

**C**ALL IT AN URBAN safari for a rare prey, one I wanted bad. So bad I could cry. The most coveted accessory in the history of womankind: The Hermès Birkin bag. Designed for sultry songstress Jane Birkin, of "Je T'Aime... Moi Non Plus" fame. I saw her once in a Paris cafe, Gauloise smoke pluming from her fingers, her skinny, perfect French legs crisscrossed, tugging with insouciance at her long bangs, and, most importantly, holding a slightly worn Birkin bag in the crook of her arm.

On this side of the Atlantic, Aerin Lauder has one. So does Samantha Boardman. Nina Griscorn has three. Vera Wang has six. I could not wait any longer. Why, pray tell, spend a king's ransom on a handbag? Because a part of all of us never evolves beyond seventh grade. The cool girls have one. I want one too.

So with studied nonchalance I sauntered into the New York Hermès store last year to order my first Birkin. Once inside I kept my sunglasses on, trying pathetically to emulate Anna Wintour. I looked through the book of hides, fondling creamy leathers and ostrich skins, weighing the pros of nubby black leather versus chic, glossy black calf. I considered the prices, which range from \$4,500 for the smallest of four sizes in natural leather to \$80,000 for crocodile with a diamond clasp.

The nice ladies put my name on a list and told me not to call them, they'd call me. I'd heard the horror stories of the four-year waiting list for a new Birkin, so I was prepared to wait until 2004 before feeling the thrill of being truly chic. The wait seemed unavoidable. A fancy friend of mine had contacted a Paris Hermès honcho directly to speed things along: He told her to get in line behind Gwyneth and Madonna.

Imagine my astonishment when I heard the French accent on the other end of the phone a mere four months later. Hermès called me—three years and eight months early! The suspiciously helpful sales clerk said she now had a medium, 40 cm Birkin in nubby black. "Would tcho layk to come een for eet?" Gwyneth may have to wait years, but moi—four months!

For a delicious, self-deluded year, I pranced down Park Avenue feeling like Mme Birkin herself. I hadn't felt this good since the preteen years I spent pretending to be Julie in *The Mod Squad*.

Then one day the unthinkable happened. My very, very fancy



## Oops! I Bought the Wrong Birkin Bag!

She ponied up \$6,000 for the world's most elusive accessory, only to be made fashion's fool.

friend Pamela caressed the distinctive Hermès gold lock dangling from the handle of my nubby black Birkin. She was perplexed: "Oh, how funny! A soft one. Kind of reverse, nerdo chic. Must be your second or third. What color is your hard one?"

The horror. The horror. Pamela understood immediately what had happened. "You mean you didn't know? You actually bought a soft one, as your first, on purpose?" "I wai-wai-waited four months for this one," I pleaded. "Four months?!" Pamela scoffed. "You can get a soft one in a New York minute. What took so long? They're practically giving those away. You must have been a real bottom feeder!"

Fuck. Anyone can get a soft Birkin. I might as well have bought Birkin-stocks. Only a fashion incompetent would buy the soft one. The "right" Birkin has sides that defy gravity like pert breasts pointing to the heavens. I was so pissed. Had people like Pamela and the other Birkin cognoscenti been laughing at me at dinner parties all over town for the last year?

Then I decided to grow up and confront the issue. How could I have been so duped? I talked to Vera Wang and Nina Griscorn about my Birkin. Vera said she had never even heard of a soft one. This from a woman with 30 Hermès bags. Nina pointed out that over and above the leather, the hardware choice "is crucial." Oh God, there's more. "Silver is very chic now," Vera explained to me. Mine's gold. It figures.

These fashion faux pas happen to me all the time. I try so hard, but I

never crack the fashion codes as they come over the wire. How does everyone know but me? Who gets the seasonal fashion memo, and why am I not on the list? The one that tells you what's in and what's out. No to pleated pants, yes to flat fronts. Beaded jewelry is out, the baguette is passé, legs sans stockings are in. No more wearing my Joseph Tricot sweater with the fur collar that makes me feel like Jackie O. Soooo last year. Why can't *Vogue* lay it all out more clearly for the fashion tone-deaf? I WANT THAT MEMO.

And so I look down at my Birkin, which I still carry to amortize the cost. The sides flop over like a dead, wet rat. How could I be so dense? Everyone knew but me; everyone's still laughing behind my back. Park Avenue, which is just a seventh-grade cafeteria with money, mocks me as I walk along in my nude stockings, my fur sweater, my pleated pants, my flaccid Birkin. I give up. ■