

Holy Mother

by Patricia Feeney

I was seven when I learned I had an older sister, a girl who didn't belong to my mother.

The secret sister orbited on the margins of my 1950s world. She appeared at family gatherings, trailing behind my paternal grandparents. She hung quietly on the perimeter of our crowded family, her spectral presence enveloping my childhood. I didn't concern myself with who Karen was. I only took note of her interest in my grandmother, whose attention I hoarded.

"Ain't that something?" my grandmother would say with raised eyebrows if a neighbor complained the mail was late or the man down the street was caught picking through trash cans in the alley. She thought most people were petty, stupid, or both. I was delighted with her irreverent comments and always agreed with her.

When I visited her, we feasted on potato chips and daytime soap operas that played in black and white on her Motorola TV. I couldn't follow the plot lines of *Guiding Light* and *The Secret Storm*, but I snuggled against my grandmother, who extended an arm across my lap and let me flick its flabby triceps, the cool, white flesh slapping back and forth. I was mesmerized.

Karen was two years older than Billy, my oldest brother, four years older than Tommy, my second brother, and five years older than I. She was so much older than my other siblings, they have no memory of her visits. Occasionally, Karen's arrival to our home led to a sleepover; she slept with me in a narrow top bunk in the room I shared with my two older brothers. Our bungalow in Glasgow Village, MO, had not an inch to spare for Karen's comfort. The three tiny bedrooms brimmed with seven bodies, and we all competed to use the single bathroom.

One night when I was about five, Karen hopped down from the upper bunk and told me to do the same. She shook the blanket, then swung it to the top bunk like a lasso, slapping the sheet. Saltine cracker crumbs and bits of Halloween candy rained to the floor.

After we climbed back onto the bed, Karen smoothed the sheet with a flourish. I dragged my hand across the sheet half-heartedly.

“Feels good, huh?” Karen said.

It *did* feel better, but I was sure my mother wouldn’t want me to admit that to Karen.

“It’s okay,” I said with no conviction.

Karen spoke easily with me, as if she knew me. She nestled herself near me in a companionable way as we closed our eyes. In those moments, Karen’s vaporous presence became stark and solid: flesh and blood against mine.

At the time, I didn’t know we were related. I learned Karen was my half-sister on another sleepover two years later—at my grandparents. My father took just the two of us, leaving my brothers at home. Karen blew into the spare room we were to share and crammed the space with a suitcase, a portable record player, and several teen magazines featuring movie stars and fancy clothes. She flopped onto the bed in one motion, propped both pillows behind her back, and began to flip through one of her magazines. I stood in the hallway and watched.

Though Karen was thin, I was scrawny. I touched my white-blond hair, feeling its choppy shape; I located the spot where my mother had cut gum from a tangled mess. Karen’s hair was curled and held to one side with a pink ribbon. Her long legs extended from short-shorts like those on the cover of one of her magazines. I looked down at the legs of my shorts, which bagged together like a skirt. Karen—who was almost a teenager—was exotic and out of my reach.

“Patty, wanna look at my *Seventeen*?” she asked, extending a magazine to me.

“No thanks.” I wasn’t sure what a *Seventeen* was or if a seven-year-old should read it.

That evening I sat at the kitchen table coloring a connect-the-dots picture of Cinderella.

“Go outside and call your grandpa and your sister. Tell ‘em supper’s ready,” my grandmother said.

My legs stuck to the faux leather of the kitchen chair, the summer humidity mixing with the stove’s heat. I didn’t have a *sister*. I only had brothers.

My grandmother leaned over a steaming pot of stew, holding a spoon to her pursed lips. When she realized I hadn’t moved, she turned to me. “I told you to get Grandpa and Karen,” she said with an exasperated sigh.

I ran to the screen door of the kitchen and spotted Karen chasing our grandfather, squirting water at him from a hose. He howled with delight each time she hit him. Karen whooped in tandem with our grandfather, her joy a vivid contrast to my serious disposition.

Standing in my grandparents’ kitchen, I felt a tingling along both sides of my nose, the signal I was about to cry. I couldn’t move, but I knew my grandmother would be angry if I stood paralyzed. I didn’t ask her what she meant about my *sister*.

I shut off the tingling sinuses, flung open the door, and gleefully called out words I’d heard my mother say: “Come and get it!”

There was no one I could ask about Karen. Though I suspected my father had the answer—after all, he delivered Karen to my grandparents—he rarely spoke to his children except to give orders that we disappear: *Beat it* or *Shove off*. He had no patience for family life, rarely having dinner with us, preferring to unwind at the Topper, the bar where he was well known, and where I later learned, he likely knew most of the women. He’d arrive home late, loaded, and famished. As the kids brushed their teeth for bed, my mother fried a T-bone steak for him, adding garnishes from the dinner we’d had.

I saw my father sober on occasional weekend days when he had little to do with his children but was decidedly more pleasant. He read Shakespeare and his favorite poet, William Blake, as he relaxed in the living room chair.

“Teeny, listen to this,” he called to my mother, who came from the kitchen and stood in the doorway. He read Blake’s “The Tyger” as if he were performing onstage, his deep voice flowing like warm water over the lines. He paused just before the last stanza, lingering over an image:

Did he smile his work to see?

Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

“Really something,” he said, shaking his head in appreciation when he finished.

My mother nodded with a smile. “Sounds right. He made them both.”

“And he made all of *us*—the fierce and the tame,” he said.

Their humor, like their love of literature, sailed far above my head, but I realize now there was no doubt my mother grasped my father’s dry wit, and my father was equally taken with my mother’s less subtle style. In light moments, laughter laced their conversations in the living room. From a hidden corner in the dining room, I saw my father’s half-smile as he eyed my mother when she wasn’t looking.

Since my father didn’t talk to his children, I blamed my mother for not telling me about Karen, but I was afraid to ask her, just as I was afraid to ask my grandmother. Unspoken questions lodged in my throat and gave me stomachaches.

Throughout my childhood, I affixed myself to my mother like a tick. As she shoveled through an avalanche of household chores, she related her history from childhood to motherhood. Her love story with my father was the anchor of her oral history. It surpassed even the fairytales of handsome princes and their princesses. I believed every word she told me. My mother was a hypnotist.

For all her stories, she failed to mention Karen, an inconsequential child who had no place in the life of a woman who excelled at having children.

I got answers to my questions by listening to my parents argue when they thought we were sleeping: my father had been married before he married my mother. Karen was his child from his first marriage.

“We have four going to camp this year,” my father said one night. I was eight, ready for my second year of summer camp. “And Karen wants to go, too.” My father dropped this last statement with a matter-of-fact tone.

“Are you kidding?” my mother hissed the words.

“Why shouldn’t Karen go? The other kids go every year.” My father’s baritone voice amplified the words.

“The *other* kids? You mean *our* kids? *Our* kids already do without plenty so you can make *her* support payments.”

I didn’t know what support payments were, but it was clear Karen was taking something from us. My father said nothing.

“If this is so important, Tom, why doesn’t Lorraine pay for camp?” my mother said.

“Her mother doesn’t give a Goddamn about Karen. You know that.” The anger drained from my father’s voice.

I’d never heard the name *Lorraine*, Karen’s mother. It sounded like she didn’t care about her daughter any more than my mother did. And it sounded like my father didn’t know what to do about this.

“Tell your mother to pay for her camp,” my mother said. “She always has enough for her card games.” My grandmother’s card-sharking pursuits were the subject of much discussion between my parents. My grandmother played—and usually lost—high-stakes poker with a group of women she referred to as *lucky widows*. Within a few years, I learned my father long held the same penchant for gambling. My mother’s hard scabbled savings often enriched my father’s bookie at the Topper. I imagine my mother’s shot at my grandmother was as much about my father as it was about his mother.

“My mother can’t even pay their own bills,” my father said. “She asked to borrow money again today.” He sighed as he elaborated on how my grandmother hid her gambling from my grandfather, who apparently turned over his paycheck to her each Friday.

“So, this is where it’s all coming from,” my mother said. “Your mother.” I could sense a triumphant *Aha!* beneath the disgust in my mother’s voice. I was rooting for her.

My parents took sides: my father for my grandmother and Karen, my mother against them. As much as I loved my grandmother, I loved my mother more.

“Forget the whole Goddamned thing,” my father said, his voice rising again. “Just remember the kids’ camp the next time you write a check to Holy-Mother-the-Church!” I heard my father’s heavy footsteps move from the living room to the kitchen. The door to the back yard slammed.

Much like Karen, Holy-Mother-the-Church exerted an invisible undertow on our family. My father blamed the Holy Mother for what he considered *unbelievable* rules about marriage and *beautiful* rules about kids. I understood none of this. But I knew my father used the words *unbelievable* and *beautiful* when he considered something wrong, disgusting, or just plain stupid. When he railed against the Holy Mother, the mother I thought was perfect shot back her usual retort: *We’re Catholic*.

I conflated my mother’s declaration of their faith with every word spoken to me in Catholic school: *We’re Catholic*. I clung to the rules of the Church, believing everything the nuns told us about burning in Hell. I monitored my thoughts, words, and deeds, always coming up short on the balance sheet: not enough good, too many sins.

By age ten I’d established the facts of my parents’ spiritual dilemma. I correctly determined that Catholics could not remarry if they divorced. They were considered forever married to their first spouse despite a civil dissolution of the marriage. Since my father was considered still married to Lorraine, he couldn’t marry my mother in the Church—or anywhere else and stay in the good graces of Catholicism. My parents’ courthouse marriage resulted in excommunication from the Church and a ticket to Hell for them both. Because of this sentence, my parents were banned from receiving Communion. To do so would rain more retribution in the afterlife, though I’m not sure what was considered worse than Hell.

In any Catholic parish, the divorced were akin to second-class citizens; the divorced-and-remarried were akin to untouchables—but only if the parishioners knew. This was a secret I kept as closely as my parents did.

I grew obsessed with my parents' afterlife. I hoped my father would die, leaving my mother free to go to Heaven. Then, I shamed myself for this sinful thought and hoped my mother would divorce my father and disengage herself from the family blight. I didn't have much concern for my father's outcome. I saw him merely as the obstacle to my mother's salvation.

I began to worry every time my grandparents pulled up in the front of our house, fearing Karen—proof of my parents' sin—would hop from the back seat. I feared neighbor kids—other Catholics—would ask who she was.

While I wrestled with the demons Karen's identity unleashed in my life, she must have wrestled with her own. Seemingly no more popular with her mother than she was with mine, Karen often spent months of her life with our grandmother while Lorraine began her second and third childless marriages.

When I was eleven, my father's success led to a contract on a home three times the size of our little bungalow. Located in Florissant, MO, the new house was twenty minutes from our parish, which seemed like a moon-shot from the secrets of my childhood. We had a chance to hide Karen for good. She was sixteen and had dispensed with regular visits.

While the house was under construction during the summer and fall of 1963, I finally had sisters I could acknowledge, the sixth and seventh children, and my mother was pregnant with her eighth child. Despite the numbers in our small home, it was quieter than I'd ever remembered it.

Looking back, my parents probably were financially stable for the first time in their marriage. This security and Karen's infrequent appearances likely lifted a dual burden from their lives. I suspect it's also when they decided to take Communion at their new parish. I can imagine them deciding they'd done their best—years earlier they'd tried for an annulment of my father's first marriage but didn't have the influence or the money to land that Catholic dispensation. I think they decided it was time to try for the marriage my mother always pictured, and a new parish gave them the shot they needed. My father stopped sniping about the Holy Mother and kept silent about his distant daughter.

On Sundays after Mass, our family jammed the Mercury station wagon and drove to the construction site. As the bricks rose to the second story, I day-dreamed about a life that matched the home and people in *Leave it to Beaver*.

The good times carried on as my mother's belly grew. She took us to the neighborhood pool, sang show tunes in our kitchen, and executed goofy dance moves down the hallway. The house took on an orderly appearance as my mother dispensed of old toys, clothing, and household items in preparation for the move.

My father came home for dinner almost every evening, often carrying a coffee cake for dessert. I was scared at first because he'd never wanted to be home when we were awake. But after a few weeks, I viewed my father's appearance as normal, Dad coming home after work like other fathers in the neighborhood. The family my mother imagined took shape before my eyes.

The respite ended at an uncle's home on Thanksgiving Day 1963. The holiday fell a mere six days after the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The country—and even more so, the Catholic world—was in deep mourning. My parents were tearful in the week leading to Thanksgiving but must have decided to put the grief aside for the holiday. It was a festive event.

As most of the family finished dinner, my grandmother moved to a chair close to another elderly relative, Myrtle. The men and older boys had settled in the living room to watch a football game, and the younger children ran to the basement to play. As always, I stuck by my mother, who was radiantly pregnant and decidedly not moving from the table as she enjoyed a second helping of dressing and turkey. Amidst the aroma of sage, pumpkin pie, and freshly brewed coffee, my grandmother paid tribute to my father's success in business.

"He's doing great. I guess you heard about his new house?" she said, turning to Myrtle.

"Oh, yes. That's wonderful," the other woman answered.

"This'll work out good." My grandmother lowered her voice as she glanced to the far end of the table where Karen sat idly picking at her dinner. "Finally, Karen'll have a place to live," she continued. "You know she's been staying with me?"

"No, I didn't know that," Myrtle replied, concern creasing her forehead.

My mother stared at the two older women, her mouth slightly open, her faded lipstick the only color left in her face. She stood and walked from the dining room and returned a moment later, her arms loaded with her children's coats and snowsuits.

"Come on, kids. It's time to go," she said in a monotone.

I stared at her, unmoving.

For a beat, she stared back. "I said it's time to go, Patty. Get Mo and Kath ready." She dropped their snow suits on the floor. "Guys, take your coats and head to the car," she called to my brothers. We surged into action.

"Teeny, what are you doing?" my father called back from the living room.

"You should know," she answered, pulling on her coat.

"Teen, aren't you saying goodbye? What the hell is going on?" My father stood, his voice stuck between fear and anger.

My mother walked out to the wintry wind on the porch. I hurtled down the steps, pulling my little sisters to the sidewalk. My father followed my mother to the porch. He was in his shirtsleeves and wrapped his arms across his chest.

"Teeny, what's the matter?" I listened carefully because I wanted to know what happened, too.

My mother turned to face him. "I just heard your *mother*"—she spat this word—"tell Myrtle your *daughter* is moving into our new house."

My father's mouth moved, but I couldn't decipher the words. The wind picked up, blowing horizontal waves of leaves.

When I saw my mother start down the steps of the porch, I pushed my sisters into the car as my brothers jockeyed for the coveted rear-facing seats. She slid into the driver's seat, started the engine, and pulled from the curb. My father stood on the porch, staring as we left.

Decades later I wondered if my father knew about my grandmother's plans for Karen to live with us. He may not have known, or perhaps he knew her wishes but ignored her. Or maybe he thought he'd pitch the idea to my mother once they moved. I never learned the answer.

We made the drive home in silence. Even my brothers seemed to recognize something serious was afoot.

After my mother thought her children were asleep, she pulled my father's clothes from his dresser and their shared closet and threw them onto the front lawn. Suits, shoes, ties, underwear, and a load of the white shirts she'd carefully starched and ironed scattered on the yard. It was dark, but the living room light dimly illuminated the scene I watched from my bedroom window.

The next morning, I looked out my window. Everything was gone. I heard my mother in the kitchen, so I crept into my parents' bedroom. My father's empty drawers echoed as I opened and closed them.

Later that day, my mother huddled in the basement, the phone cord marking her path from the wall to the space beneath the staircase. She spoke in hushed tones that even I couldn't decipher.

By nightfall, I couldn't tolerate my mother's silence. I asked her where my father was.

"He's gone." My mother's voice was empty of emotion.

"Is he coming back?" I hoped she would say "no" but didn't want my mother to know this.

"I don't know."

"Mom, what's going to happen?"

She sat on her bed, her hair uncombed, her bulging belly pushing against the cotton of her nightgown.

"Oh, Patty, I just don't know. He was going to move Karen into our new house!" With that, she made a choking sound as if she were trying not to cry.

The name hung in the air. *Karen* signaled something was unraveling in our family. Never had my mother acknowledged this child, and now she referenced her as the triggering force behind last night's cataclysm.

"Are you getting a divorce?" I asked. Just as she'd never spoken *Karen*, I'd never said *divorce*. It was as if the word itself were dangerous.

My mother showed no surprise at my question. She looked at me steadily, one woman to another and said, "Patty, I might. I called a lawyer today. I just don't know."

That night, I listened to my mother cry as I lay in bed on the other side of the adjoining wall.

Over the next few days, my spirits lifted. I fantasized about the divorce. I cheered at the prospect of life without my parents' emotional battles and without fear of my father's unpredictable moods. I adored my mother and looked forward to living as the child of this single parent, who would be free of the threat of Hell. I could tell my mother was miserable, her eyes swollen, her usual good nature tamped down to dull smiles that felt automated. But I thought she'd be better once my father was gone. And a divorce meant no more Karen, no more shame, and no more fear of other kids finding out about her.

I entertained these fantasies for days as I watched my mother resume a modicum of normalcy: driving to the grocery store, washing mountains of laundry, and packing our lunches for school.

Each day that passed without my father strengthened my conviction we'd be delivered from our misery.

Then, a week after Thanksgiving, my father returned. He strolled through the back door, his heavy footsteps signaling his entry before I saw him. He turned the corner into the living room and surveyed the early-evening scene of kids in front of the television.

"Beat it," he said to me and my brothers. We crept away, careful not to make a sound.

My mother never explained the new family order, and I didn't ask.

Several weeks later, we moved to the new house without joy and without Karen. My mother arranged for my parents' new bedroom set to be delivered the day the moving van arrived. A set of twin beds, two nightstands, and a dresser and chest in dark walnut were placed in their bedroom. My parents never slept in twin beds. Though I had just turned twelve, I sensed the new furniture reflected my parents' chilly détente.

Over the next few months, my father arrived home drunk hours after we'd had dinner. My mother didn't fry a T-bone steak. They rarely argued, and my father seldom mustered the energy to tell his children to get out of his line of vision. I think he stopped seeing us.

In March 1964, the eighth child, the fifth son, Danny, was born into our lifeless family. He was an easy baby, the adored little brother, the singular object of my mother's affection. In the days after his arrival, I thought Danny could heal us, but I was merely a child imagining an infant could perform a miracle.

For the next few years, my family spun further out of control. The uproars Karen had ignited between my parents ended. But after Danny's birth, they resumed diatribes on other topics, my father drunkenly swaying and my mother screaming into his face. Some of these battles related to Billy and Tommy, fifteen and thirteen when we moved to the big house, where they started a new life as neighborhood vandals. They keyed and egged cars, spun deep tire tracks in freshly manicured yards, broke windows, and stayed out all night with teenaged girls drawn to bad boys. They drank and did drugs and dragged a younger brother into the addiction fold. Both Billy and Tommy were expelled from their respective high schools, Billy at sixteen for reasons I never learned, Tommy at fourteen because he sold stolen watches from his locker—watches Billy claimed he won playing poker.

Billy began to creep into my room late at night; he fondled me in my sleep, pulling his hands from beneath my pajamas when I awoke startled and frightened. My mother refused to believe me and refused to tell my father, and I spent the next two years standing guard over my little sisters until Billy left to marry the first of his three wives. As soon as he was out of the picture, I dated any boy with a car who would drive me as far from my home as possible. No one in the family noted my comings and goings.

I don't know why my parents' showdowns stopped, but when I was fifteen, they did. The ceasefire seemed abrupt, but perhaps battle fatigue had set in over time.

They seemed to have given up on my brothers, one now married. While their children ran wild and unprotected, my parents established new rules of engagement. My father accelerated his corporate climb, and my mother assumed the role of the big-shot's wife. They partied and traveled to business conventions at ritzy resorts. I don't remember who cared for my younger siblings when they were gone. I wasn't mentally present for much of this period of my life.

When my parents were in town, they entertained at the country club and arrived home tipsy and laughing. They regularly attended Sunday Mass at our new parish and

took Communion, often within hours of my delinquent brothers climbing into their bedroom window after a night out. When I was sixteen, I found birth control pills in my mother's drawer and realized the twin beds hadn't frozen their sex life. By then, I understood what my father meant by the *beautiful* rules about kids and realized my mother wasn't as Catholic as she'd claimed.

With money in their pocket and Karen out of mind, my parents were dating and falling in love again. We kids weren't sure if we were lucky or abandoned.

At a time when my parents seemed to make peace with the Holy Mother, I stopped attending Church.

By the time I started college, I rarely saw Karen. She wandered in and out of our lives, sometimes showing up for holidays with boyfriends who never made second appearances.

"He'll never marry her," I heard my father tell my mother after one of our holidays.

"Why not? He seems like good husband material," my mother said. She seemed able to talk about Karen now that the child support payments and weekend visits were far in the past.

"He'll be a great husband for somebody else. He only wants one thing from *her*," my father said.

My father's instincts were correct, as we later learned Karen's great catch was engaged to another woman while he was seeing her.

Though my grandparents continued to visit us at holidays, I don't recall seeing Karen after I finished college. I never asked about her and I never heard my parents discuss her again.

When I was twenty-five, I spotted Karen on a sidewalk in a St. Louis City neighborhood where I lived. She was strolling slowly, holding the hand of a young child who appeared to be about three years old. I crossed the street and walked toward her. She stopped, and in that split-second I could tell she didn't recognize me. Though she was only five years older than I, she appeared drawn and exhausted. She was thinner

than I remembered, and her hair hung in straight dull strands to her shoulders. Her face lacked emotion as she stared blankly at me.

“Karen, it’s me. Patty.”

The years seemed to drop as a broad smile covered her face. She greeted me generously as if we’d just seen each other at Christmas. She turned her eyes to the child and said to me, “This is my son, Sean.”

I could feel her pride pulsing in the air between us. Her son was beautiful, exuding a calm and sweetness I loved in small children. He reminded me of Danny at that age. Sean looked directly into my eyes and offered a shy *Hi* when Karen coaxed him to say hello.

I didn’t suggest we get together. We didn’t exchange phone numbers. I wasn’t sure how to interact with Karen. I was no longer a child, but I felt a child’s fear of my mother’s disapproval if I were to treat my sister as a sister. At twenty-five I had little maternal sense. I didn’t know that my mother’s behavior toward Karen fell outside the norm of maternal instinct. I didn’t know that her parenting of her own children also fell outside this norm.

“I never really liked kids,” my mom told me when I was twelve.

At the end of this confession, my mother must have sensed the need to say more. “But I love *my* kids,” she added with a wide smile.

My mother, whom I adored and whose love I’d craved as a child, was at heart a child herself.

I never saw Karen or Sean again. According to Tommy, who occasionally ran into her, Karen struggled with drugs and alcohol. She drifted from job to job, often landing her next gig through my father’s connections.

“Karen, you have to show up to work. You can’t be a no-show. You have to prove yourself.” There was a long pause as my father listened to Karen at the other end of the phone. He leaned against the kitchen wall, the curling cord wrapped around his torso. His voice had a tinge of urgency and he spoke quietly, kindly. I was forty, stopping by

my parents' home for a quick visit on my way back from work. I listened to my father through the screen door that separated the deck from the kitchen.

"This is a good job. You've got brains, kid. You can do this if you decide to."

I watched him hang up, disentangle himself from the phone cord, shake his head, and retrieve a Budweiser from the fridge. I didn't ask him about the call.

When Karen was in her late forties, she left behind a husband and her son when she died of an overdose of prescribed meds. No one seemed to know if she did this purposely or simply made a mistake. I learned of her death long after the fact when Tommy told me he and our father had traveled to the funeral. Much later, my father told me he'd met Sean at the wake, "a very nice young man" who lived "up north, maybe in Michigan."

Shortly after that conversation, I found Karen's birth certificate in a hodgepodge of family documents and discovered her middle name was Patricia, my first name. This clearly was my father's favorite name for a daughter.

The conversation with my father about Sean took place in my parents' retirement apartment when my mother was out of town. In the last fifteen years of his life, my father and I aired secrets we couldn't discuss in front of my mother. This last chapter of our relationship bore no resemblance to my childhood experience. I cannot explain it.

Several years before he died, my father told me his ex-wife called him to ask how to get in touch with Sean. My father didn't know.

"Why do you think she's looking for him?" I asked.

"She's getting old. She doesn't have anybody. Even Lorraine can feel *that*."

When I returned to my office that day, I Googled Sean Feeney and Shawn Feeney, but none of the results matched Sean's approximate age. I joined Reunion.com and ran a search for my nephew. I wrote emails to the ten young men who fell into his age category. No one responded. I wasn't trying to help Lorraine. I wanted to do the one thing I thought would help Karen were she alive: recognize her son as part of the family. I never found him.

I had two young kids of my own and was awash in maternal instincts. With the birth of my first child, I fell in love with every child. I imagined the pain Karen must have

felt growing up. Her mother was preoccupied with a series of marriages, her father held her at arm's length, and her stepmother treated her as though she were invisible, never addressing her by name. The fact Karen lived on and off with our grandmother led me to think her stepfathers treated her with the same disinterest or disdain of most of the adults in her life.

About a year later, during a visit with my father, we excavated another family secret.

"Listen, Hon, when I die, there's something I want you to do. I'll die first—I promised your mother I would." My father referred to a long-standing joke between my parents: a man's obituary always contained the line, *survived by his wife*.

"Charlie, who lived to be 119, is survived by his wife, Ethel," my father said, his blue eyes crinkling at the thought of the old joke. He cleared his throat and took on a serious, business-like demeanor as if he were about to give an assignment to a subordinate. He sat back in his lounge chair and his silver hair caught the sunlight that slanted through the blinds. "So, when I die, I want you to do something for Teen."

"What's that?" I thought he was setting me up for another laugh, his deadpanned humor a staple of our relationship.

"I want you to take her to a priest and get this stuff cleared up about my divorce. Since I'll be gone."

"Are you kidding me?" I was stunned, but not at the request. I was stunned at the shorthand, as if my father had been in my head all those years ago. For the first time, one of my parents spoke of my father's divorce and their Catholic sin. I'd observed my parents take Communion for years and thought they'd left that part of their lives behind them. But my father, who was the stauncher Catholic, had either not made this peace or believed my mother had not.

"No, Pat, I'm not kidding. This has bothered your mother her whole life. I don't want her thinking she can't go to Heaven."

"Ok, Dad. I'll see she gets to a priest. But you've really got to hold up your end and die first, or this isn't going to work."

“Got it covered, Hon.” My father stared straight at me for a long moment, his lips closed but smiling. Then his eyes lit up and he smiled broadly, showing even, capped teeth. We collapsed into uncontrolled laughter, tears filling my father’s eyes as we slapped our knees and called out the phrase *survived by his wife*, neither of us able to get the four words out at once.

When our laughter subsided, we sat in the silent apartment, the only sound the kick of the air conditioner as I reflected on the family upheavals throughout my childhood.

“Dad, I think you and Mom would have had an easier life, maybe a happier life, if you hadn’t had kids,” I said. I often thought this, but never confided it to anyone. My father looked at the ceiling at a place above the door frame, his lips tight.

“Hmm. That’s what you think, huh?” He didn’t look at me.

“Yes. I think there were too many of us. Just too much for the two of you.”

“Hmm,” He repeated, his eyes fixed.

There was a silence I would not pierce, and the grief in the room was palpable.

“Of course, it would have been fine for you to have *some* of us. Maybe three,” I said, referring to my place in the list of their progeny.

At that, my father turned to me with a sympathetic smile. He knew I regretted my words, which must have sounded like an indictment of their many years of parenthood.

“Yeah. So that’s what you think, huh? Three?”

“Yeah. Stop at perfection.”

We looked at each other for a long moment and moved on.

My father kept his word and left my mother behind when he died in 2005 at age eighty-three. She protested when I wrote his obituary and included Karen in the list of children who preceded him in death. I decided our sister didn’t deserve another insult even though she’d been long gone.

Friends of my mother took me aside at the reception following the funeral.

“Who is Karen?” Jane, one of her oldest friends, asked me in a near whisper as she stood in my kitchen. She cast a look over her shoulder to be sure no one was listening.

“Did you know my dad was married before he married my mom?” I asked.

“Yeah, I knew about that. I just didn’t know he had a kid. And she died?”

“Yes. Karen died about ten years ago. I’m really surprised you never heard about her.” I refused to lower my voice.

“No, I never knew. Your mom never said anything.” With that, Jane took a sudden interest in the coffee pot.

I kept my promise to my father to establish my mother’s path to Heaven. Over a cup of coffee in my kitchen, I suggested a visit to the parish priest to discuss her standing in the Church.

“Why would I do that?” she asked.

“Dad asked me to talk to you about this. He was worried for you—about his divorce.”

“Oh, my God, Patty. I don’t care about that,” she said, leaning across the table. She spoke with a quiet concern.

“When did you stop caring about it?”

“Years ago. I can’t believe Dad thought I cared.” She was smiling, clearly amused.

“Mom, he was really concerned for you.”

“There was no reason to worry. All that stuff was crazy,” she said.

We never discussed this again.

Three years later, a diagnosis of terminal cancer signaled my mother’s imminent end. Despite the cancer ravaging her body, she was active and brimmed with good humor.

One afternoon, I took my mother out for an afternoon snack. As we sat at the restaurant table, I risked distressing her by asking about Karen. I told myself her mild dementia would erase the conversation as soon as it ended.

“Mom, why did you react to Karen the way you did?”

Without a pause, she responded. “I don’t know. I think she reminded me of her mother.”

My mother sipped her lemonade and stared past me out the window. “But she wasn’t anything like her.” My mother seemed to be talking to herself, making no eye contact with me. “Lorraine was kind of trashy. Karen never was.”

“Then, what was the problem?”

“I think I didn’t want to be reminded Dad was married before me. Karen reminded me,” my mother said with a simplicity that left me breathless.

We split a cheesecake cookie and nibbled on it as we sat in a brief silence.

“Mom, I feel sad about Karen. I can’t imagine being that child. So little comfort from the adults in her world.” I felt a familiar tingling in my sinuses.

“Yes. It had to be hard,” my mother responded. “She was a sad kid.” My mother’s eyes narrowed as they did when she was alone with her thoughts. I believed she was contemplating how she’d magnified Karen’s grief. I wanted her to acknowledge she was one of the adults who withheld affection. I waited to hear regret in her voice.

“Didn’t she die?” she asked, her face regaining its composure as she asked the question.

This was the last time I spoke to my mother about Karen.

My parents both were laid to rest with a Catholic Mass and burial. In the last ten years of his life, my father attended daily Mass; by then, my mother thought little of the Holy Mother and hadn’t made it to the pews in at least as long.

My father confessed to a priest when he was in hospice care. I assume he addressed the sin of his two marriages as well as the many sins with his too-many-to-count girlfriends, and everything else he carried in his guilty heart.

But I was left with the grief of *my* sin, my shunning of Karen. Though I couldn’t be blamed for how I treated her when we were children, I regret that I never contacted Karen in our adult lives. It wouldn’t have taken much to extend a kindness, to let her know I was her family, to acknowledge we shared the name “Patricia.”

I missed this opportunity, but Karen taught me more than she could have known. She never seemed angry with us. She seemed to forgive us in advance for all we’d never be able to give her. She seemed to accept that my mother would not mother her

and that her own mother would not mother her. I never heard an unkind word from Karen—not about her father, not about her mother, and not about *my* mother.

Karen miraculously exuded a sense of family acceptance that was absent from her childhood. How she did that, I will never understand.

Like me, Karen was a child adrift among the people charged with her care. We grabbed at whatever shred of companionship, escape, or shelter we could find. We were alone—Karen as an only child and I as one of eight. I regret that I missed my chance to share family stories with the adult Karen—how we viewed our father, our brothers, and our grandparents. I missed the chance to tell her I knew my mother was wrong.

Today I know Karen reached out to me for solace when we were children. Though I was unable to be a sister to Karen, she showed me the kindness of an older sister. She curled up beside me in my childhood bunk bed. She offered me her magazines. She never teased me or made fun of my awkward appearance. And she never made me question the fact that I felt nothing in return.

It was a year after my mother died when I found out about Lisa, the child my father had with a family friend in an extra-marital affair. Lisa used Facebook to reach my youngest sister, who notified the rest of us. Lisa, fifty, lived with her husband and two sons in San Francisco.

We planned to meet at a restaurant in San Francisco. I flew from the Midwest with the little I had to offer her: medical information about our father and his family. I stood on a heavily trafficked sidewalk downtown with no picture of Lisa, only her description: “average height, short brown hair.” Then I spotted a woman exiting the throng of sidewalk traffic and entering the restaurant. It wasn’t her height or her hair that gave Lisa away. Rather, it was an eerie reminder of my father: she had his military posture, his commanding stride, his slim, muscular body.

By the end of the lunch, I felt connected to the sister I’d never met. She has my father’s deadpanned wit and his sharp mind. She loves poetry. We worked for years in the same field. Indeed, Lisa is my sister and over the past decade, she and her family have merged with ours: holidays, sister trips, evening phone calls when we share our

angst about our jobs, our health, and our adult kids. Never do we end the call without a good laugh no matter what we discuss.

With no shame, I explain how Lisa came to join our family: *my dad's daughter from an affair*. Occasionally, I sense judgment: *Isn't that weird?* The judgment doesn't seem aimed at my father, who arguably deserves it. Rather, it seems aimed at me—for accepting the situation.

"I don't care what my dad and Lisa's mom did fifty years ago," I've said repeatedly.

I was fifty-seven when I learned I had another sister, another girl who didn't belong to my mother.

This time, I opened my heart to her.

This time I got it right.



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