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Profile

Christian Curry's Naked Ambition

It's been a whirl of stretch limos, Veuve Clicquot, and \$1,000-a-plate charity dinners for Christian Curry ever since his scandalous case with Morgan Stanley was settled. So what if the firm claims they didn't pay him a dime? He's the life of the party.

- By Vanessa Grigoriadis
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Once upon a time, there was a kid named Christian Curry, and he was humiliated in the worst possible way. It was 1998, and Curry, a 23-year-old junior analyst at Morgan Stanley Dean Witter & Co., had the misfortune of having nude photos of himself, aroused, appear in *Playguy* magazine -- "my naked ass for all the world to see," as he puts it. Though he claimed he had no knowledge that the shots would be published (they'd been taken in college, when he was pursuing a modeling career), he was fired, allegedly for padding expenses. He then filed suit, alleging discrimination on the basis of race and sexual orientation (he's straight, but the magazine that published the pics is for a gay audience); he was featured in hundreds of articles, on CNN and network TV, and even in a thinly veiled *Law & Order* episode. Finally, the announcement last fall: The Curry case had been settled. Morgan Stanley would donate \$1 million to the National Urban League, a nonprofit devoted to the promotion of diversity. But the ex-financier himself wouldn't be compensated.

No one, of course, believed this.

"This is Morgan's statement: 'We paid Curry nothing! *Nothing!*'" says Curry, adopting a booming bass like Ed McMahon's. He snorts. "And who am I to argue?"

But try as Morgan Stanley might, its public claims have been belied by the recent transformation of Curry from social pariah to Richie Rich. The party started the week of the settlement, when Curry arrived at a victory dinner at Harry Cipriani in a limo strewn with rose petals; it built steam as he bought two Ferraris, a Porsche, a Range Rover, and a Mercedes; and it's still on in mid-January, when he arrives at Le Cirque 2000 with his 23-year-old assistant, Stephanie, and publicist, David Granoff, whose other famous client is Anna Nicole Smith. "The last time I came here was for a Morgan closing party," Curry says with a smirk.

After settling in a purple velvet banquette -- "best table in the house," Granoff observes -- Curry gazes around the fairy-tale room, smiling happily. He sips a kir royale, peruses the menu ("What's halibut?" he asks), and orders tub after tub of caviar. "I've never had caviar," confesses Stephanie. "It's one of those little-kid things -- I always said I wouldn't eat it."

"But it's awesome," says Curry. "You've got to try some!"

Finally, she nibbles a little, and pronounces it "awesome," too.

Holding court in the cozy, tony environs of Le Cirque, Curry seems every bit the upwardly mobile banker he was destined to become before what he calls the "tragedy." Raised in Chappaqua, the son of a surgeon, Curry resembles Tiger Woods in body type, skin color, and cocky carriage. As he tells cute anecdotes about his fiancée, a

Cardozo law student he's nicknamed "Snugglebear," Curry is funny, kind, and always upbeat, very much the popular athletic guy in the popular athletic frat that he was at Columbia University and, earlier, at Northfield Mount Hermon, where he played basketball, baseball, and football.

But there is one topic about which Curry loses his cool: "People are saying, 'This guy Curry, spoiled little bitch, never worked a day in his life, and now he's a multimillionaire,' " he snarls. "Well, *bullshit!* I'd never go through that again, whether they paid me zero dollars" -- and now he speaks very, very slowly -- "or \$52 million."

So -- hypothetically speaking, of course -- what, exactly, does a 26-year-old guy do with, say, \$52 million in cash and stock?

For Curry, plans include (but are in no way limited to) corporate investing, venture capitalism, money management, movie production, magazine publishing, modeling, and buying a "bunch of stuff," like a Hamptons club, TriBeCa lofts, and a downtown restaurant. His only business venture so far, however, has been purchasing *TheBlack Star News*, a four-year-old weekly originally bankrolled by Bill Cosby and intended to compete with *TheAmsterdam News*. In addition to paying the bills (Curry spent \$2 million for 51 percent of the business), he's now writing a column as well, so, on a rainy February morning, Curry heads to the Puffy Combs trial, in a chauffeured black Mercedes with tinted windows.

His driver pulls up to the courthouse's media entrance. "Stop right in front," he commands. "The cameraguys will think we're Puffy!"

The driver does as told, and TV crews scramble to hoist their gear as Curry doubles over in laughter.

Afterward, he proceeds to the Reebok club -- while he works out, he insists on treating me to a pedicure -- but before this, he's got one more stop: "Miramax," he tells the driver.

"Check this out: A friend from prep school and I were at a Mobil in Mamaroneck, and in comes Harvey Weinstein. He's standing at the checkout with a six-pack of doughnuts, and I'm like, 'Harvey! Harvey Weinstein!' And he's like, 'How ya doing.' So we talk for a while, and then he goes -- exact words -- 'Gimme a call, I'll introduce you to Tina Brown at *Talk*.' "

So Curry is figuring that before the meeting he should drop off some copies of *Black Star*, to impress the guy. After he waits a half-hour in the lobby, Weinstein's assistant calls and says come on up. Edward Furlong sits nearby as Curry hands the underling his crumpled envelope.

"Harvey'll get that, right?" says Curry.

"Yup," says the assistant brightly. "Talking to me is like talking to him."

Back in the lobby, Curry passes Robert De Niro. "Hi, Mr. De Niro," he exclaims.

"Aaarrrrh," grunts De Niro.

For all the talk of what he is going to have, right now Curry doesn't seem to have much. Though he says he's negotiating a deal for a Trump Tower three-bedroom ("It makes you want to make love," he says), he's just moved into a very bare TriBeCa loft. The sum of his belongings are an unmade bed, a golden Lab puppy, a stack of men's magazines, and "a 1,000-watt stereo," he yelps. "Check it out!"

If there's little evidence of the high life here, it's because Curry doesn't actually control his money -- yet. It's in his lawyers' hands until he's 35. "I went a little nuts at first, with all these cars," he says. "Now I have people looking out for me, so I don't turn into M.C. Hammer."

Having someone else hold the purse strings makes some sense, because Curry has a habit of getting into trouble. Last October, for example, Spa club promoter Scott Sartiano says Curry violated a restraining order against Sartiano, whom Curry was convicted of harassing when he pushed him through a window three years ago. Sartiano is now suing for \$4 million. "In some ways, Christian is an adult," says Benedict Morelli, Curry's civil lawyer, with whom he has a paternal relationship (Curry won't discuss his own parents). "In other ways, he's a boy."

It's hard to know if he really plays basketball with Jay-Z or hangs with Russell Simmons, as he says he does. Does he own five cars or one, as friends report? Does Weinstein really want to take a meeting? (Weinstein's office says a conversation with *Talk* was proffered, but not necessarily with Brown.) Leafing through a magazine, Curry points to a new Guess? model: "I'm taking her out," he boasts.

It's only fair to cut the kid some slack: After a two-year legal battle under intense media scrutiny, is it such a crime to enjoy the spoils of wealth and notoriety? Though Curry might appear confident, the responses he provokes are not always sympathetic, especially on one recent night at the meatpacking-district nightclub Lotus, where he earns stares from young guys in suits and loosened ties, including a couple of Morgan Stanley analysts who say that they're "repulsed by him," particularly by the idea that he "could've gotten more money than we'll see in our lifetimes." One can only imagine their reactions to the first issue of *Gotham*, a new city magazine for which Curry posed wearing nothing but a Morgan Stanley baseball cap over his privates.

You can chalk that photo up to bad taste, the thrill of his newfound status, a certain boyish, almost Bushian, immaturity -- or you can blame it on Curry's thirst for revenge. It's this kind of poor judgment that damaged his credibility in the Morgan Stanley mess: After he was fired, he allegedly participated in a plan to bolster his suit by planting racist e-mails in Morgan Stanley's computers with Charles Joseph Luethke, an acquaintance who occasionally crashed at his old frat house.

But this time, it was Morgan Stanley's turn to show bad judgment: The alleged scheme imploded when it was revealed that Luethke had been paid \$10,000 by Morgan Stanley for his role in the plot. This led to the resignation of the firm's general counsel in June 1999, as well as a media war that never seems to end. Just two weeks ago, Morgan Stanley sent out a memo to all 62,679 employees, reiterating that they didn't pay Curry "a penny." And Luethke recently filed a suit against the firm, alleging coercion of testimony. He'd like \$500 million.

Christian Curry arrives at the Plaza a bit late for the \$1,000-per-plate dinner at which Carl McCall is announcing his gubernatorial candidacy. His guests (all of whom he's paid for) include an NBC medical reporter, a Mercedes exec, a bodyguard, plus -- surprise, surprise -- the Guess? model, Rachel Nichols.

Curry calls her "Muffin," she calls him "Button," and he bought her a diamond tennis bracelet and pendant worth \$40,000 at Tiffany & Co. for Valentine's Day (no, really -- I saw him do it). "The best part about Muffin?" he says. "She doesn't know that I'm the Naked Gay Guy." She does know about Snugglybear, but the engagement is off -- at least for tonight.

Curry's appearance here with a six-foot model isn't the only reason he's turning heads: Despite his splashy contributions -- like a hundred grand for the John Starks Foundation (for disadvantaged youths) -- Curry's relationship with the black community is a complicated one.

Though the Reverend Al Sharpton led a protest for Curry at Morgan Stanley's headquarters on July 15, 1999, his support wasn't to last long. That same night, Sharpton attended a party for *Black Enterprise* publisher Earl Graves. Here, according to deposition testimony, he was approached by a number of black leaders -- including Johnnie Cochran; Hugh Price, head of the National Urban League; and Morgan Stanley's Bill Lewis -- who said Sharpton "didn't fully understand the Curry situation and what he was getting involved in." Curry says Sharpton never held any further protests on his behalf.

Tonight, however, Curry is feeling only love. He's greeted warmly by Charles Rangel, Percy Sutton, and McCall himself. "I'm a huge fan," says a guest.

"It's nothing," says Curry. "I'm nothing."

Out of the crowd comes a classmate from my high school, Melissa Breitbart Sohn, a married slip of a woman who runs Emma & Me, a jewelry-design business, and just so happens to be the daughter of Curry's criminal-defense attorney. Curry sweeps her up in a big bear hug, and her feet dangle off the floor.

Everyone heads up to the Plaza suite Curry's rented for the night; the bodyguard pops a Veuve Clicquot, a reggae CD goes in the player, and people lollygag on the king-size bed. Muffin changes out of her Gucci snakeskin dress and into jeans; she unzips them to show off her new black thong with a Sisqó appliqué. Curry puts his hand down her pants.

"Get out of there, Christian!" says Breitbart Sohn. "You're drunk."

"I'm drunk on life!" he yells.

There's a lot of off-the-record discussion of deals Curry might or might not do, the money he might or might not have, and the fees he most definitely has to pay Breitbart Sohn's dad. "Did I pay for those shoes?" he asks. "Or this bag? Did I pay for this hair?" He pulls at her highlighted locks. "My father hasn't supported me in a long, long time," she retorts, indignant.

Curry pulls out his cell phone. "People want to hire me, too," he says, and plays a message from an ID Models booker.

As the night grows longer, Curry gets more loose. "All these women throw themselves at me," he tells Breitbart Sohn. "I've got a drawer at home of panties that girls have sent me." He takes a pair of stockings out of his pocket. "Look . . ."

"Christian!" screams Breitbart Sohn. "I saw you take those from Muffin's bag!"

"All right," he says, laughing, putting the white cotton crotch to his nose. "But smell them! They smell

so good, like a fruit."

After hanging out at the Plaza, the group jumps in Curry's long white limo and heads, once again, to Lotus. This time, they're shown to a good table right away, and Curry orders champagne as Muffin dances on the banquette. When Lotus closes, it's back in the limo to the Plaza suite.

And so on.

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