



POOR LITTLE RICH THUGS

How a pampered college boy wove a sordid web of dope dealing, strip-club orgies and murder-for-hire.

BY HARIETTE SUROVELL | On Oct. 26, 1994, two men in their 20s, Peter Kovach and Ted Gould, were escorted at gunpoint into a tacky room of the Torrance, Calif., Traveler's Inn Motel. The kidnapers: Kenny Friedman of Queens, N.Y., aka "the Animal" -- a career criminal since childhood -- two other Queens thieves and a California man who provided the guns and the car. Kovach, a former marijuana dealer who had gone legit, now co-owned a cellular phone store, the Galleria Telecom, in a strip mall in Torrance, a Los Angeles County suburb. Gould, his pal and sometime employee, had just been hanging out at the store, waiting to go out for dinner.

Friedman and his crew had been staking out the Galleria Telecom for weeks, hoping to nab Kovach when he closed up alone, but popular Pete always seemed to be surrounded by friends. After the foursome had spent thousands of dollars on cheap motels, cheaper hookers, beer, heroin and crack, "the Animal" lost patience with his prey. The crew crashed into the store, pushed the videotape camera into the ceiling and grabbed Kovach and Gould.

The details of this evening -- cobbled together mostly from court testimony from the kidnapers, especially the slow-witted Ruben Hernandez, who plea-bargained his way out of a trial -- give the outlines of a criminal underworld whose ugliness is rivaled only by its utter absurdity. In addition to massive drug cabals, hard-core violent crimes and relentless wheeling and dealing in Miami's South Beach club scene, this carnival of fools, sadists and college-educated criminals led investigators to uncover a saga of traveling orgies, penis extension operations, high art heists and \$15,000-a-night strip club forays the likes of which even Ross McDonald would have found difficult to weave into a credible story. One federal agent, who has been investigating conspiracies, organized crime and drug cartels for the past 22 years, called it "the weirdest case" he had ever encountered.

In the car on the way to the motel, Kovach pleaded for his friend's release. Friedman laughed. Once inside Room 116, Gould's mouth was duct-taped and the kidnapers covered his head with a pillow. Friedman began punching Kovach repeatedly, screaming: "Where's the drugs and money you stole from Howard?" Kovach screamed back, "I don't have any money, motherfucker!"

Kovach escaped from Friedman's clutches and hurled himself at the window, but Friedman grabbed him before he could jump. The broken glass made the guys nervous, according to Hernandez, who said, "Pete was screaming, making crazy noise," so they transferred to Room 118. It was then that Friedman called his younger brother, Gary Friedman, a New York attorney. Soon after, Gary's main client, 28-year-old Howard Bloomgarden, placed a call to the motel room from a phone near his parents' plush Jupiter, Fla., townhouse. Evidently, the heist was not going as planned. "Kovach doesn't even have the Rolex!" Kenny Friedman snarled to Bloomgarden, and put the terrified Kovach on the phone. The two men -- once close friends -- then engaged in their own loud, vicious argument. Kovach denied his status as a marijuana kingpin who had stolen Bloomgarden's connections, but Bloomgarden, who had run afoul in most other aspects of his life, refused to believe him.

Friedman then gleefully strangled Kovach to death with his bare hands. In court, Hernandez credibly admitted to holding down Kovach's legs, but claims he didn't realize he was abetting murder. Staring into Kovach's sightless eyes, Friedman laughingly pointed out to the others that Kovach had "shit his pants before he kicked." When Ted Gould saw his dead friend, he thrashed about frantically, his screams muffled by the duct tape: "Help me, help me, please God, help me!" Friedman, incited to a new level of sadism, casually strangled him too, savoring each moment of Gould's demise, which, apparently, was "bloodier" than Kovach's.

The crew assiduously wiped down both rooms for fingerprints and other evidence, swept up the glass, brought the corpses out the back door and stuck them in the trunk of their used green Buick Regal. Hernandez was so nervous about "ghosts" that he moved back to Room 116. Friedman, believing the crime to be a *fait accompli*, celebrated by scoring crack from a dealer across the street and sleeping peacefully on Kovach's deathbed. The "chauffeur," Gustavo Malave, had sworn that he would drive the car to Mexico, where he would torch it, contents of trunk included. Instead, he dumped the two dead victims in a San Diego parking lot two days later. After the murder, Hernandez testified that he asked Friedman: "Yo, what up? Why did you kill the motherfuckers?" and that Friedman replied, "Howard Bloomgarden said to do it -- it had to get done. Ted Gould was just in the wrong place."

Not just another drug vendetta

One could chalk up this double homicide to a typical drug vendetta executed by a bunch of losers, except that the two guys giving the orders -- Gary Friedman and Howard Bloomgarden -- do not match any known stereotypical criminal profile. Gary Friedman, born to a middle-class family in Whitestone, Queens, was a well-educated man, a licensed lawyer, with a pretty wife, two children and the ability to pursue the life of an affluent professional. Although he and his criminally inclined brother had always been extremely dependent on one another, the two siblings had little in common aside from their parents. With his menacing black eyes, craggy features and perpetual snarl, Kenny earned his nickname "the Animal" in appearance and deed. As one Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agent put it: "Kenny is a weird, freaky sex-guy." Once he rounded up a bunch of crackhead hookers, hustled them into a van, passed around the pipe and then distributed sex toys before a small crowd of onlookers. Like an orchestra conductor, he instructed the wasted women on how to get each other off while his disenfranchised neighbors, jostling each other, competed for a view of this off-off-off-off Broadway burlesque.

Gary, in contrast, had a vaguely nerdy mien, with red hair combed over a balding scalp, freckled skin and glasses. While still in college, Gary married his high-school sweetheart, Nina, an attractive redhead who later became a speech therapist and bore him two children. But according to Billy Fredericks, group supervisor of the New York City division of the ATF, Gary's happy home life was just a façade. Characterizing Gary as "an excessive sports-better and a degenerate gambler," Fredericks believes that he served as a sort of mentor for Bloomgarden, the younger of the two hoodlums.

As a criminal defense attorney, Gary Friedman had aspired to represent

Mafia hotshots. Around 1986, he landed the gig of his dreams when he was invited to launder money for the Blue Thunder Gang of the Bronx. Run by Colombians, Italians and Puerto Ricans, it was one of the biggest heroin-dealing gangs in New York City history, grossing \$250 million a year until the feds used the racketeering (RICO) and Continuing Criminal Enterprise (CCE) statutes to disassemble it in 1991. Despite Gary's lack of charisma, the Mafiosi in Blue Thunder embraced him, and for a few years he was able to act out his life's dream of being a "made man," donning \$1,000 suits, going to the requisite Italian-style christenings, weddings and birthday parties for the members' children. Kenny worked for his brother as his bodyguard and took care of frequent "problems." The Friedman family owned a condo and a Caddy. But when the members of Blue Thunder were arrested, Gary managed to lie low and keep out of the spotlight.

There have been other lawyers like Gary Friedman -- other professionals who have conspired to murder and even murdered people on behalf of their clients -- but what baffled the federal agents and detectives about this case was the rich, fast-talking, Long Island golden boy Howard Bloomgarden. At the time of the murders, Bloomgarden owned a failing nightclub in Miami's South Beach, "Club One," but his life's dream, which he often gleefully expressed, was to "control all the nudie bars of South Florida." This was a peculiar ambition for the only son of a millionaire eye surgeon and a professor of art therapy. But despite his cosseted, upper-middle-class upbringing, he displayed a keen interest in unscrupulous dealings from an early age. "Howard liked to talk to the adults about business," said Norman Steiger, the family's lawyer and longtime friend. "He always had leanings towards making money and making it fast. He always had a penchant for the deal. Maybe we should have paid more attention to that."

Although Charles and Joan Bloomgarden refused to be interviewed for this article (as did Howard's lawyer, Gerald Shargel, one of John Gotti's chief attorneys), Steiger emphasized how wholesome the Bloomgardens are. The family often takes bicycle trips for their vacations, he maintained, and Joan "works in clay." Charles Bloomgarden blames Howard's attention deficit disorder for his "alleged" misdeeds, but Steiger admits, "Maybe he could have used some tough love."

Whatever the roots of Howard's later behavior, every step along the way, his parents seemed willing if not eager to bankroll Howard's most outrageous endeavors, and soon Howard's peculiar pecuniary obsession blossomed into a full-fledged pathology.

After high school, Bloomgarden attended the University of Miami, where he majored in business administration -- and minored in coke-dealing. There he found his tribe: other rich kids with vaguely criminal aspirations. As the

ATF's Fredericks put it, "I'm still stunned that Howard Bloomgarden would have engaged in the kind of activities that he did when he could have led a life of leisure ... and his cadre from the University of Miami were also all very well-heeled. They weren't organized-crime guys or guys from the 'hood. They were people with big bucks and girls hanging all over them, pretending to be gangsters."

The University of Miami has long been considered the ultimate party school for "spoiled rich kids." Even Steiger characterizes it as having "low admissions standards." University of Miami executive director of media relations Dan Kalmanson explained, "In the past, some students were attracted to the university because of its location in beautiful South Florida, its weather and its proximity to the ocean." Bloomgarden, however, had flashier goals than copping a great tan. He dealt coke to his classmates at a very high level -- 10 kilos per transaction, and he interacted directly with the Colombians. Dad's exorbitant allowance bought Howard numerous "friends," such as Anthony Buttitta and fellow drug dealer Dan DiLiberto.

But it was his roommate, Peter Kovach, who idolized him the most. Kovach, a mellow, middle-class New Jerseyite who attended Florida International University, shared the condo Dr. Bloomgarden had purchased for his son to help him concentrate on his studies without distractions. During his five years as an undergraduate, Bloomgarden's extracurricular activities included toking up around-the-clock, melting "roofies" -- a popular date-rape drug in Miami -- in arbitrarily selected ice cubes and then waiting to see which of his clueless friends would pass out over his vodka tonic, and the occasional Roofie-assisted rape. He also constantly treated Kovach to evenings of strip club-hopping, where Howard would relieve himself of as much as 15 grand in a few hours. One ATF agent says that Kovach was, essentially, "extremely impressionable. At community college, Kovach had been best friends with a jock, and so he suddenly developed an interest in athletics. In fact, Pete's nickname was 'the Sponge.'" To the eternal regret of the Kovaches, his next role model became Howard Bloomgarden.

A \$150,000 graduation gift

If Kovach made Bloomgarden his underworld mentor, Bloomgarden looked to Gary Friedman for the same kind of guidance. The two men met just after Bloomgarden's graduation, when Gary's brother Kenny heard that Bloomgarden was in the market for an unscrupulous "lawyer/investment advisor." At the first meeting, Bloomgarden apparently boasted that his father had given him "a graduation gift of \$150,000 in cash," and Gary's eyes lit up like a slot machine jackpot. Steiger, the family lawyer, claimed that the money had been intended for Bloomgarden to invest in a business.

Soon the college kingpin and the money-laundering mouthpiece were palling around almost every night, going to bars and, of course, strip clubs. Occasionally, Gary's wife, Nina, partied with them. When he heard about Bloomgarden's obsession with owning a string of silicone showplaces, Gary suggested they instead invest in a new, low-rent dance club, "Glamourama" on New York's 57th Street, whose owners included an ex-cop who had been kicked off the force for drug dealing. Rather than hand over cash, Gary suggested that Bloomgarden install a pricey, state-of-the-art sound system. But the club was an almost immediate failure, and the young entrepreneurs needed a new money-making scheme.

The Friedman brothers and Bloomgarden had procured some stolen art from the robbery of a Connecticut family (including a Picasso, a Miró, a Klee and rare Egyptian statuary) that they used as collateral for a cash loan from Glamourama's owners. It was here that Bloomgarden's greed and impulsiveness set the course of his destiny in motion. He tried to use the statue to pay off a \$75,000 pot debt to a wiseguy named "The Doctor." But real Mafiosi know that hot art ain't cold, hard cash. "The Doctor" and his partner, "The Butcher" were enraged, and developed a persistent loathing for Bloomgarden.

Then, one night, "the music died" at Glamourama when its sound system mysteriously disappeared. Though there was no evidence that suggested the owners were guilty of the heist, Gary and Kenny Friedman kidnapped their business partners at gunpoint and brought them to their recently deceased mother's apartment in a housing development, Lefrak City. They waved guns around, threatening to kill them unless they paid them cash for the missing music machines. The ex-cop, who had secreted a gun in his pants leg and was, after all, a professional, shot his way out of the situation. No injuries occurred and no police reports were filed. A year later, while testifying at the double-murder trial, one of the owners summed up the Friedman brothers succinctly: "Gary was cold as an ice cube. Kenny was high as a kite."

Eventually, Bloomgarden, nostalgic for the South Beach scene, moved back to his Miami condo. He also frequently stayed at the family compound in Jupiter. Since Bloomgarden had long ago pissed away his "graduation gift," his dad dipped into his Keogh funds to buy him a nightclub in South Beach. Of all the decadent nightclubs that proliferate in Miami -- where one can have sex in the middle of masses of foam sprayed all over dance floors -- this place was the most notorious. Formerly owned by Luther Campbell of 2 Live Crew, it had finally been closed down for "persistent lewd acts." Dr. Bloomgarden's only condition? That Howard purchase it under the name "Howard Steele." Howard alternately called it "Coco Bongo" and "Club One." Fellow University of Miami alumnus Anthony Buttitta also invested in

the club. Bloomgarden spent a fortune modeling and remodeling it. When it opened, witnesses report seeing Bloomgarden ensconced in his own private booth, simultaneously drinking Dom Perignon, smoking weed and doing blow while getting blown. He also developed a propensity for receiving oral sex from a trio of women simultaneously, while contemptuously pouring Cristal over their heads. Florida police report that there was an inordinate number of violent incidents at Club One -- fights, attempted kidnappings, rapes, macings and stabbings, even assaults on police officers -- so they "kept an eye" on it.

A Miami Beach detective explained that "it is a constant challenge to control the enforcement of nightclubs" in the heavily trafficked tourist area, and that violent and illegal incidents prevail at almost every club, but that Club One was the worst. Helping to exacerbate an unfortunate situation, the Friedman brothers were frequent visitors to the Sunshine State. Predictably, with Bloomgarden's frantic need to squander money coupled with Gary Friedman's bizarre advice not to keep any financial records, the club quickly became a liability. Dr. Bloomgarden helped out with frequent infusions of cash. Norman Steiger said simply, "The Bloomgardens knew that Howard had fallen in with a bad crowd."

A displeasing kidnapping

Howard's wealthy college friends contributed to his criminal reputation by carrying out numerous attempted kidnappings and extortions. Buttitta suggested that they acquire extra cash by ripping off another drug dealer, the son of a former Metro-Dade police officer. The dealer, pleading poverty, helpfully suggested that they instead rob the Strohacks, a Miami family known to possess a valuable baseball-card collection. Upon Bloomgarden's orders, two of his minions drove Kenny Friedman to the Strohack household, where Friedman terrorized their maid, their teenage son and Mrs. Strohack at gunpoint for hours before he escaped with some jewelry, several cards and a jar of coins in Mrs. Strohack's Lexus, which he then abandoned at a Tony Roma's so he could score some heroin.

Bloomgarden was extremely displeased. To chill out, he invited his millionaire junkie pal Tex to stay at the Jupiter condo for a month of cocktails and golf. Tex brought along his friend George Aguilar, a street kid emblazoned with tattoos and a veteran of East Los Angeles gangs. Howard sent Tex out to buy \$50 worth of pot. Smoking a joint, Aguilar sneered at the quality and cost, claiming that he could do much better. When he returned to California, he sent Bloomgarden a sample, and it was, as promised, sublime. A business partnership was born. Aguilar rewarded Tex for hooking him up by treating him to a penis extension operation.

An ATF agent mused, "It's ironic to think of George Aguilar, covered with tattoos, playing golf with Howard and Tex in that exclusive complex." Gradually, Bloomgarden rounded up his rich former college pals to start the marijuana business with him. Balding Dan DiLiberto wanted to earn enough money for a hair-transplant operation. The others, approximately 15 of them, didn't need the money, so one can only speculate that their motive was thrills. As a Miami Beach detective noted, "When people have everything in life, it's the rush that gets them off. If they actually had to work at a real job to pay the rent, they wouldn't think of gangsters as being movie stars."

Meanwhile, Bloomgarden's former roomie Peter Kovach was living a straight life, working in real estate in Fort Lauderdale. But when Bloomgarden, incapable of keeping track of details and distracted by his usual obsessions, asked his trusted friend to move out to Southern California to manage his affairs with Aguilar, the ever-anxious-to-please Kovach promptly complied, unknowingly sealing his doom.

Although the marijuana business was successful beyond anyone's expectations, the inevitable drug-dealing disaster struck. A motor home in Illinois carrying three women, their children and 800 pounds of pot was stopped for speeding. The contents of the vehicle were confiscated. Bloomgarden owed Aguilar approximately \$400,000 for the whisked-away weed. In typical fashion, he totally ignored Aguilar's persistent phone calls and made no effort to aid the incarcerated women.

Ironically, Bloomgarden's main customers in Miami were "the Doctor" and "the Butcher," the two men who, after the stolen art incident, had already decided Bloomgarden couldn't be trusted. But because they made their purchases exclusively from Anthony Buttitta, they assumed that he, and not their nemesis Bloomgarden, ran the organization. Someone, and there are discrepancies over who that someone is, decided that, with Aguilar growing angrier, it was an auspicious time to tell the mobsters the truth. The Doctor and the Butcher flew out to San Diego and met with Aguilar and Kovach. They paid Aguilar almost all of the \$400,000 Bloomgarden owed him while Kovach, eager to get out of the business, was eventually eased out of the operation.

Relieved to be "living a straight life again," Kovach rented a studio in unpretentious Redondo Beach, bought a Camry and invested all his savings in a cellular phone store, the Galleria Telecom. Back in Miami, Buttitta claims that the Doctor and the Butcher "forced" him to call Bloomgarden and meet him at a gas station, where the deadly duo had planned to kidnap him. Coincidentally, police arrived at the scene shortly after Bloomgarden was threatened, foiling their plans. Bloomgarden did not press charges, realizing that the Doctor and the Butcher had bought out his business.

As time went by, Bloomgarden was running up gambling debts and running out of scams. The once-obstreperous club was as desolate as a haunted house. When Gary Friedman called him and asked him who they might rob, Bloomgarden, known to keep a "revenge book," responded gleefully by naming Kovach, who he believed had double-crossed him and stolen his drug connections. "I hear he's living in Beverly Hills, driving a Mercedes and wearing a Rolex," Bloomgarden said. A used car dealer friend of Gary Friedman's named Bruce Wolosky tracked down Kovach through a TRW report. Bloomgarden dispatched the Friedman brothers and a rag-tag crew of winos and potheads to Torrance in September 1994. Gary checked into a hotel, while the others stayed in flea-bag motels. Shortly afterwards, Gary flew back to Queens to attend to some "legal business," and he did not return to California. Though it should have been obvious even to people under the influence of numerous substances that Kovach was hardly living the lifestyle of a Michael Ovitz, Ruben Hernandez insisted on the witness stand, "We knew Pete was rollin', got bodyguards, Benzes, Lexuses and shit."

After many missed hits (including one that landed them in jail for suspicious behavior), the birth of a child and a work-release appearance, the quartet reassembled, crashed at another vermin-infested dive, bought a new gun and another used car and resumed a similar routine, including the nightly stake-outs and orgies. But Kovach presented a problem. He was always surrounded by friends, either hosting a pizza party after work or watching a football game. Kenny, under pressure from Gary and Bloomgarden to "get it over with," finally decided to perform the kidnapping when Kovach was in the company of just one other person: Ted Gould.

Law enforcement might never have caught the killers -- except for the fact that on Jan. 18, 1995, Gary Friedman and an associate named Carlos Rodriguez attempted to kidnap Gary's client and old acquaintance Bruce Wolosky at gunpoint on the very Queens street where the ATF was coincidentally videotaping an undercover drug bust. Eventually, Wolosky told them, "Check out the name Peter Kovach. I think he might be dead." Thus, the case was eventually solved.

The Friedman brothers and their colleague Rodriguez were tried in July 1996, and found guilty on most of the charges of a 23-count indictment. The trial was held in New York's Eastern District Federal Courthouse, flawlessly prosecuted by Leslie Caldwell and Lisa Klem. Bloomgarden pleaded guilty to six of the 19 counts in his indictment -- from theft of stolen art to conspiracy to extortion to commit murder, in return for avoiding a trial. All four felons were sentenced on July 2, 1998. The Friedman brothers and Rodriguez got life, while Bloomgarden received 33 years, all without possibility of parole.

How does one explain a Howard Bloomgarden? "He liked the power of making a phone call and getting someone beaten up," says one Miami Beach detective, characterizing Bloomgarden as the classic cowardly bully. "Everything was centered around the fact that he was very insecure. He thought the sun shined and set on his ass. But when he got locked up, his true self came out and he became a whimpering little baby."

Such tales of rich kids who choose a life of crime inevitably give way to theories of pure evil, or parables like "the bad seed," but his parents' seemingly unequivocal support for his escapades casts more confusion on their motives than his. What drives two well-educated parents to support their child both emotionally and financially even as he sinks into depravity? Family lawyer Norman Steiger argues that the senior Bloomgardens are morally upright, solid citizens. But it is odd, to say the least, that even as his son was being sentenced, Dr. Charles Bloomgarden still retained a silent-partner ownership of Club One/Coco Bongo, now renamed Cristal and co-managed by the Bloomgardens' middle daughter, Susan.

But of all the surreal twists and turns of this case, none was stranger than Joan Bloomgarden's [Web site](http://www.whitmore.org/bloomgarden.html) <http://www.whitmore.org/bloomgarden.html>. It records her latest venture in art therapy: "The Volunteer Prison Education Program" in Rikers Island Prison in 1997. She writes that "social, cultural, and moral ills can and must be solved by use of creative problem solving, innovative thinking, intuition and work," and lists enlightening courses offered to prisoners. Among them: "Understanding Your Anger," "Conflict Resolution" and "Basic Understanding of Money Management."

In the end, though, the Bloomgardens did seem to understand "money management." They had to sell the Jupiter condo, and Dr. Bloomgarden has resorted to advertising his practice on the Internet, which, according to an ophthalmology expert, is "highly irregular -- most good surgeons have year-long waiting lists." But while the Friedman brothers and Rodriguez will meet their maker in their prison cells, it was Gotti lawyer Gerald Shargel's legal expertise (with a rumored \$350,000 price tag) that may one day enable Howard Bloomgarden to again ogle bared breasts in strip clubs. If they offer senior citizen discounts.

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