowed him to stay in Pia's old apartment on Maple Drive. Strewn throughout was rack upon rack of Versace suits, the price tags still attached. Rocancourt had warned him not to try using the broken wall heater, but one night it grew so cold Amghar opened the heater's front cover to turn it on. Out tumbled a brown paper bag holding a pistol. He spied several other bags inside, all apparently containing handguns. And then he found the hand grenades, two of them. Stunned, Amghar searched the rest of the apartment. Behind a curtain he found two long rifles with scopes. He moved out in a hurry.

Amghar's alarm turned to anger when Pia reported that the Versace suits and other clothing he had found in the apartment—valued at \$275,000—had been stolen; Rocancourt told the Beverly Hills police he suspected Amghar. Angry and afraid, Amghar then went to the police himself—and told them everything he knew about Rocancourt's schemes. One that piqued George Mueller's curiosity involved federal passport officials. According to Amghar, Rocancourt and Lea Bongo had slipped a \$2,000 bribe to two Los Angeles passport clerks to issue Rocancourt an American passport. When Mueller ran Rocancourt's name by the F.B.I. and Interpol, he found they had files on his past exploits. He opened a full-scale investigation.

By this time Rocancourt sensed trouble. He told Lillian Pinho that he thought he might soon be arrested. As Pinho recalls it, "He says, 'You know, my friends from the C.I.A. came by and did a sweep, and I think the heat is coming. I think they bugged the place.' He was so excited. He just loves the attention he gets from being a

## Christopher Rockefeller

criminal. He is absolutely enchanted by it."

By the end of May 1997, Mueller was ready to strike. Armed with a search warrant, he and a half-dozen sheriff's deputies raided Rocancourt's suite. As a stunned Pia looked on, they carted away boxes of personal papers, jewelry, and several guns. But Rocancourt was already gone, off on a "business trip" to the Far East. Within hours of the raid, in fact, he phoned Lillian Pinho from Bangkok. His voice betrayed no sense of alarm. Instead, Pinho recalls, he sounded excited. "He loved it!" she says. "He just loved the attention!" From Bangkok, Rocancourt implored Pinho to bring Pia to meet him in Rome. Pinho realized it was her last chance to get her money back. And so, leaving Zeus with a nanny, she and Pia flew to Rome.

Rocancourt, meanwhile, was enjoying a gilded tour of the Far East. With his old friend Charles Glenn as his aide-de-camp, Rocancourt had flown to Hong Kong, where they stayed at the Four Seasons, then forged on to Macao, two cities in China, Jakarta, and ultimately Bangkok. There, to Glenn's amazement, they were met by a chauffeured limousine and accompanied to their hotel by a police escort.

They continued on to Europe, where Glenn headed to Paris, alone. When Pia and Lillian Pinho arrived in Rome several days later, Rocancourt, clad in Armani, met them at the airport. He was accompanied by an elderly gentleman, Don Miguel de Summa, whom Rocancourt introduced as a mentor and adviser to his father. They all stayed at the luxurious Hotel Hassler, atop the Spanish Steps, hit the best nightclubs every evening, and shopped incessantly. On one such outing, Pinho recalls, Pia confided that her greatest dream in life had always been to marry a criminal. "The one thing you can never, never do," Pinho remembers her saying, "is snitch." Pinho's alarm grew when the group was joined on several evenings by a man named Gianfranco, who, Rocancourt whispered, was a hit man for his father. Pinho began pressing Rocancourt to return her money. He appeared to relent, saying he was sending Don Miguel to Switzerland to retrieve a check for \$9 million that was owed to him.

After three weeks Pinho left, saying she needed to get back to her business in Los Angeles. Pia followed a week later, checking back into the Regent Beverly Wilshire. Several days after that, Rocancourt called Pinho from Rome, asking that she meet him at the airport in Vancouver and drive him across the border. She did so, meeting him and Don Miguel and driving them to Seat-

tle, where they all boarded a plane back to Los Angeles. Rocancourt said he would repay her within days from the proceeds of the \$9 million check. "I remember in the airport [Rocancourt] went cruising, saying he was going to look 'for surveillance,'" Pinho remembers. "What an ego."

Back in West Hollywood, Rocancourt and his growing entourage shuttled from hotel to hotel, running up huge bills. Pinho continued to seek her money from both Rocancourt and the kindly Don Miguel, whom she had befriended. "Do you have the check?" she kept asking. Finally one day Don Miguel said he did. From inside his necktie he produced a check. Pinho examined it in astonishment.

"It is a blank check, written on someone's account in New York, a brand new account," she recalls. "But it's signed by Steve Martin! The comedian! [I said,] 'This is the check? This is bullshit!'" Don Miguel, carefully slipping the check back into his tie, professed to be scared of Rocancourt. He said he would try to work things out.

The next night Pinho got a call from Don Miguel. He sounded frightened. If she came to the hotel in the morning, he promised, he would explain everything. The next morning Pinho phoned Don Miguel to confirm the appointment. There was no answer. She called every five minutes for an hour; still no answer. Finally she called Rocancourt, who typically slept until noon, on his cell phone.

"Look, something's wrong with Don Miguel," she remembers saying. "You need to go find him. I'm very worried." Pinho listened as Rocancourt, still on his cell phone, walked down the hall to Don Miguel's room. The door was locked. A maid let him in. "Oh my God!" she heard Rocancourt exclaim. "He's dead! Get over here now!"

Pinho, suspecting Don Miguel had been murdered, was at the hotel within minutes. She found his body on his bed. There were no obvious signs of violence, though she noticed the couch was rumpled, its pillows thrown about. Pinho told Rocancourt to call the police, and he did, reluctantly. The next day and twice more on following days, Pinho called the coroner's office. "I told them, 'Look, you need to do an autopsy on this guy, something is wrong here, I think he might have been murdered,'" she recalls. "And they said, 'No no no no, he died of natural causes. A heart attack.'" Though investigators would later inquire into Don Miguel's death, there was never an official murder investigation. The body was cremated.

From there Pinho's relationship with Rocancourt degenerated into a series of angry phone calls. "I kept calling him," she says. "At one point he wrote me a check for 20 or 30 thousand dollars. It bounces.... There

were lots of fights on the phone. He kept saying, 'Don't you be a snitch. You know what will happen to you.' I was like, 'Fuck you! Just try it! Come on over, let's go.'"

Pinho's final chapter with Rocancourt came with the arrival on her doorstep of Gianfranco, the "hit man" she had met in Rome. Gianfranco, she says, was actually the owner of a small photocopying shop. Rocancourt had taken him for his entire savings, more than \$35,000. Gianfranco spent several days in Los Angeles fruitlessly searching for Rocancourt before returning to Rome.

By December 1997, when he was finally charged along with Lea Bongo and two others on charges of passport fraud, Rocancourt was being sought by several government agencies, including the F.B.I. and the L.A. County District Attorney's Office, where Mueller's file on his exploits was growing by the minute. But no one in law enforcement realized Rocancourt had slipped back into L.A.

In fact, Rocancourt's strange career had entered its Mickey Rourke Phase. He had befriended the hard-partying actor at a West Hollywood lounge on Sunset Boulevard named Barfly and had moved in with him not long after, hiding in plain sight at Rourke's roomy home on a side street above Sunset. Rourke has declined all comment on his friendship with Rocancourt, but the two spent many a night at Barfly, along with Charles Glenn and some new friends, including the actor Jean-Claude Van Damme and his then wife, Darcy LaPier. It was a uniquely L.A. scene; Van Damme, who says he has no memory of Rocancourt, was looking for financing for a health club he hoped to open, and, according to Glenn, had approached Rocancourt via Van Damme's assistant's chiropractor. Rocancourt, in turn, promised Van Damme \$40 million to produce his next movie.

They weren't the only celebrities Rocancourt sought out. In his address book he kept private numbers for Dolph Lundgren and Robert De Niro, although there's no evidence he met either actor. He had a particular fascination with the late Dodi Fayed, who before his 1997 death spent time in L.A. producing several movies. "Christopher tried to get close to Dodi, but Dodi never met him," says Fayed's longtime assistant, Melissa Henning. "One time he pretended to be a buyer and went to Dodi's house in Malibu. He was like a stalker." After Fayed's death, Rocancourt managed to buy his customized Hummer—it had a surveillance camera mounted in back—through a car broker. He told friends Fayed had given it to him.

While Rocancourt was staying with Rourke during the winter months of 1997–98, his



constant companion was a Valkyriesque blonde "model" named Rhonda Rydell. Rydell, a single mother whose topless photos can be found on several Internet sites, says she met Rocancourt at a pre-production dinner for the World Music Awards in Monaco, where she hoped to be a spokesmodel. Rocancourt attended the dinner as a prospective investor and asked for her number. The next night over dinner, he told her he was French royalty, the son of a countess, and had grown up in a castle, though he later made a point of saying he had always worked hard in the family fields. He flashed a ring with the family crest.

"After that I was with him every day for six months; we spent every second together," says Rydell. "He was the love of my life. We could not deny each other. We just connected on a really deep, you know, soulful level. We could communicate without speaking." To Rydell, Rocancourt was a world-weary traveler, "a modern-day philosopher, a teacher of life."

To Rourke and their small circle of friends, Rocancourt and Rydell were known as "Bugsy and Virginia," after the gangster Bugsy Siegel and his moll, Virginia Hill. They spent their days sleeping late, going to nightclubs, and attending business meetings at their favorite restaurants, Café Maurice and Drai's, though, Rydell says, she could never understand what was said; Rocancourt typically talked business in French or Italian. He was, as always, very good at keeping his true nature a secret. For all the time she spent with him, Rydell didn't know that Rocancourt's wife, Pia, and his son were stashed in an apartment just blocks from Rourke's home.

Then that spring Rocancourt's luck abruptly ran out. On the night of March 14, 1998, he was partying with Rourke, Rydell, and several other friends at the Garden of Eden nightclub in Hollywood. Around midnight Rocancourt noticed a muscular man with a ponytail, whom he later described as an "Arab," sitting at a nearby table, staring at him. Words were exchanged. According to testimony later gathered by the police, the Arab stood and began screaming at Rocancourt, "Do you know who I am? I'm going to fucking kill you!" Both Rourke and a trio of the Arab's over-size friends stepped between the two men before a fight could break out. The Arab's group then left the club.

Early the next evening Rocancourt, driving Dodi Fayed's old Hummer, pulled up outside Café Maurice on La Cienega Boulevard. Just as he arrived, in what appeared to be an awful coincidence, the same group of Arabs stepped out of a black Mercedes 500. Rocancourt sped off, but the Arabs had seen him and jumped into their Mercedes to give

chase. Speeding south down La Cienega, Rocancourt watched the Hummer's dashboard video monitor as the Mercedes gained on him. Just then Rydell called Rocancourt on his cell phone. He told her he was being followed by a luxury sedan loaded with angry Arabs and to please call the police.

After several minutes Rocancourt was forced to stop at a red light at San Vicente and Santa Monica. The Mercedes pulled up alongside. A white Hyundai pulled up behind, and a man emerged. Listening on the cell phone, Rydell heard gunshots.

Moments later Rocancourt, scared and out of breath, stumbled into a sheriff's department substation across the street. He told the officers he had been shot at. The scene was cordoned off and an investigation begun. There were indeed gunshot holes in the Hummer, but the officers saw they had all been made from inside the vehicle, with a .40-caliber Glock pistol Rocancourt wasn't licensed to carry. Officers found the man from the Hyundai at a local hospital, a minor bullet wound in his arm.

Rocancourt was held for questioning. When sheriff's deputies ran his name through their computer, they found the outstanding warrant for passport fraud. Within an hour of Rocancourt's detainment, both Rydell and Pia appeared at the substation. It was only then, Rydell says, that she realized Rocancourt was married. "I asked him, 'Chris, what is going on?'" she recalls. "At that point, the whole picture started to come clear to me, that he was living a double life."

Despite his protests, Rocancourt was held for trial on the passport-fraud charges, as well as on new charges of carrying a concealed weapon. He was thrown into the L.A. County Jail. "I stayed loyal to him the whole time he was in jail," says Rydell. "We talked eight hours a day the whole time he was incarcerated, close to three months. . . . He said he wants to write books about our love. Our love, it was a movie." The movie ended, Rydell says, when she broke up with Rocancourt, citing his marriage.

Rocancourt, via Charles Glenn, begged everyone for bail money, from Rourke to Victor Drai of Drai's to other restaurant owners he knew. It was Pia who finally arranged to get Rocancourt released, paying a portion of his \$175,000 bail. But all was not well. By late spring 1998, when the con man's trail was picked up by Mitch Seflin, a Sherman Oaks private investigator hired by Michel Polnareff, the French pop singer, it was clear Rocancourt was running scared. Setting up surveillance outside an apartment Rocancourt shared with Pia, Seflin and his men watched as Rocancourt came and went, constantly accompanied by muscular bodyguards—eight of whom appeared at a single court hearing.

During the several weeks of surveillance, Seflin suspects, Rocancourt was engaged in an intricate check-kiting scam with a circle of Vietnamese friends. Then, in July, Seflin received a tip that Rocancourt was poised to jump bail. After a court hearing in downtown Los Angeles, one of Seflin's men followed Rocancourt and his bodyguards back to a nearby parking lot.

"They pulled the old double-limo trick," Seflin sighs. Rocancourt and his bodyguards shuffled back and forth between two rented limousines, until Seflin's man couldn't be certain which one Rocancourt was in. When the two limos drove off, one headed west, the other east, then south. Seflin's man followed the eastbound one, figuring that Rocancourt might be heading for the Mexican border. Which limo the con man took he never found out; a policeman stopped the detective for speeding. Once again, Rocancourt had vanished.

Still no one had figured out who Rocancourt really was.

Christophe Thierry Daniel Rocancourt, it turns out, was born in July 1967, in the scenic resort town of Honfleur on the coast of Normandy. But a visit to Honfleur uncovers no trace of Rocancourt in the town—no relatives, no official documents. The key that unlocks the mystery of Rocancourt's origins lies in the dank cellar of an orphanage in the outlying town of Saint-Germain-Village. There I discover a musty pink-paper file whose contents chronicle the heartbreaking story of a smiling nine-year-old boy, his photographs attached with a paper clip, who was admitted in October 1976.

Rocancourt was the son of a drunken housepainter named Daniel Rocancourt and a 17-year-old prostitute named Annick Villers; the couple married a month before Christophe was born. The family, which soon added a daughter, lived in a mobile home across from a Presbyterian church in the hamlet of Conteville, just over a set of green hills from the mouth of the river Seine and the English Channel. Theirs was a miserable existence, according to the orphanage report; Daniel complained that Annick left the children alone while she was off plying her trade with her sister.

In 1969, not two years after they wed, the couple separated following the death of a second daughter, during childbirth. According to his brothers, who still live nearby, Daniel discovered Annick was cheating on him; he left the family to find work in Belgium. Annick then abandoned Christophe and his infant sister, moving away and leaving them with her parents, the Terrier-Villers, who lived in a two-room hovel without running water or electricity.

By the time Christophe was five his father had returned from Belgium and taken

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up with Annick's sister, who two years later abandoned Christophe just as her sister had. When Daniel's next girlfriend also rejected the children, he installed Christophe and his sister in the orphanage in Saint-Germain-Village. A 1979 psychological analysis says Christophe talked endlessly of rejoining his father, but a reunion was not to be; Daniel died in 1991, having keeled over in a snowbank. At the orphanage, Christophe was a bright if desultory student who chafed at authority, bartered the other children's toys, and had at least one run-in with gendarmes. In November 1978 he confessed to vandalizing a local man's home, throwing rocks, bashing in windows, and stealing nuts, pears, and apples. "Whenever he got in trouble, he could charm his way out—always a bit of a talker, you know," recalls his former counselor, Patrick Hnoy.

In July 1979, after almost three years in the orphanage, 12-year-old Rocancourt was adopted by a family who lived outside Le Neubourg, an hour's drive east. His adoptive father was a military man who tried in vain to discipline the restive boy.

"I told Daniel, 'If this was my son, I would never let him go with this man,'" remembers Joel Rocancourt, Daniel's brother and Christophe's uncle. A stout, ruddy-faced laborer, Joel is sipping a glass of pastis with another brother, Germain, at their mother's simple home in Conteville; Adrienna Rocancourt, Christophe's grandmother, is a friendly old woman who shakes her head at news of her grandson's exploits. The military man, Joel goes on, "was tough on Christophe, very mean. I know he tried to run away two, three times from that man. . . . Then, when he turned 18 [in 1985], he just took off. I remember he told me, 'Uncle, I will come back a big man.'"

Rocancourt fled to the streets of Paris, two hours south. There, amid the neon lights and dizzying spectacle of the French capital, the teenager made the fateful decision not to introduce himself as Christophe Rocancourt, the poor, orphaned first-born of a French prostitute. Instead he constructed and assumed the identity of a wealthy Russian nobleman, Prince de Galitzine. It was, by all accounts, a clumsy ruse that fooled almost no one. Between 1987 and 1992, Rocancourt was jailed five times, for forgery, counterfeiting, and petty larceny.

Then, on the night of September 15, 1991, three armed men broke into the apartment of a woman in Geneva, Switzerland, just across the French border. They held the woman and her companion hostage overnight. Early the next morning

the trio took the woman to the jewelry store where she worked and forced her to open the safe. The men grabbed about \$400,000 in diamond rings and watches and leapt into their waiting car. Police gave chase, and the men were forced to escape on foot, leaving some of the jewelry in the car. Swiss police fingered Rocancourt as a suspect.

A wanted man, he fled to the U.S. By late 1991, at the age of 24, Rocancourt had settled in Los Angeles, where he began making friends among the city's French expatriates; in time he was to find Angelenos far more gullible than the Parisians he had left behind. One of the first people he met was Charles Glenn, the French-born wine salesman. Glenn was sitting in Cafe Maurice one afternoon when a man next to him turned and asked, "Do you speak French?" The stranger, who introduced himself as Christopher Rocancourt, said he was a boxer, the reigning European champion no less, and was in town for a major fight that evening.

When Rocancourt asked Glenn for a ride to his fight, Glenn happily obliged. He chauffeured him to downtown Los Angeles, but there Rocancourt appeared to grow confused, saying he couldn't find the site of the fight. They stopped at the Bonaventure Hotel, where Glenn grew irritated as Rocancourt shuttled back and forth between the car and a pay phone, saying he was checking with his manager. Eventually Rocancourt said the other fighter had forfeited. When they returned to Glenn's car, Rocancourt produced a large roll of bills. "He gave me \$500 and said, 'Charles, when we get back to Cafe Maurice, tell them I won by a knockout in the first round,'" Glenn recalls. "So I took it. I'm not rich. So that's what I told everybody. We had quite a celebration that night."

Glenn took pity on the young "fighter," letting him sleep on his couch for several months, showing him the city's nightclubs, and introducing him to other Frenchmen. Rocancourt quickly demonstrated a knack for ingenious grifting. When he discovered that one of Glenn's friends, Pierre, was remodeling his home in Bel Air, Rocancourt proposed to buy it, then swiftly moved in. To get rid of Pierre, he appropriated the American Express card of another of Glenn's friends, a Japanese girl, and bought Pierre a ticket for a lengthy Portuguese vacation. With Pierre out of the way, Rocancourt lived rent-free in the Bel Air home for several months. When Pierre demanded payment, Rocancourt told him to travel to Geneva, promising to wire him the money there. The money never came, so Rocancourt moved out; a bank then foreclosed on Pierre's house, Glenn says.

But Rocancourt's real gift was seduction. One evening in June 1992, Glenn took him to L.A.'s Bar One, where Rocancourt bet him he could get a date with the beautiful young coat-check girl. Her name was Gry Park, and Rocancourt sent Glenn over to her with a message. "I was reading the Bible; I love the Lord," remembers Park, a born-again Christian. "He had someone come over to me and say he wanted to marry me because he loved the Lord. I said, 'No, I just come here to work.' But he didn't give up. For a long, long time he would come in every night and just sit next to me and say nothing. . . . He said he didn't speak any English. . . . He was very passionate and persuasive. [Finally I said,] 'Now I've told you no for six weeks.' [So] he said, 'I will go to church with you.' And he did. He went to church. He would cry a lot. He was really sad. At first I didn't know why."

The doe-eyed young Frenchman told Park his name was Christopher De Laurentiis, and said he was the nephew of film producer Dino De Laurentiis. That August she finally gave in to his overtures and, though they hadn't even kissed, agreed to join him on a Hawaiian vacation. "I said, 'We have to have separate rooms,' and we did," she remembers. "He was very much the gentleman. . . . We just sat and talked and talked and talked. He still couldn't speak English. Most of the time we talked through this interpreter he hired."

Then, on a flight to an outlying island, Rocancourt began to cry. He was trying to tell Park something, but couldn't find the words. "He pointed his finger, he made a gesture like a gun," Park remembers. "He said he had robbed a bank, that he had done bad things. He said he wanted to stop. I didn't believe him, of course. I said, 'Yeah, I robbed a bank, too.'" In time Park was overwhelmed by Rocancourt's affections. He was like something out of a French film, quiet and loving, haunted and scarred. "I don't know what he's like with other people, but with me he's desperate, he's sad, he wants to change," says Park. "He never speaks above a whisper. . . . His heart was just so hard, he was so hurt. . . . He would confess to taking money from people. He always came to me to confess."

They began taking trips to Las Vegas, where Rocancourt enjoyed attending boxing matches. "This one time we got married," Park says with a sigh. "It's a long story." It was October 1992, and her impulsive decision to marry the mysterious Frenchman transformed her life. Ejected from the Bel Air home, Rocancourt took his new wife and settled into a luxurious suite at the Peninsula Beverly Hills hotel. There they dined frequently on meals delivered by one of Rocancourt's first American targets, the Holly-

wood restaurateur Silvio de Mori, who then owned an aging spot named Tutto Benne. Rocancourt, who often visited the restaurant in a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce, offered to buy Tutto Benne for \$3.75 million. According to people who knew both men, de Mori liked the young man enough to lend him \$5,000 or so, then accepted Rocancourt's invitation to fly to Milan with him to retrieve enough money to repay that debt and buy Tutto Benne.

De Mori's suspicions were aroused, however, when the two men arrived at the Los Angeles airport and Rocancourt, saying he was short on cash, suddenly asked de Mori to buy the airline tickets. The restaurateur angrily bought the tickets, then simmered in a Milan hotel while Rocancourt disappeared for days on end, ostensibly to get the money. The money never appeared, and upon their return to L.A. the restaurateur severed his ties to Rocancourt; de Mori, who says he remembers nothing about Rocancourt, declines comment.

Back in L.A. the newlyweds engaged in a series of escalating arguments. Creditors kept calling, demanding money. Nothing about her new husband, Park realized, added up. He said his father was a diplomat, but his parents never visited, never phoned. She began to suspect he was a drug dealer, or worse. Finally, she told him, "Either you tell me everything or I'm going to leave you." Once again Rocancourt broke down. In tears, he said he was a criminal, part of the Italian Mafia. Within days Park, by then several months pregnant, left him, moving in with her sister in San Francisco.

Rocancourt followed, relocating to Sausalito. He began pestering Park with frantic phone calls, beseeching her to rejoin him. At wit's end, Park called the San Francisco office of the F.B.I. "He was so crazy, I could feel something was really wrong," she recalls. "I called the F.B.I. almost as a joke. I guess I was calling to get information about him. I told [the operator] I was married to a man named Christopher Rocancourt. [I said,] 'If you've heard of this guy, then I can help you.' Within a minute, an F.B.I. agent called me, and within five minutes they were at my house."

An agent named Mark Irish explained to Park that Rocancourt was wanted by the Swiss police; after a tip from the Swiss that he was in the Sausalito area, Irish had been tracking Rocancourt for some time. All he found was a string of people in Sausalito and the Napa Valley who claimed Rocancourt had swindled them. In Napa, Rocancourt, still masquerading as Christopher De Laurentiis, told people he was in the area to purchase a vineyard. "[Irish] said, 'We can't catch this guy, he's very intelligent,'" Park recalls. "'Will you help us?' I said, 'Yeah, I'll help you.'"

The agents placed a trace on her sister's phone. The chase went on for weeks. Rocancourt would call, he and Park would talk, and the F.B.I. would throw up its hands; somehow, the agents told Park, Rocancourt was able to camouflage his calls to appear as if they were coming from disparate locations. One moment the F.B.I. would check a phone in New York, the next, a phone in Los Angeles; Rocancourt was nowhere to be found. Then, in June, agents caught a break, tracking him to San Francisco's landmark Fairmont Hotel, where a frightened employee gave them Rocancourt's briefcase and a duffel bag containing a .22-caliber pistol. The employee told the F.B.I. that he'd heard Rocancourt was also in possession of an Uzi machine gun and two hand grenades. "If you fuck with me," the employee reported Rocancourt as saying, "I'll put two bullets in your brain."

But still the con man eluded them. Finally, for reasons Park didn't understand, an agent told her to instruct Rocancourt to call early in the morning, before dawn. "So I told him I was leaving, he would never see me again, and if he wanted to say good-bye, he had to call early the next morning," Park recalls.

Rocancourt called at the appointed time and said a teary good-bye. Minutes later, Park's phone rang once more. It was Rocancourt, calling from Las Vegas, telling her he had just been arrested by the F.B.I. "He told me, 'I know you did this,'" Park remembers. "'Nobody could have done this to me but you. [But] you don't ever have to worry about your life, because I'll never kill you.'"

Park sighs. "That was comforting," she says.

Rocancourt was extradited to Geneva, where he faced charges on the jewelry robbery. According to U.S. officials, the charges were ultimately dropped, apparently because Swiss prosecutors had insufficient evidence to go to trial. Whatever happened, the Swiss handed Rocancourt over to the French police, who wanted him on old swindling charges. Rocancourt entered a prison outside Paris in 1994. From prison he wrote elaborate love letters to Park and his new daughter, who was born after his arrest. "They were beautiful letters, for his daughter, how much he loves her, how he was going to be different and get a real job," says Park. "He would just write and write. He called me from jail all the time, making me nuts."

In mid-1995, Rocancourt was released. Park was stunned; the F.B.I. had said he would be imprisoned for life. From France he sent her a plane ticket. Against her better judgment, and because she didn't want him to return to California, Park flew to Paris to see him. Amazingly, their romance rekindled. Days turned to weeks. Rocancourt, now bulked up from a prison weight-lifting regime,

took her to Honfleur, where he introduced her to a man he said was his brother.

"He was just the same, really loving," she recalls. "He pledged honesty and faithfulness, you know, the whole bit, how he wanted to go straight, how he wanted to take care of my daughter. Was I swept away? No, I wasn't, and yes, I was. Intellectually I knew, but emotionally . . . Oh, it was complicated. He made me feel very, very, very loved. He said he would die for me in a minute. . . . [He also said,] 'If I ever find out you divorced me, I'll kill you.'" Park thought it best not to tell him she had already had their marriage annulled.

She told him to stay in France. But when she returned to Los Angeles, he followed. They reunited briefly, then broke up. He was penniless, living hand to mouth, pelting her with phone calls, promising his undying love. Then, one evening in late 1995, he showed up at her house while Park was holding a prayer meeting. "That night he just lost it," she recalls. "He started crying, [saying,] 'My life is horrendous, my life is a living hell. I need God.'" Park was unmoved. She threw him out. He sat on the sidewalk, crying for what seemed like hours. Finally a missionary in attendance named Marjorie took pity on him. She told Park she would take him in.

"Marjorie took over his life, for like six months," Park remembers. "They had no money, they just moved from couch to couch, you know, at friends' houses. She [called and said,] 'Omigosh, he goes to Bible study, he goes to church. He's a totally different man.'" One day Park reluctantly accepted Rocancourt's invitation to visit him at a church in Pasadena, where they sat as he once again poured out his heart to her, telling her how God had changed his life. She didn't believe him.

Within a year he had married a *Playboy* Playmate and moved into the Regent Beverly Wilshire.

Rocancourt's ticket back to the good life came thanks to his budding friendship with Shahrām Moussazadeh, the backgammon-playing boutique owner who for a time bankrolled his lush lifestyle. He met his future wife, Pia Reyes, when she was a hostess at a now defunct restaurant on Santa Monica Boulevard and intervened on his behalf when a "problem" developed with his credit card. After a whirlwind romance, they were married in Las Vegas in May 1996.

Even after he was married, however, Gry Park was never far from Rocancourt's thoughts. On the day Reyes went into labor with Zeus, in 1997, Park says, Rocancourt called her, and they had lunch. The next day, not 12 hours after the birth of his son, Rocancourt called once more, beseeching her to run off to Hong Kong with him. "Can you believe that?" she asks today. "I was

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like, 'Who are you? Are you on drugs?'"

Each time Rocancourt called, Park implored him to leave her alone, once and for all. "If I would cry, and he would see I was sincere, he would leave me alone," she says. "I told him, 'You're hurting me, you're hurting my children. If you really understood life, if you really understood what your daughter needs, you would leave us alone. If you insist on being in her life, she will be like you. Give her a chance to have a normal, nice life.' And he would leave me alone for six months. But he would always come back."

In 1998, Rocancourt made what turned out to be his last visit to his former wife. Park, who by then had gotten remarried, to a filmmaker, was at home one evening when she walked into her living room and was stunned to find Rocancourt had entered, unannounced. With him was a 350-pound Samoan bodyguard, carrying a pistol.

"He wanted to take my daughter," Park remembers. "It was very tense. He was horrible. My husband is very intelligent. He befriended the bodyguard, offering him something to drink. We stayed there all night, talking." Park's husband, looking to defuse an explosive situation, eased things further by making Rocancourt a proposition. "I said, 'Chris, you know, we should make a movie of your life,'" he recalls. "We talked about that. He got very excited."

Rocancourt's disappearance from Los Angeles in late 1998 once again left investigators empty-handed. At one point, George Mueller of the L.A. District Attorney's Office received a tip that he was back in Italy, trying to put together a scheme to smuggle drugs through the South of France. Charles Glenn heard that he was in Saint-Tropez. Investigators have since fielded a report putting Rocancourt in Nashville for a time.

But wherever he had been, by late 1999 Rocancourt was in New York, along with Pia and Zeus, comfortably ensconced in a \$6,500-a-month loft apartment on White Street in Lower Manhattan. In six months there he accumulated a familiar string of victims, according to one investigator; whether out of fear or embarrassment, not one has yet come forward to tell his or her story. They include an immigrant businessman who got taken for an estimated \$175,000; an Upper East Side retail store that gave Rocancourt \$40,000 of merchandise for which it never received payment; his landlord, stiffed for \$20,000; two more establishments, taken for an estimated \$50,000; and an employee of one of the establishments, who gave Rocancourt \$40,000 to invest in the stock market. His biggest mark may have been a wealthy woman he seduced. Investi-

gators say the woman, who has also refused to come forward, gave Rocancourt \$90,000 in cash; in addition, watches and jewelry valued at more than \$250,000 were stolen from her home. "She's not Ivana Trump," says the investigator who has interviewed the woman, "but she's not exceedingly stressed over losing 350K."

In May, Rocancourt, along with Pia, Zeus, and his new assistant, "Joseph"—actually a Brooklyn man named Dante Daniello—moved on to the Hamptons, where they registered at the Pink House in East Hampton. Rocancourt spent his days house-hunting with a real-estate agent, who, investigators say, eventually gave him \$108,000 to invest in the stock market; she never saw any of it again. Not everyone he met was so gullible: a woman named Nancy Lorenzen rejected his entreaties to invest with him after a few games of tennis. Lorenzen didn't believe a man of Rocancourt's supposed means would be playing at the East Hampton public court beside the Waldbaum's grocery store.

Rocancourt was a regular at the Palm restaurant in East Hampton, where he smoked Cuban cigars; then he would make the rounds of all the area's busiest nightclubs. During June and July he shuttled among several hotels, including the Maidstone Arms in East Hampton, usually slipping out without paying his bill. Sometime in July he began calling himself Christopher Rockefeller. It was under this guise that he befriended the masseuse at the East Hampton Gym, Corine Eeltink, who gave him \$14,000 on the promise he would triple her money. In turn, Eeltink introduced Rocancourt not only to the Spanish painter Gines Serran-Pagan but also to several friends staying with her at a house in Water Mill, where Rockefeller began dropping by to play tennis.

Then, on Saturday, July 22, after Eeltink's father had a stroke in the Netherlands, she telephoned her friend Kevin McCrary and asked him to contact Rockefeller and give him an additional \$125,000 she had promised him. McCrary met her at Kennedy Airport, took her instructions, then headed to the house in Water Mill, where he met Rockefeller and his aide, Joseph, and accepted an invitation to join them and a group of friends at a nightclub called NV. McCrary was immediately suspicious. Though the group sat in the V.I.P. section and drank Dom Pérignon, the Frenchman didn't seem like any Rockefeller he had ever met. He had a gaudy tattoo of an eagle on his right arm, bad posture, and a weak handshake. His friend Laurent claimed to be a runway model, but knew little about the modeling world. And Joseph—"Call me Joey D"—was too coarse for words.

"He set me off immediately: How could a Rockefeller be associated with such a bumbling fool?" McCrary remembers thinking. "It didn't fit. Nothing fit. He's French. My family has known the Rockefellers for decades: Nelson, David. We've known them for years. If there's one thing I know, it's growing up around money. He didn't feel like money."

McCrary's suspicions hardened the next day when he and Rockefeller met for several sets of tennis. Afterward, McCrary discovered that his own Hamptons host, a stockbroker named Tom Gregory, had given Rockefeller \$50,000. The two men got into a loud argument when McCrary insisted Rockefeller was a fake; Gregory got so mad he wanted McCrary to leave the house. Returning to Manhattan, McCrary went to the 19th Precinct, on 67th Street, and tried to report a crime. A policeman asked where the crime was. McCrary had to admit he wasn't sure.

Instead of handing Rockefeller the rest of Eeltink's money, McCrary engaged in a series of phone calls in which he demanded that Rockefeller return the \$14,000 he had already taken. When Rockefeller seemed to drag his feet, McCrary turned to the police in Hampton Bays, meeting them on the night of Tuesday, August 1. It was that night, after sensing that the police were less than enthusiastic about the case, that McCrary tracked Rockefeller down to the Mill-Garth Country Inn in Amagansett.

The next morning two detectives from the Hamptons, Jerry Larsen and Robert Flood, phoned McCrary and asked him to join them on a stakeout at the East Hampton Gym, where Rocancourt had been spotted. There, in an unmarked car parked by a rear Dumpster, McCrary listened as the two detectives made several phone calls in an attempt to pin a provable crime on the Frenchman. When they called the Mill-Garth, they discovered that Rocancourt had left that morning without paying his \$8,000 bill. "Ah, there's a crime!" McCrary cried.

They waited. By and by Rocancourt and Joseph strolled out of the health club and walked over to a car; the three men watched as Rocancourt talked with two women—Laurent and Rocancourt's wife, Pia, who seemed to be acquainted. The detectives told McCrary to get out of the car so they could follow Rocancourt. McCrary slipped through a set of bushes and, taking a seat on a bench along Highway 27, watched as the two detectives slowly followed behind Rocancourt and Joseph as they walked into East Hampton.

The two men were subsequently detained and Rocancourt was thrown into jail. Joseph was released and took a worried call from Gines Serran-Pagan, who had scheduled a meeting with Rocancourt that afternoon. Informed that Rocancourt had been arrested, the painter pledged to do anything he could

to get him released. In the meantime, Pagan told Joseph, "I will fill the jail with my paintings so that he can sleep quietly in peace."

Placed in custody on charges of false personation and theft of services, Rocancourt gave police a passport identifying himself as "Fabien Ortuna." The next day, after hiring John Gotti's defense attorney, Bruce Cutler, he posted a cash bond of \$45,000.

And vanished. Again.

**F**abien Ortuna's arrest and disappearance produced little news outside minor items in Long Island newspapers. It was only after police checked his fingerprints and belatedly discovered he was actually Christophe Rocancourt that the chase began. In the wake of Rocancourt's disappearance, a small army of law-enforcement officials and media organizations mobilized to follow his trail.

By October, after stories in the *New York Post* and *The New York Times*, the throng in-

cluded F.B.I. agents and U.S. marshals, as well as crews from NBC's *Dateline*, ABC's *PrimeTime*, CNN, and Court TV. From New York to L.A., most of Rocancourt's alleged victims refused to cooperate. But Charles Glenn opened a thriving business selling Rocancourt videotapes and photographs. A Manhattan private eye on the case, meanwhile, put the price tag for his own stash of Rocancourt photos and videos at \$100,000.

Rocancourt began using intermediaries to approach media outlets, including *V.F.* "I would not consider myself a criminal—I steal with my mind," he told a *New York Times* reporter in an hour-long telephone interview. "If I take things, if that is your definition of a criminal, then I am a criminal. . . . If they catch me, I will make no deal. I will do my time." He said he felt no guilt over fleecing his victims. "I feel sorry for their greed."

At this writing, Rocancourt remains a fugitive. Everyone involved has a different theory

about where he is hiding. Montreal. Paris. Rome. Bangkok. Miami. San Diego. Venezuela. "I can assure you that wherever he is he loves what's going on right now," says Lillian Pinho. "Because of the attention. He loves the attention."

Those who knew Rocancourt remain sharply divided in their judgments. Some want him strung up. Others, like Rhonda Rydell, remain enamored of him even after learning of his lies. Still others have developed a grudging respect for a poor, orphaned French boy who grew up to fleece the rich and the gullible. "He's like Rocky," says Charles Glenn. "He's the Rocky of con men."

"He is not a cold, calculating criminal; I've been around him, I know," says Pagan. "The guy is a dreamer. He walked like a Rockefeller, in an emperor's shoes. He does not belong in jail. The people who gave him money, they belong in jail. For stupidity." □

## Oxygen

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 105 mother. Beauty queen. Think like a lover. Bunny. Soccer mom. Hostess with the mostest. Oxygen. Think like yourself." Another stated, "Oxygen: Enjoyed by bad girls everywhere." Cut to a woman, bundled up for winter. "To snow tire or not to snow tire, that's a question," she said brightly. Cut to three voices. "It's all chicks?" one asked. "Yeah, nothing but," said another. "Play like a girl with Oxygen Sports," said the third. Cut to a woman, alone, in a wedding dress. "We were supposed to get married, but he blew me off," she said. Cut to a mother meeting her newborn baby. "Happy Labor Day from Oxygen."

The clips were a reminder that Oxygen's target audience is younger and sassier than Lifetime's. But demographics matter less to Laybourne than what she calls "psychographics." Famously addicted to social-science research and focus groups, she says women fall into five distinct categories. There are "the disaffected," for whom television is a narcotic, like tobacco—"They will never watch Oxygen," she says. There are "the contented," some of whom might occasionally tune in. Oxygen is aiming for the rest: "the achievers," "the changers," and "the adventurers." "Women today don't feel like they're victims, they don't feel 'Woe is me,'" she explains. And they are sophisticated: No longer can women's programming be "just about 59 ways to thinner thighs."

**S**o far, Laybourne feels her vision has been fulfilled. "We've hit all of our targets, in terms of revenues, in terms of subscribers, in terms of page views," Laybourne claims. Her

script calls for Oxygen to be in 50 million homes by 2004; by the end of 2002, she says, it will be two-thirds there. (That's crucial because, while Oxygen has struck special deals with Johnson & Johnson, Hewlett-Packard, and Procter & Gamble, advertisers generally do not pay much attention before a network can claim 20 to 30 million subscribers.) Oxygen executives say that the network is available in some parts of Los Angeles, and will soon be available in more. As for programming, "we've created 15 completely different new series, right out of the box. That's unheard of. There is no new network with that much original content that looks as good as Oxygen. Nowhere. Not in any country of the world. It's so great. The only thing it isn't is the Second Coming, and we never thought that." So eager was she to push convergence, she admits, that Oxygen passed on more expensive, labor-intensive programs—dramas and comedies. But Carsey-Werner-Mandabach will soon rectify that with a multigenerational sitcom and other projects.

Laybourne ridicules the notion that had Oxygen not been so hyped at the outset it would not be so scrutinized now. "And that would really have been possible with Oprah Winfrey, Marcy Carsey, and me," she says sarcastically. "That's a great piece of advice. That's brilliant. I wish I thought of that myself." Nor, she says, was getting on in New York right away or having a smash hit at the start ever realistic. "People say, 'Well, why didn't you have a hit out of the box?' I don't know, because that was on our business plan: Have a hit, right out of the box," she declares. Her disdain for such fatuous thinking is obvious, but she is taking no chances. "If you're going to quote me, you better put that there was a smirk

on my face," she says. No one remembers, she points out, that it took five years for Nickelodeon to make a hit out of *Rugrats*.

**O**prah has seemed scarce around Oxygen, apart from a 12-part series in which she and Gayle King learned how to surf the Internet; her promised talk show, *Oprah & . . .*, has yet to happen. Around the office, staffers have seldom seen her, and were told to steer clear of her when they did. Nor has she done much on her syndicated show or in her wildly popular new magazine to push Oxygen, stoking rumors that she is unhappy with how it has evolved and is distancing herself from it.

Carsey concedes that she and her partners have trod lightly with Oprah, fearing she is stretched too thin. But Winfrey, she says, recently asked to become more involved; during a visit to New York in October, she gave a pep talk to the staff at *Pure Oxygen*, pledged to call the control room periodically to kibitz on-air, and offered to film an upcoming trip to Africa for Oxygen. Winfrey's level of participation evidently satisfies Laybourne. "This isn't called *Oprah*," she says. But it's clear that even she proceeds gingerly with Winfrey; she could not deliver her for an interview, forcing me to settle for a pallid written statement instead. (In it, Winfrey reiterated her faith in Oxygen and pledged to give it her continued "creative energies.") The folks at Oxygen made me feel that both I and they were lucky to get even that.

Oxygen is a private company—in today's bear market, going public is no longer an option—and Laybourne will not say how much of her original \$300 million stake she's already burned through, nor what her profits and losses have been. She is now