

11:19pm EST

karen: Things are hard for me, as ashes have not yet been buried. Any chance you could encourage?
It is fine here. I just find it hard to visit [his apartment], knowing it isn't done. Your dad told me about the day. I apologize in advance.

me: Sorry, I'm not sure exactly what you mean, but happy to encourage you in whatever way I can.
... I thought you maybe had a pet die, then thought about it and you don't have pets, haha.
You mean my mom's ashes? I can imagine that being kind of uncomfortable for you, if that's what you meant anyway.
Apologies if I'm guessing wrong though!

karen: For me to commit to taking care of older man and all, his wife's ashes must be buried appropriately
Help him
Help him

me: I wasn't aware that people buried ashes, I thought they just lived in the urn or were sprinkled somewhere the person wished. But I can understand feeling weird about being in the house

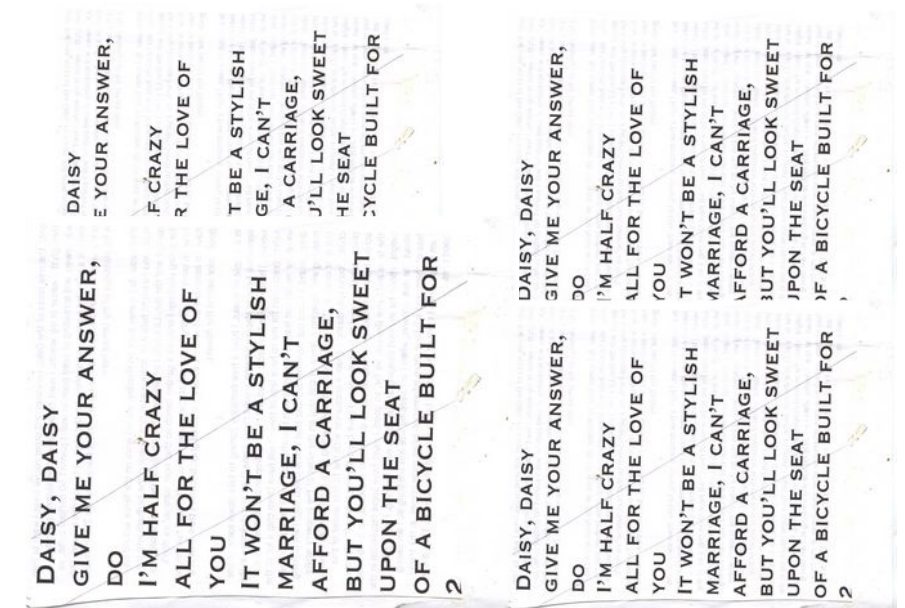
karen: Help him
I am exhausted
I want to be there but I cannot be the redeemer
Ashes of a person belong in the earth. That is my upbringing.
Good night

sycamore lite reading still presents



KARENGATE

the misery of real-world TERFs



1-20-2025

CONTENT WARNIN': *severely rancid hatred of transpeople, evil deeds of internet goblins, sadness, general psychic damage*

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any proceeds accumulated from this stupid gossip rag will be donated to projects supporting trans healthcare in the united states

Anything can presumably rot for lack of circulating air, and there are societal structures closing some people off from sufficient ventilation. I passively hope people can change, but definitely at a certain point I don't believe it's worth my energy to try and drag a big box fan out and belatedly un-rot certain worldviews. In the end, I'm not really sure what else we can do *except* confront these lunatics wherever needed, and I don't think I did a particularly good job.

semi random resources

gno caring collective

<https://www.gnocaringcollective.org/>

new orleans free resource guide

<https://www.imaginewaterworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/JULY-2024-RG-Word-for-View.pdf>

trans in the south resource guides

<https://southernequality.org/resources/transinthesouth>
<https://southernequality.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/CSETransIntheSouth2019.pdf>

trans youth emergency project

<https://southernequality.org/tyep/>

pflag

<https://pflag.org/>

lgbt resource lookup

<https://www.lgbtnearme.org/>

The second question is a personal one: not that I think we all really needed to look into this void seeking a face, as if to say, "Oh, but she's a human being!" But I feel haunted by wondering whether I've been a Karen at moments in my life. I wonder whether we could all go in some equally irredeemable direction, in the same or a differently disgusting way.

I think we can. I think it could happen, in some form, to almost anyone who was in the wrong circumstances. Being reddit for a moment I would guess the recipe is something like "trauma + anticommunism + entitlement + grievance." The ready-made marketplace for exchanging content doesn't help either, but I think blaming the internet is lazy. I think those basic flavors are the key problem. because if you were proportionally drenched in them, even if you lived among real people and no internet, you'd eventually still start to hate and resent everyone you met.

I'm not really sure what's the right course, or what exactly you do with someone you can neither tolerate nor confront: during this saga I always defaulted to the idea that I didn't want to dictate someone else's relationships. But now I think that this much conflict avoidance can be an equally compulsive response--there's a point at which it enables shitty people. Or at least enables them to dictate the terms of interaction.

What does it mean that things *do* go this wrong for people's lives and inner architecture? That also haunts me! Knowing roughly what circumstances converged to build it doesn't tell me what it *means* that it happens.

I now also feel the need to strive to never get stuck like this myself. I think that mainly means tuning into the people around me, making an active effort to listen to them and think about them more, and changing together, changing each other. I don't think it means never having conflict, or applying pressure to tamp it down always, at all costs. But I do think it means keeping an eye on compulsive conflict (and compulsive patterns of interaction in general): conflict that comes about because we're predisposed to see ourselves as victims, or because we cease to believe we have a range of possible responses to things, or lack other means of enjoyment.

Forward by Honey Waggle

This text details the dangers of the girth of information being formed by boomer TMI.

Fortunately? Science just keeps on truckin amiright... last i checked like 7 yrs ago one could 'fit the library of congress in a soda can' according to the clickbait about datastorage and compression.

Well i'm not gonna waste my precious life googling an update on that factoid but now i know they got SD chips the size of a toddlers thumb nail what can hold a terabyte... aka you can prolly make a hearing aid that can hold the entire live recordings of teh grateful dead (the cutting edge of american torture).

what's more what was once an act of PIONEERS and a select few in the aforementioned age of the soda can is now accessible to most common folk... now, in this age at last

*we can **all** put the library of congress exactly where it seemed destined to go from its inception...*

... right up our ass

Introduction: Karens are Real

*Never get in a wrestling match with a pig.
You'll both get dirty.. But the pig will like it.*

My friend's dad, a guy from Mississippi, shared this saying recently, and it feels like I'm breaking its rule. I am completely sure by now that TERFs want nothing more than they want attention: negative, positive, any kind really, as long as it's undivided, undiluted, and excludes even the hypothetical existence of not just trans people but other people in general.

For that reason I feel deeply embarrassed to have accumulated this many observations about the psychic quagmire that is Karen (the only real-life TERF I've ever met). Over the years I made an effort, if a misguided one in many ways, to deflect my attention away from Karen, away from her fixations/opinions/grievances /bad breath; mental gymnastics to sidestep, to deflect, to reframe, whatever it took not to receive her psyche or have its figure etched into mine. But not only did I fail to keep her out of my head, I also failed to meaningfully confront her half-baked, rancid pseudo-intellectual cheez whiz when I had the chance.

I worked on a version of this zine years ago under the tentative name "Oregon Trail" with a different concept in mind. At that time, Karen was sending me 1 or 2 multi-page-typed letters a week (for a period of months; I never quite figured out how to respond, so I didn't; but she just kept on mailing them) and they were so darkly funny that I had thought to compile them as a stand-alone zine. In the letters, she often referred to herself as a "pioneer" in the ... mission? purpose? identity? of having a trans divorce; so I was gonna go with a 'wagon train,' 'skulls of oxen and tumbleweed' theme, maybe even do some illustrations.

I'm still including some choice excerpts of the letters, but in the past few years things have taken a heavier turn. Karen retired, sold her apartment, bought a house in a small town, stopped speaking to her kids and siblings, and finally went full-time facebook-youtube-substack as an aspiring TERF influencer (maxing out at around 2k youtube subs last time I looked; on substack, well under 100).

Conclusion

If you've read this far, I hope I've given a face to this figure of the TERF in 2025. I know it's like saying "I hope I've done a good job describing what diarrhea smells like so you can imagine it clearly." I'm left with two questions:

1. What are the best ways to protect our friends and neighbors from Karen?
2. Can this septic transformation into a Karen happen to anyone? Why or why not?

The first question is a political one. I love my friends and neighbors, and it feels self-evident that our fates, political and otherwise, are connected. The obvious practical answer is to engage in our standard direct acts of support for trans healthcare, safety, and stability at whatever scale we can.

With this in mind, I think we must try to get good at being the opposite of Karens--believing in others' power to co-constitute us, believing in the flexibility of collaboratively-built realities, believing that "our" universe, the shared one, is a real one, that sharing connects people in complex ways. The vulnerability of having a shared world is a minefield of potential enemies for a Karenized consciousness. We, though, can avail ourselves of the joy of changing with and among other actual people.

These are communist threads and I think it's no accident that an era of shrill public anticommunism spawned so many Karens. 1960's cultural emphasis on the individual and opposition to "conformity" seamlessly became, over time, opposition to "being subject to other people's influence," and then to "dealing with other people's presence," and finally just to "other people." The glorified individual becomes the universal victim.

In decades past, right-wing voices ridiculed and fixated on identity politics as a misguided paradigm, but in this era they've fully horseshoed around. Now it's the Karens, zionists and TERFS who demand increasingly boundless safe spaces on the basis of (as Richard Sennett put it) increasingly grandiose personal identities. A Karen's individual trauma is all-important, trumps every other concern, and renders the very existence of other people's subjective worlds as targeted acts of brutality.

But narcissism may be encouraged by cultural developments and can vary in expression from era to era, so that in some circumstances, it may seem tiresome, in others, pathetic, in others, an affliction shared in common.

A society with a very low level of interaction between its members, dominated by ideas of individual, unstable personality, is likely to give birth through fantasy to enormously destructive collective personalities.

Fantasy of the collective person tends to be grandiose, because there is very little actual knowledge of others like oneself, only a small number of symbolic details. The collective person has abstract characteristics, for the same reason. This collective figure goes easily out of focus, in part because of its abstractness, in part because the very modes of perceiving personality destabilize the personality perceived.

And finally, once formed, collective action for the community is difficult because people's constant worry is who belongs and who is to be excluded from this grandiose, unstable identity. Such a community is hostile to outsiders, and competition is rife among those within over who is "really" an embodiment of the collective personality, who is really a loyal American, a pure-blood Aryan, a genuine revolutionary.

The logic of collective personality is the purge; its enemy, all acts of alliance, cooperation or United Front. Broadly stated, when people today seek to have full and open emotional relations with each other, they succeed only in wounding each other. This is the logical consequence of the destructive gemeinschaft which arose when personality made its appearance in society.

The narrower the scope of a community formed by collective personality, the more destructive does the experience of fraternal feeling become. Outsiders, unknowns, unlikes become creatures to be shunned; the personality traits the community shares become ever more exclusive; the very act of sharing becomes ever more centered upon decisions about who can belong and who cannot. The abandonment of belief in class solidarity in modern times for new kinds of collective images, based on ethnicity, or quatrier or region, is a sign of this narrowing of the fraternal bond.

Fraternity has become empathy for a select group of people allied with rejection of those not within the local circle. This rejection creates demands for autonomy from the outside world, for being left alone by it rather than demanding that the outside world change itself.

The more intimate, however, the less sociable.

For this process of fraternity by exclusion of "outsiders" never ends, since a collective image of "us" never solidifies. Fragmentation and internal division is the very logic of this fraternity, as the units of people who really belong get smaller and smaller. It is a version of fraternity which leads to fratricide.

During this interval she ditched the "pioneer" thing in favor of equally grandiose but way less whimsical self-mythologizing jargon, to be introduced later.

Now, after Karen stopped mailing me letters, and instead got into posting vlogs about me/my family, my goal is, first and foremost, amusement. As much as I've tried to distract myself and forget about it, I still feel compelled to share: it's one of the goofiest and most bizarre subplots I've ever brushed with. To this day, Karen actively lurks at the edges of my family life, passively sniping at my dad (a cancer patient in his late 70s); whenever I try to forget her, she pulls some new antics, and here we are.

"Karen": more than a name, more than just vernacular for "an insufferable white woman," Karen has become a concept, a mindset, a way of life. In addition to attempting entertainment, this zine should also function somewhere between a means to purge the individual Karen from my frontal lobe, and also a sort of case study, a reflection on the TERF movement, and the uniquely grievance-poisoned boomer and genx Karens who make up its ranks.

A little mea culpa:

Even as late as 2019 I would, when it came up, sincerely ask my friends, "... Are TERFs ... actually real?"

Transphobia was a visible problem of course, both interpersonally and as a scapegoat-based angle of electoral politics: but at the time I'd only ever seen it declare itself outright ("Yes, me, I am transphobic!") when coming from self-identified conservative christians. And even these people had no idea what TERF meant.

And even though I'd had an interest in bullshit feminisms for a long time, I had no basis, neither in lived experience nor in academic explorations, for understanding how hating trans people could even nominally be connected to *any* "feminism". At the time, I was completely sure they were just a sort of internet boogeyman with negligible relevance to our actual queer lives.

For one thing, although I vaguely knew there were "certain authors" who took things a little sideways in the 70s or something, I had never met anybody in person who promoted this viewpoint (somebody saying "I'm a feminist" who also claimed that a version of "feminism" should exclude and even

demonize trans people). Being honest, I'd only ever heard the term deployed by ultra PC individuals smearing each other in a very trigger-happy, 2010's petty-disproportionate-idpol sort of reflex.

So I actually thought stuff like, "let's not blow things out of proportion," etc. Being *rude* to trans people was never something that I thought was okay, but, I reasoned, most interpersonal rudeness I ever observe tends to happen by accident or via misunderstanding, and rarely, in my immediate social universe, comes via a serious ideological commitment to bigotry.

I thought of it like the way every stupid hot take was getting called 'fascist'. I was inclined to push back against the reflex to label any instance of interpersonal rudeness as TERF, because-- I'm serious--as a nerd from a nerd family I genuinely had a hard time believing anybody who took "feminism" seriously in any way could *actually* subscribe to a "position" so obviously vapid, tautological and moronic as the TERF premise. I guess I was just doing the "no true scotsman" fallacy...

I thought it must be a wholly online thing, and an astroturfed one at that, a funded figment of right wing think tanks, failing bathroom warriors and deepfried ultrawealthy children's book authors, etc. The idea that we were (or could ever be) bothered by people with an explicit commitment to such an unbelievably stupid and ignorant premise, or even that we would have to encounter them in the physical world, just legitimately seemed far-fetched. How *could* they be real?

In my defense, anyone who knows me can confirm that I was verifiably not online enough to know about tons of things... and tons of these *did* turn out to be "real".

I was (and still am) resistant to the churn of online discourse and tend to dig my heels in against the idea that I have to be aware of all of it, pay active attention to all of it, much less *respond* to it, and least of all get up in arms over every single wave of bullshit that tidally floods social media conversation.

But as it turned out, the TERF movement would eventually break containment from the internet (and I also belatedly realized this had apparently happened in the UK first); after seeing it in real life, I truly regret my dismissiveness of the threat.

railing against Woke? With around 2k youtube subscribers (inarguably a v low number for somebody parked at the screen 24/7 for multiple years) she couldn't be getting paid much for her labors. *And* she was out begging people to buy her fucking amazon book. So if it was grift, it was a low-rent version.

No! I believe Karen is a true believer: because, this is boilerplate but, she fundamentally hates people, and above all hates seeing others accomodated and supported and accepted. In her mind, their acceptance always comes *at the expense of hers*. The world is having one big divorce, it's zero sum, it's her verbal diarrhea waterfall versus other people's ocean of lies, it's the irresolvable gridlock of her sister getting a bigger allowance 50 years ago, it's her self-declared normalcy versus boundless public perversion.

To Karens, there is a morality at play in every waking instant, with a predetermined status: personal injustice. As others have said better elsewhere, public visibility and fine-ness of other people being embraced and integrated into a field of normalcy is *an existential threat to the Karen psyche*. She knows she can never enter any such field of public normalcy, because from the get-go she violently resents the power of *other people* to constitute this field. She can never be accepted by the public because she cannot accept any of the people in it.

She rubs herself painfully along the contradictory threshold of this rejection, nonstop, 24/7. Karen gets off on the pain of making others dislike her. It's the only comfortable kind of recognition possible, because she at least controls its rhythms.

Finally--this past week, in 2025, Karen sent my dad a box of his things with a message: *Dearest Claes, I hope you survived cancer. I was wondering why you never apologized for not reading the article I sent you last year on the necessity of nuking Gaza. Here are some of your things, but don't ask me to return any of your valuable stuff still at my house. I've suffered enough. Bye!*

Richard Sennett again:

Narcissism is the search for gratification of the self which at the same time prevents that gratification from occurring. This psychic state is not created by a cultural condition; it is a possibility of character for any human being.

Karengate

... at least, that's what I'm deciding to call the revelation, as well as the zine, because the actual dossier I found on her on the internet had the title "GC Jewgate 2022." call me PC but i'm just not putting out a zine called 'Jewgate.' I swear I managed to resist googling Karen until I cracked around 2022, and still honestly haven't spend much time poisoning myself with more of her excretions. But to the extent that I have, these fairly predictable things were gleaned:

1. Of course, she posts constantly.
2. She promotes the self-published-on-amazon-memoir on as many trans-targeted hate channels as will have her.
3. Following in the noble footsteps of one Jordan Peterson, she does hella benzo vlogging.
4. She keeps tight control over the comments section of anything she can: dishing it out hard, but easily taking psychic damage at the slightest negative response.

Point 4 seems to be in effect because:

5. She got in a deep feud with multiple alt-right internet goblins, a big enough brawl that the details were written up... *on fucking kiwifarms*¹. The threads are long as hell, utterly impossible to follow, and the conflict was dubbed "Jewgate 2022"... seemingly because the crux of the event was that a more-zionist-than-thou Israeli personality called Karen out for being a "fake Jew" and from there, allegedly, it devolved into Karen *mailing people menacing anonymous parcels*.

Believe it or not, by 2023 even the other alt-right freaks started calling Karen a "predator," insinuating she has dementia, and (if I understand this shit correctly) tried to get in touch with her sons on the allegation that she was threatening self-harm?

What *really* happened to our girl Karen?? So rapidly she went from being just a weird personal nuisance at the corner of my life to a full-blown forum monster. Just a couple years prior she'd been citing "progressive antiracist policies" as a proud state attribute, and now she's reposting National Review articles and

1 <https://kiwifarms.st/threads/terfs-trans-exclusionary-radical-feminists-gender-critical-feminists.15152/page-195> ... Put a condom on your browser first.

It's been a hard pill to swallow that viewpoints this dumb can, and will, eventually get too loud to ignore.

The Kindergartener

It's 2017. I'm visiting my dad, with my baby daughter. Travel with a baby is pretty tiring, but things are chill.

I love my dad. He was born in the 1940s, so he's functionally from a different universe, but it doesn't matter; he's a sweetheart, a thoughtful person, a loving, curious guy. He gets along with his family, neighbors, coworkers, really most people who meet him; he's historically extremely patient with people and makes an effort to understand them, even across major cultural differences. I live around a thousand miles away, so I don't see him too regularly, but we keep in touch pretty well. We have a pretty good relationship.

He's been dating someone for a year and change. This is great news, since he's been kind of lonely (and at times sad) for much of the time since my mother died (nearly 10 years prior to this visit). The idea that he's got a partner is reassuring to me, for his emotional life and general happiness. I like the idea that he's got some more regular close contact with somebody. I'm sure he'll be better off in his retirement with (as he calls it) a "good friend".

They became acquainted in some sort of meetcute situation involving him leaving a hat at a restaurant or something. It then came out that she was an acquaintance of our family friends, a couple I've known my whole life. And shout out to them! They're cool. (They're in a folk dance group at a local synagogue with her.) My dad's relationship with Karen sounds, from the start, kind of whirlwindy, maybe a bit fast-moving, but he seems really happy with it and energized by it.

On this visit, he says she's being a little weird about meeting me, but does want to see the baby (who wouldn't?) -- I think this is pretty normal, even a good sign, in a way, if it means she's someone who can be honest about those kinds of apprehensions.

My dad also lets me know she's had two messy divorces, and the first one (20+ maybe even 30 years prior) involving two kids; in the course of this divorce, her first spouse came out as a transwoman.

It sounds like it got pretty gnarly. But I also don't really think about it too much: she's in her 60s or something, divorces happen, it's usually a bad scene for everyone involved.

If it ever so slightly rubs me the wrong way that he adopts her framing of the "randomly transitioned ex" as "her having endured some extraordinary turn of events," I reason it away.

I make the presumption that having this type of thing happen in a normative marriage in the 90s was perhaps kind of uncommon, something she was unprepared for and hadn't fully had the means to process. Maybe the ex was also just a nasty person, or an abuser, who knows. I try to think generously that maybe this aspect of the divorce *was* a strange, possibly even traumatic experience for her.

But on the other hand I am a little weirded out that I was already being positioned to extend benefit of the doubt about this person's past conflicts/divorce(s) at all--to have to analyze it at all--without having even met her yet...

Eventually we end up making plans, walking over to her neighborhood and having dinner at her house. As expected, she's just a mildly unrelatable, schoolmarm style lady with those little oval shaped glasses... Standard-issue uptight lib boomer. Personality-wise, she comes off like someone who's trying to perform warmth but seems real anxious; someone who speaks loudly and with a big smile but you can tell they don't actually want you there/are afraid you'll leave crumbs on the couch or whatever.

She's also a little weird/awkward with my kid, too; but again, plenty of people don't know how to interact with babies (and do the thing where they seemingly expect instant affection and are a little too ready to feel rejected... by a baby). This surprises me, though, only because she's an actual kindergarten teacher, and also because she did have kids of her own.

In this first encounter I do notice a couple of key things:

1. She harps on her divorces very openly to me without much introduction (hi, so nice to meet you, how's it going, nice weather we're--); both the first divorce with the transwoman, and the second divorce, with a very religious conservative Jewish guy for whom she converted to Judaism;

The shortest version possible: In March 2022 Alix Aharon apparently had enough of Ute Heggen, aka Karen ██████ an American Jewish convert, misrepresenting all things Jewish. Ute is a major manipulator who had a story to tell: 30 years before she left a terrible marriage with a terrible man - an AGP - and her two grown sons sided with her ex and she was now wanting to vent all about it to the world in book form, even though her Wordpress blog was already doing this. She managed to insinuate her needy personality into Karen D ██████ 'You're Kidding, Right?' You Tube channel and KD was too stupid to notice what a racist user and narcissist Ute was/is. All Ute wanted to do was promote her upcoming book to a desperate audience of AGP hating women and she was shaping her future audience of sympathizers. She became a semi-regular for almost a year on KD's channel. Then she began butting in on other conversations in social media about this book she was going to have published. She used this term 'Grass Widow' claiming it was Jewish but it isn't. She was spewing Yiddishisms all over and trying to get a little devoted group of 'Transwidows' under her spell and force them all to use 'Grass Widow' instead. I spoke with one who refused to join that group who said that "Ute has mental problems that run very deep and she even brought up suicidal ideation about standing on the Brooklyn Bridge thinking about jumping about twenty years ago. She brought that up several times and as a psychotherapist, I knew she was trouble trying to lead a support group of wounded women. I warned those that would listen but she had a couple who thought of her as some kind of Saint. She was creating a little cult. What's worse is that some women who aren't even transwidows felt sorry for her and she became like a wounded victim they wanted to nurse back to health - into the arms of GC women who thought they could save her wounded soul. That these women could not see what a master manipulator she is was frightening."

these unhinged screencaps are explained on the next page.

horrible GRASS WIDOW book which we're sure Joey would only care to burn if she ever saw one. KD & Joey seem to have no contact and when KD was asked in her COMMUNITY page if she contacted Joey about this creepy package, KD did not respond. Someone in our group reached out to Joey to ask if she was contacted by Karen about this and she replied she had not received any notification from KD and was surprised to learn of this development. (Upon posting this we learned from KD's COMMUNITY page that she received ANOTHER creepy package from Ute who refers to herself as THE BIG NANNY GOAT who is still waiting for her gift money of \$2,400.00 to be returned!) Anyone who STILL doesn't get the capital 'C' in CRAZY that is Ute after all these months and her on-going displays of lunacy can go fuck themselves. The more we see her stalking abusive creepy AF behavior the more we understand the psychological torture she put all three of these women in and why it was decided that Ute just might have warned them of potential self harm. Imagine if none of them had tried to reach out for help and she actually offed herself? Would you be blaming them of her suicide a well? Of course you would! Of course...

all seriousness I also think it really blows that my dad ended up having this type of guest when he most needed support.

I think her leaving really hurt him, as predictable as it may seem in retrospect. It's shitty to break up with someone right when they get a serious illness, but doing it with all these other stunts and accusations and guilt tripping them is really beyond what I could've expected.

It was a sad time. But at least I had the hope that finally, finally at this juncture she would just leave *me* alone, even if she needed to send *him* twelve million lectures on the need to nuke Gaza, in an email also marked "NO RESPONSE NEEDED JUST WATCH THE VIDEO"--but it was not to be.

A couple months later I got this email from her, cc'd to three of her internet friends:

February 7th 2024

Just an update. I could not stay in a thing with a dude whose wife betrayed him so many times and wrote it up in her diaries. Done.

Thanks.

Ute Heggen, author, In the Curated Woods, True Tales from a Grass Widow

I think the most perfect thing about this is that she identifies herself as an "author" of the self-published-on-amazon memoir.

Not that it matters, but after that last visit my dad told me Karen had become fixatedly upset by "having to know" that my mom (deceased 15+ years by now) slept around a lot in her life (props to you, mom!) and apparently had smuggled hashish in Morocco in the 70s; in other words, it tormented her to know that my mom was incredibly cool. love you, mom!

Anyway--I'm not gonna print what I wrote back. It was my one shot, the only one I was going to take, and I don't think I really nailed it. But I tried. I know I've been a real hamlet about this shit but I just couldn't get past feeling that this is a person so miserable and wretched, grinding her teeth at night, queasy, unable to sleep, friendless, hated by everyone she meets--*does it really have to be my job to tell this bitch that she sucks?* She must already know.

2. She does seem to route a lot of conversations to past grievances regarding her family, her coworkers, the children (ages 5-6) she teaches in public school, and above all her exes;

3. In the course of this, she guilelessly launches into the most alarming self-indictment I've ever heard in my life.

The story, paraphrasing (but swear to god, not exaggerating):

A couple years ago a little girl in my class told me that a little boy classmate reached under her skirt and grabbed her genitals. I was furious. The parents were so rude to me. They're these awful entitled parents. This is why I never want to teach the gifted class: the parents are the worst. It was awful for me. It was this whole big nightmare. It was so unfair! (To me, I mean.)

The little girl was definitely lying. She was a spoiled little liar. She was just doing it to get me in trouble. I felt so bad for the little boy. In the dance performance I planned for the end of the year, I gave the little boy a special role--he had been through so much because of that lying little girl.

I managed to un-drop my jaw and lower my eyebrows but shit, it wasn't easy. I struggled to come up with something bland to say. How the hell do you respond to that?

It crossed my mind that this was a *wild* first anecdote to tell someone you're newly meeting.

I also had the thought that this was obviously someone who shouldn't be around children; I shuddered to think of my own kid ever being stuck in a class under an authority figure with this type of baggage and bad judgement. It was baffling to imagine a *kindergarten teacher* approaching a situation this way in the first place, let alone willingly tell a near-stranger this was how they handled it.

At the time, I actually more or less shrugged it off: *well, I guess my dad is dating someone who's readily, even eagerly showcasing that she's kind of insane, but it's not my problem...*

My initial theories: lots of people, when nervous, have the unfortunate reflex of vomiting up their most unlikeable, alien life experiences and traits, maybe as a way to force others to share

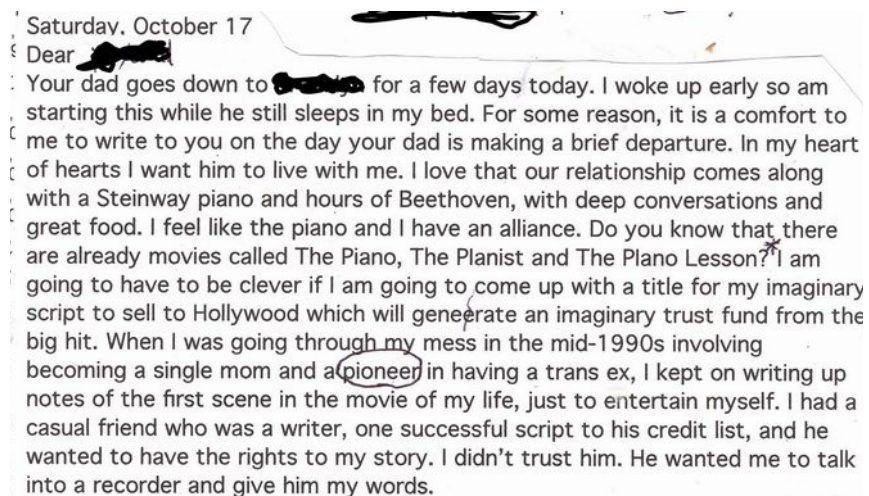
their internal sensation of anxious nausea, maybe as an urgent bid for acceptance.

Or maybe she was on the same too-strong anxiety meds as my employers, with the observed side effect of just having no filter and saying crazy shit emotionlessly.

Final theory: plenty of people can't fully distinguish negative attention from positive attention, and since negative attention is easier to obtain, they develop the habit of pulling the proverbial fire alarm in every situation, because they fear being ignored, and because even negative attention makes them feel securely centered in people's focus...

For better or worse, at that time I was functionally pretty "accepting," in the sense that I didn't push back whatsoever against this absolutely stunning story, or any of the other weird stuff being dumped. But shit, man. To this day I've never again met someone for ten minutes and then had them drop something that unhinged. Not even at a bus station.

My family friends who knew her from the folk dance group, when I asked them about her, all burst out laughing right away. "Karen! She's.... Interesting. A real TMI! We gave her a ride home one time and she wouldn't stop talking about her divorce..."



Saturday, October 17
Dear [redacted]
Your dad goes down to [redacted] for a few days today. I woke up early so am starting this while he still sleeps in my bed. For some reason, it is a comfort to me to write to you on the day your dad is making a brief departure. In my heart of hearts I want him to live with me. I love that our relationship comes along with a Steinway piano and hours of Beethoven, with deep conversations and great food. I feel like the piano and I have an alliance. Do you know that there are already movies called *The Piano*, *The Pianist* and *The Piano Lesson*?* I am going to have to be clever if I am going to come up with a title for my imaginary script to sell to Hollywood which will generate an imaginary trust fund from the big hit. When I was going through my mess in the mid-1990s involving becoming a single mom and a pioneer in having a trans ex, I kept on writing up notes of the first scene in the movie of my life, just to entertain myself. I had a casual friend who was a writer, one successful script to his credit list, and he wanted to have the rights to my story. I didn't trust him. He wanted me to talk into a recorder and give him my words.

* i guess she never heard of 'the piano teacher' tho

I was skeptical, since she'd only ever stayed at his house for about a week at a time and it never seemed to go well. But I hoped she'd pull through and find it in herself to support him. This was why, feeling like I was in a seinfeld-style gag, I even took the box with my mother's ashes from his house and traveled with them back home, where they now reside in a beautiful place.

To make matters worse: October 7th happened, and the ensuing escalation of the Israeli genocide against Palestinians. Give you one guess what side Karen took, and who she felt was the world's biggest victim, really the only victim, of the entire situation. Shortly thereafter Karen commenced spamming my dad links to Bari Weiss videos and articles about how THE UN IS HAMAS!!!!, a mode of communication that remains active from her end to this day.

I think she stayed with him about half the time they'd planned; as I understand it, a series of things degraded the situation:

- Her cataracts, which she'd known about but not addressed for years, suddenly became an emergency, coincidentally requiring her to schedule appointments for eye surgery on the same days as his chemo appointments. She became very angry and resentful that he wasn't available to support her.
- She went out to dinner with a "friend" (the friend's existence is frankly dubious) and got drunk a bunch of times, came back to his house on foot drunk, angry, unable to see, Mr. Magoo-ing across traffic, and ragefully blaming him for the stress and mayhem of walking through the city disoriented.
- She did go to a couple of his appointments with him... But snuck outside during them to film and post slurry monologues titled "TERFing it up in Woke [hospital neighborhood]!" about how much she loves doctors who subscribe to a gender binary.
- She also left his apartment and filmed herself drunkenly sticking his neighborhood with TERF slogans like (jesus christ, not even trying to be clever) "Transwomen aren't women"

As much as I love the mental image of Karen transformed from schoolmarm into full-blown crustpunk, raging out, flushed red in the face, swaying on a streetcorner with a 40, drooling through her brown teeth, heckling passers-by *SPARE A DOLLAR, WHITE COLLAR?!*, sticking lampposts and falling on the pavement, in

Breakup #3: Karen, Crustpunk

In September 2023, my dad began having serious health problems. The hospital he was at doesn't allow kids, so I was in a bind, but thanks to the support of our friends and family, I was able to get there and visit. another shout out to youse guys!!! <333

In the hospital bed, he called Karen, put her on speakerphone. No one loves those type of parameters for contact with people you aren't speaking to, but he's literally in a hospital bed and should feel loved and supported by a united glob of people close to him, so I was on board.

She picks up... Ahe three of us make small talk for about two minutes... and then:

Are you having your daughter do any schoolwork while you're visiting? Are you doing math? You have to be sure to teach your daughter multiplication. Multiplication is very important. I have to tell you why. One time, about ten years ago, the bureaucrat in charge of my paycheck in the public school system made a multiplication mistake and the result was that I was underpaid.

I was underpaid! Can you believe it? This was a very rude woman, they lied, it turned into a huge issue, the mistake followed me for years, I had to go above her head to get the issue resolved, they tried to cheat me, and I got in trouble over it, even though it wasn't my fault...

I still can't fully describe the garish, miserable vision of watching my dad in a hospital bed with an IV in his arm, calling his girlfriend on speakerphone, only for her to instantly go on a rant about a petty work grievance from over a decade ago. All I could say was "Oh! Uh, wow..."

He got out of the hospital after about a week, but his health issues changed his lifestyle and bound him to the schedule of medical appointments. At first, he had his hopes up that Karen would come for a little while, stay with him, go to his appointments, maybe they could keep seeing each other even though it didn't seem plausible for the time being for him to leave his house and go stay with her.

I visited a few times as he started chemo; despite his health issues, he made an effort to change some things about his apartment so that she could be more comfortable. He told me she was planning to stay for 3 weeks.

She Wants Me All To Herself

There was a period of time when Karen and I were nominally friendly. As much of a hater as I am, I felt no reason to be anything *but* friendly: I was extremely glad my dad had company, even if I didn't personally want to hang. In my mind, she was just another of this sad world's mentally ill wraiths with messy social skills, of which there exist probably billions. I tend to be avoidant of these people, to, it turns out, a cowardly degree even. I'll be as warm as I can, even coddling them, and then skedaddle. So I never went out of my way to have contact with her, but I tried to be warm when needed because I wanted my dad to feel supported.

The two of them had a few years of a pretty normal relationship. Despite her apparent medical issues restricting travel, they went on some road trips; despite her apparently strained family relationships, they made inroads into each other's lives. He met her adult sons and their wives. He even met her elderly mother. She hosted *parties* a couple times. They were talking about moving to Vermont together.

One early weird thing: she did seem to be making an active effort to undermine my dad's friendship with the aforementioned family friends. At least, they told me she was pressuring my dad to stop having regular dinner dates with them. They said he'd canceled at least once with the weird excuse that she "needed him to stay home because she was upset that her mother was going deaf" (... I don't even follow this, and neither did his friends)--or, later, disclosing that she felt "judged" by them for being a convert to Judaism from Lutheranism.

(To be fair, when asked about this, they did laugh real hard and said pretty meanly, "Yeah she definitely just converted to get in with all the community activities--and she tries way too hard and it's so awkward! She's from Wisconsin! That accent! Come on!" etc. So I guess she was picking up on something real.)

I thought it was funny/sad but not really my problem.

I did get the sense that she didn't really love the idea that he had friends, family members, and a (decade-plus deceased) ex-wife. The more we crossed paths, the more this was confirmed.

He sometimes said things like "She wants me all to herself..."

I shuddered a little, because, yuck; if they had been people my age, I would have maybe thought of expressing concern, a red flag. But instead, I rationalized: well, I guess that's a more normal relationship dynamic for people of that era. Icky, not to my taste, but not my business.

After a while like this, Karen retired from teaching--naturally, she retired early and in a state of bitter conflict with her workplace. I first only heard about it from my dad; he kept saying how unfairly she'd been treated by the school, characterizing it like they really did her dirty somehow.

The more details were provided, the more insane it sounded, though: she had been "forced to quit" after being saddled with too many special-needs students (she later openly expressed that their special needs were just occurring in order to victimize her, and/or they'd been planted in her class by workplace enemies, like bombs, to sabotage her).

In and before her retirement, Karen self-published several childrens' books via amazon. I ended up with a couple copies. Predictably patronizing, half-baked and cheesy, of course she brought them up in conversation a lot. (Later, at the start of the pandemic, she would express excitement that her children's book about bereavement and grief, written after the death of her mother, could have a lot of interest and a big market due to the number of grandparents that will kick the bucket from COVID.)

She started offering me money at unexpected and unintuitive junctures (I always declined); just bringing up money a lot, to the point that it was confusing, since I still barely knew her.

At this point she was not, if I remember correctly, fully calling herself a TERF. Despite the constant rehash of all the injustices involved in her divorce, buzzwords such as "gender critical," "gender ideology" or "trans widow" hadn't really come up yet. I think she hadn't yet found out about facebook.

After retiring, Karen abruptly dropped the "move to vermont with my boyfriend" thing, sold her apartment and bought a house in a small town. My dad was confused by this but took it in stride. Apparently she wanted to be in the same town as one of her sons, "because she expected him to have kids". Put a pin in this.

is always to play dumb and find some twisted pathway to force sympathy or pity for the other person.

It's been hard to learn that that's, if not exactly a mental illness, this inclination can be something closely adjacent. Even if coming from some place of "diplomacy," I can now say with total confidence that this was the wrong approach. It is pathological in an entirely different way than the adversary's antics.

Never get in a wrestling match with a pig... But if a pig charges you head-on, isn't it worse to just let it trample you? Especially a pig that, um, this metaphor is falling apart, but like a pig that constantly states its intention to trample other people?

Thinking these kinds of thoughts, a few weeks later we have the following exchange also well after 11pm; Karen, go to bed!:

karen: Your father deserves respect. Call him.

me: drunk texting again I see... maybe call your own kids :)
but better wait til the morning. drink some water, take some deep breaths

The next morning, I got a call from my dad--Karen had dumped him again.

This one didn't stick, but just lasted a few weeks at most. I told him she'd been texting me weird shit late at night and I finally cracked. I told him I also thought she might be drunk--he interjected "Definitely, definitely"--and I reiterated, dad, I love you, have whatever relationships you want, I really tried not to take the bait, but it just got too crazy.

He said he thought it wasn't a bad thing for her to get pushback from people once in a while. He said he was sorry she had antagonized me. He said she seemed to get blackout drunk on wine whenever he left her house and sometimes called him angry and incoherent. He said he thought she was on medication where it was dangerous to drink and she just got blacked out.

Karen's triangular antics had failed (or maybe you could say they succeeded) yet again, but the ashes--again, *my mother's cremains*--did become a legitimate issue in their relationship. He asked me later on if I'd be willing to take the box with my mother's ashes back to my house, so that Karen would be more comfortable visiting him. I said, sure, we could figure that out sometime when I visited next. He didn't bring it up again for over a year, and they kept up their routine of him visiting her.

The Ashes

I've got a question. Even blacked out partying, have *you* ever told someone what to do with their dead mom's ashes?

If you have, you might have a future in TERF media.

Things got a little strained between us after the visit--I think the letters abruptly stopped coming, I stopped responding to her texts, even when she texted me things like "YOUR FATHER'S NOT PICKING UP HIS PHONE! I THINK HE'S INJURED! CALL HIM!" and other obviously engineered emergencies. I struggled to play it real cool, check up on my dad as needed, call him when he was at his house, and just never respond to Karen.

He expressed frustration that the "publication" of the memoir had not only not allowed her to "turn the page on the divorce," it had sort of done the opposite. Karen was full-speed submerging into the stew of angry internet divorcees. My dad felt she increasingly excluded their shared hobbies (gardening, music, wildlife) from her consciousness.

My dad also told me that the book has sections about me and my daughter; he said that Karen "didn't want me to read it". This came off like a bad attempt at reverse psychology, but the fact is nobody could pay me to read any more of her vomit-thoughts than I already have. I also know from scanning youtube video descriptions that her vlogs reference us, but I've only felt motivated to watch one vid and it was 10 seconds long and it was just Karen saying in a dementia-style voice

OH SO I GUESS EVERYTHING IS THE WOMAN'S FAULT!!!!!!

Sometime in 2022, my dad asked me if I'd make plans to bring my daughter and visit Karen again sometime; I had to tell him honestly I couldn't do it. I told him the anti-trans shit was getting too crazy and now dominated every interaction, and it was rancid and unhinged, and that it upset me. I told him I didn't wanna blow up at her and put him in the middle of an inevitable conflict. I told him he could start dating Melania Trump and I'd still find a way to support him having whatever relationships he wanted, but to put myself personally inside the blog headquarters was just a bad idea.

He told me he totally understood.

Close to midnight sometime in 2022, Karen and I had the text exchange I put on the back cover of this zine.

Even now, I read and re-read my response to these texts and I honestly feel like a horrible, deranged person.

I think it's called "learned helplessness." I think it's a problem you develop when you think that the way to handle provocations

Whenever we crossed paths, Karen did mention the trans ex way more than I wanted to listen to, but she was still mostly focused on relitigating conflicts with, and hating, her former employers and coworkers and sisters (even breaking down for me which of her sisters got the most allowance when they were kids).

The sisters: for this period of time, the prime conflict she processed with my dad, and sometimes with me, and surely also with anyone trapped in an elevator or waiting room with her, was Karen's her ex--it was her sisters.

For background, her mother was still alive, but in her late 90s; Karen had 3 or 4 sisters who all lived not far from the mother, all out of state. Around this time, Karen went to war with the sisters for reasons that are a little unclear and seem to boil down to the fact that the sisters were doing the bulk of the support work and she felt (and maybe really was?) excluded... or guilty... or just distrustful of them. Her response was to accuse her sisters of "elder abuse," specifically of forcing her mother into hospice prematurely.

I kept my mouth shut, but I found the story pretty implausible. For one thing, it seems commonplace in these scenarios for the least involved caretaker to also be the most opinionated. People in the armchair tend to angrily find fault with the people doing the bulk of the work. Projection and displaced guilt and all that stuff.

It was also technically possible that the other 4 sisters were all abusive monsters and that she, Karen, hundreds of miles away, was the only righteous one. Who knows/who cares... These situations are always messy. But I was truly not prepared for how Karen would handle it!

Breakup #1: Flash Mob

In a call with my dad one morning, he sounds a bit glum. I tentatively ask why. He tours through a series of cliches: "I've been hung out to dry..." "We've hit a bump in the road..." "I've been put on the shelf..." "I'm in the doghouse..."

I ask him what's up.

He asks me if I know what a "flash mob" is.

I spit my coffee out.

"Are you all right?"

"Sorry, sorry. What? Yes I do... Why?"

Karen, ranting for the 500th consecutive day about the "my sisters are doing elder abuse" scenario, had announced a new plan to take action on the crisis. She'd run it by my dad and it had gone over poorly. The plan was as follows:

Karen will dress in her mother's antique wedding dress and hire a flash mob off craigslist to perform an interpretive dance outside the nursing home, accompanied by the song "Bicycle Built for Two".

As I gasped for air on the other end of the phone, desperately trying to keep my painfully spasming lungs from making a sound, I heard my dad searching for the words to elaborate on how he had misreacted to this plan.

"It made me... Kind of... What's the word... Uncomfortable..."

We talk through it. Apparently he, grasping for words but not wanting to hurt her feelings, *didn't tell her this sounded insane*. He didn't tell her to 'get help'. He didn't even gently question the plan. He didn't tell her anything.

He just said nothing.

In short order, she blew up at him: "You don't support my creativity!" She booted him out, mailed some of his possessions back without even a note, ghosted him.

He was sad and very much confused... He had tried, more than really anyone I could imagine, to be "supportive" of her "creativity"... But it didn't matter. His silent judgement was an act of supreme aggression; the relationship terminated.

Unpacking the breakup, he also said she'd thrown in resentful digs about "Bernie Bros." My dad had been a Bernie supporter from pretty early on, and had said something snarky about Biden, "and Karen didn't like that".

I wasn't privy to many details of their communication during this break but I do think she did some bullshit where she said she was going to put his remaining stuff on the curb or something.

What I hadn't foreseen was how much disney movie *Frozen* would come up, and with what intensity; there was a furious rant about the song "Let it Go" and how much it had enraged her to hear the kindergarteners singing it.

I quote:

I told those girls, in MY class we do not LET IT GO. In MY class people are ACCOUNTABLE FOR THEIR ACTIONS.

One thing that I could not Let it Go was the fact that I'd been thwarted from seeing my aunt and uncle, two solidly cool people who I love being around and don't see too often. Shout out to my aunt and uncle! They're experts in how to be from the same generation as Karen, but still end up as brilliant, loving, compassionate people with strong connections to others.. love you guys! But to my surprise, they made the impulsive decision to drive up to her town and visit us for the day.

Karen couldn't hide how pissed she was. She barely spoke to them, didn't join us when we left her blog headquarters for the day, and could still hardly perform the barest minimum of pleasantries for somebody's in-laws when we came back.

This was all fun for me, a much-needed fresh breath, but then it got better: my uncle had brought his juggling equipment. *His fire juggling equipment*. And he was "a little out of practice." And he wanted to show my daughter his fire juggling act, a beloved staple of my childhood. My uncle is a hero!!!!

We sat on the trunk of their car, grinning, as he spilled kerosene all over Karen's driveway and dropped flaming clubs repeatedly, saying "oops!"

I cramped with laughter. My face hurt from smiling so big. My daughter was stunned, amazed, *Is this really okay?!* We were both delighted. It was a real high point.

I now need to include a couple quotes from Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man* (1979):

To speak of incivility is to speak of... burdening others with oneself; it is the decrease in sociability with others this burden of personality creates.

We can all easily call to mind individuals who are uncivilized on these terms: they are those "friends" who need others to enter into the daily traumas of their own lives, who evince little interest in others save as ears into which confessions are poured. But incivility is also built into the very fabric of modern society itself.

Karen told me how she responded:

Can you believe that?! So disrespectful! I've decided not to speak to him again until he apologizes.

It was also during this visit (maybe even same conversation as the sons stuff) that Karen told me she'd discovered something important about herself. According to a Doctor on youtube whose videos on Narcissism she'd been binging, she was, it turns out, something called an *empath!*

Asking tentatively skeptical questions about our home life, which I and my daughter shared with 5 other non-family adults, Karen related the one time she, too, had lived with a roommate. I don't think I need to describe how it went.

I don't even know if it's worth mentioning, but it should go without saying that Karen's new politicized identity never expressed itself as half a second's support for (or even feigned interest in) things like reproductive freedom and safety, infant or maternal mortality and healthcare access, or any other issue of gender inequality actively immiserating everybody in my home state. Didn't come up but I shudder to think of her takes on sex work.

As you'd expect, Karen's was "feminism" that clearly sort of wished Roe had been overturned earlier so that her ungrateful bitch daughters-in-law would have no choice but to pop out grandkids. Again, it's so predictable and vacuous I don't even know if I should bother leaving this paragraph in. Yeah... I had definitely expected her brand of "feminism" to be this incredibly callous and anti-intellectual, and I was boringly correct.

Since it was 2021, of course she also buzzworded about racism a lot, in a way I still feel is too stomach-turning, cynical and predictable to even unpack. To Karen, lib antiracist talking points, and indeed the entire discourse around racism, had been created exclusively for her to signal herself as a good person and also for her to monologue about how "true" representatives of "the black community" frowned upon "disruptive" public demonstrations. The topic of race was also a servicable jumping-off point to segue back to how queer and trans people were the white-coded enemies of "black family values" (or something equally ignorant and gross), ultimately arriving, once again, where everything ultimately must lead: back to her divorce.

Sorry about this paper. I had done a project involving Bicycle Built For 2, which ~~was~~ my mother's favorite song. I used that and a couple of other old songs to "sing myself out" when I had to say goodbye to my mother after a visit in the last few years. I ran out of computer paper. I found that my mother was more animated and in the mood to tell stories of the past after singing old familiar songs. She and I had epic conflicts in my early adulthood, but in the last years, had good intuition about helping her and I know she appreciated all I did.

Pen Names

I don't remember exactly how long Breakup #1 lasted, but after a while they rebooted things, started hanging out again, and pretty much fell into a similar routine.

There was another period of relative normalcy, albeit one in which she was now totally retired and relocated, and spending an increased amount of time writing. Writing what? More children's books? I think that's what it was at first. I think this was when her mother died.

At what exact point did her ex's transness cross over from a hangup, one of dozens, into a monomaniacal obsession? I think it must have occurred during these years, but I didn't have enough direct contact with her to pinpoint it.

I think this was the point where she made the gesture conspicuously overpaying me for a bronze sculpture I'd made (it was stored at my dad's house and she suddenly said she wanted it) and made a big fuss over installing it in her outdoor property. I didn't want her to have it, nor did I want to accept money from her, because I knew it was some sort of weird power move, but to my regret I just gave up right away and let it happen. Karen wanted the sculpture because in this phase, she was starting to cultivate an esoteric identity around her "woods"; I think she wrote another children's book or some shit, and maybe this was the point where she began to dabble with the idea of blogging about her life/property online.

I also think it's around this time she starts calling herself "Lea Utsira" and "Ute Heggen". She begins using more northern european jargon for herself, her home, her whole vibe and

aesthetic. The term "trans widow" reared its head, and "grass widow."

"Grass widow": The idea, as far as I can decipher it, was that she, just like fisherwomen in folk ballads who had a husband die at sea in a shipwreck, had "lost a husband" (debateable, but... in a way? Maybe?), but lost him to some particular stroke of irony where there was no IRL grave, such that fully "mourning" the loss was somehow not fully possible, or only obliquely possible, or something, so it needed a special term and framing...

There's no man, no husband; but no grave to mourn at, no one giving you the honor deserved in widowhood. Widows whose husbands are indeed dead understand our plight and have no problem with the use of the word. In fact, my partner Claes, is a widower, and he also uses the term grass widow for women like me. The very word *trans* grates like fingernails on a chalkboard. A website highlighting the stories we tell is transwidowsvoices.org, where the latest chapter of my story, my ex-husband's financial fraud, appears under Our Voices, "Bertina."

<- A screencap of her blog 1/20/2025, claiming to still be dating my dad (nordic-ass codename "Claes"). In reality, she dumped him over a year ago, when he got cancer.

Leaving aside the fundamental madness and entitlement of declaring someone else's life to be "over", or even of declaring someone else's changes and transitions to be loaded with such extreme, mortal gravity with regards to your own (domestic, marital) entitlements that it even justifies characterizing them, another person with an ongoing life, as literally deceased...

I regret this, but I have to admit I still grasped, at first, for some way to render it *not insane* in my mind.

Why did I do this? Probably just simple interpersonal squeamishness. I wanted to avoid the obvious--I didn't want to deal with it. One doesn't want the people they interact with, however seldom seen in person, to be truly insane. It's unsettling, it's destabilizing. As hard as it was to rationalize, the alternative was even harder to cope with.

She was the type of host who rushes into the room after you take a shower and grabs the wet towel to make sure you don't leave it lying in the wrong place. She was the type of host who serves you rock hard homemade "cake" and brags anxiously about how she didn't add any sugar. (My dad is an incredible, transcendently great cook, but I think he was banned from taking the lead because she was still fat shaming him at the time.)

With this unfiltered view of her living space, and cartoonishly scrutinized at every turn, I thought, as I often do in times of stress, of my mother. What the heck would *she* do with this shit?

My mother... could've blown up big time. And she would've done a good job. But if she wanted to be, she was also a chiller with a deep sense of comedy. She, too, was at times bogged down in SNAFUs such as this. In such a situation, trying to prioritize not upsetting someone close to her (like my dad), I felt sure my mother would *commit to relaxing*, and maybe also indulge in some troll gestures as needed; I thought, I've gotta do that too.

I made the decision to relax aggressively, keep an earbud in my ear playing music the whole time, try to exercise, and focus on getting through the gauntlet of this grimacing, beady-little-eyes weasel's annoying neuroses, after which I would be in the arms of solid buddies.

If I'd been a weed smoking person, this would have been the time. I'm not sure I even had any kratom on me. In her TERF cave, I knew Karen was going to think I was rude and ungrateful and an unfit parent no matter what, if not also dangerous, perverse, irresponsible, disturbed, or something even more hyperbolic, so I tried to channel my mom's ability to find the whole thing demented, stupidly fun.

In person, I got the full story of what's up with her sons. It sounds like one of them wrote to her one of those sad letters millions of millennials are destined to write to their parents: something like, "Dear mom, I went to therapy and my therapist advised me that I should try to write you, I think we've got a lot of issues in our relationship and it's been hard for me for years, I'm really hoping we can have an honest conversation and maybe move forward into a better place."

Frozen: Let it Go

In summer 2021 things loosened up a bit germ-wise enough that I made ambitious plans to visit my dad and relatives in the region again, with my daughter. Pandemic travel was tricky... It went okay though. We visited friends in three different cities, with a week plus of time planned for family visits in the middle.

When I arrived at my dad's, he was fretting and seemed anxious. It turned out Karen wasn't happy that we weren't going to spend longer at her house; she'd pressured him to pressure me to ditch my aunt and uncle, presumably so that she could have my kid as a captive audience for her interpretive chair dances and monologues about backyard wildlife and her shitty neighbors.

This was pretty annoying, but as is probably clear by now, I'm a pushover, and want my dad to be happy. I didn't grant the full week, but I compromised. We would go up to her house a couple days early; I think I gave it like 4 days tops, already knowing it would supremely blow.

The walls of her compound were covered with probably a dozen pictures of a young woman, dancing. *oh man, no way this is what it looks like*. But yeah... they're a lot of framed pictures of *herself* in her 20s. Alone. None of her kids, or friends, or parents, or, to my recollection, any other human beings.

She had set up toys in the living room, which I thought was honestly a nice gesture. As weird as she was being about everything, I always appreciate someone making an effort to make kids feel welcome. But 24 hours hadn't passed before my incredibly easygoing and pliant 6-year-old came up to me and whispered "Karen's kind of bossy."

As expected, her company was that of a kind of smouldering Sauron scanning silently for slip-ups in parenting: especially, I figured, if queerness or gender nonconformity were to become visible in any way, if I were revealed to be "exposing" my child to "gender ideology". I hadn't actually heard her utter the word "groomer,"... but I *had* been told she would no longer speak to her sister on account of her having a they/them adult offspring. Though I wasn't exactly sure how much Cis she needed us to have, I knew it would be impossible to feel at ease in her house with my kid. I felt like that was clearly *why* she wanted us there at all: to have someone to have friction with.

One wants to find a way that these lunatic premises make some sort of abstract emotional sense, however minimal, or add up at least in a hyperpersonal context: to square the implausible circle of the person's loopy thoughts.

But as much as I tried to rationalize it away, this shit was really pushing it.

In the years since this juncture, watching what trans friends and loved ones go through, I still grapple with what is the right response if I ever interact with Karen directly again, or meet a new Karen. Statistically, I know that there must also be queer and trans Karens out there in the world. There must be Karens on every continent. But my problem is this: even the most affectively annoying queer acquaintances I've ever met, even people I don't personally get along with, all visibly have about a billion times the guts, wisdom and integrity of this whiny lady and everyone like her.

I say this to highlight the crux of the crybully position, that I find so difficult to parse: although Karens *are* being bullies, often knowingly, intentionally saying and doing the most vicious, antagonizing things they can think of... they're also so visibly, painfully pathetic and stupid that in the end I still somehow wind up feeling like *I'm bullying them*--just by being there, existing, at all, and definitely even more so if I directly evince the hostility I feel. Her very presence screams: *you can't be mean to me--I hate myself! How can you kick me while I'm down?!*

Never get in a wrestling match with a pig.... I regret this, but I just wasn't able to bring myself to "dignify her with a response" over so much of this early hateful bullshit and, too, increasingly personal provocations.

The property, the isolation, the free time on her hands... I think this was when the first big corner was turned, when she began working on the nordic seaside ballad's biggest possible fish: the inevitable self-publishing-bound memoir about her divorce.

"I really hope," my dad said many times, "That after writing this book, this memoir about her divorce, maybe it will help her move on... Turn the page on the whole thing... Get it out of her system. Since it was like 30 years ago..."

In this era, Karen also accelerated being weird about her own children, as well as mine.

Or we talk about you and [REDACTED]. We also talk about my sons, who are not a fun subject at the moment. For some reason, these high tech wunderkinder of mine decided, with the women in their lives, or because of them, that no babies are in their future. While everyone does make a choice, I was so, so happy to become a mother, and I tried to persuade them that this is not the time for deciding about a child, and when you are in your early thirties you might as well be 24 when you don't yet have that responsibility. They just got so mad! So now, in my mind, they are a subject I avoid for the time being. They already make too much money and are much more bourgeois than I ever was. I am making a point to give this fog some time and space to evaporate. The pandemic has brought out lots of Pandora creatures, and I am reminded of the Bosch paintings.

I think she means the painting of Saturn eating his kid?

Karen made predictably overbearing overtures to "relate" to my now preschool-age child, gestures both unsettling and ineffectual. She wrote my daughter tons of letters, always about some boring self-involved bullshit that no child on earth would find engaging.

Karen seemed, from the frequency and angst of correspondence, to expect that I would scold and cajole my kid into writing back. I might have done so had she not been spamming us so much, or had loaded so much pay-attention-to-me desperation in the letters. Sure, once in a while I honestly *might* nag my kid to write a thank-you card to a relative who sends a gift, but not if you're sending weird shit to both of us every other week.

I could hear the shrill pitch of her expectations *write back! children should be taught to write back! write back!* in between the lines. It made me uncomfortable, so I tried to tune it out.

Her attempts to assign *homework* to my child then started. At first gently ("I thought she might like this math problem I wrote, please have her mail me the results,") they then kicked into overdrive ("I re-wrote it and added another, and I included a stamped envelope. Tell her to WRITE BACK") and finally into transactional passive aggression (sending her a \$20 with no comment).

from the past sections of our relationship together. He is sincerely trying to be healthy and exercise every day, eat well and drink minimally. When we met, we were both under great stress in our teaching jobs. The sense of a mindful flow of the second half of your life was impossible to cultivate as we do now, I feel. I observe that you have the artist's sense of process and meaning, and I hope you do not ever have to fight for your sense of self while working in a large system that is not respectful of its workers and participants, as in the [REDACTED] DOE. I am proud of the fact that I took a reduced pension and resigned in protest in the fall of 2016, when the teaching I was required to do was unethical.

[REDACTED] piano playing has moved in leaps and bounds and listening to him on this historic instrument is remarkable for me. He plays several hours a day, and I come back and forth from my garden chores and enjoy the magnificent sound. We have tea in my garden almost every afternoon, and I realize that our relationship very much needed me to stop working in the little part time jobs. I think I can finally breathe and enjoy the flow of the seasons with your dad now that I realize I have worked hard enough for the money in my life, and the grind to earn and save can finally recede and [REDACTED] and I can observe the bees, butterflies and hummingbirds. I am so happy that this piano can live in my house, and my house can live in back of, in front of, and to the side of my gardens. We have a pretty awesome bubble over here. Our flow reminds me of the precious 1 semester and summer school when I just danced and did not work before I finished my BFA in dance. I felt that I lived a short life in art and it filled me, gave back.

OCTOBER 3

Dear [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] went back down to [REDACTED] today to do some things in his apartment after many lovely days here. He told me today is the anniversary of [REDACTED] death and we spent time thinking about the import of her life on this earth. I am including a draft of a children's book that I recently wrote, called How to Make a Memory Ledge, for children who have lost a grandparent, as there are now going to be so many more in our pandemic time. I thought that if you find it says anything at all well, it might be helpful and self-actualizing for [REDACTED]. I am going to pursue getting it published, for, as a teacher, I found there was a need for this type of book. I cannot say that I could ever understand the depth of meaning of this loss of your mother at such a young age. I will not risk sounding glib on this kind of subject. When a child grows up learning the memory of a grandparent they have not known, there is profound understanding of life and death that others learn only much later. My mother's father died the year before I was born, and I grew up so closely enfolded into the legend of his personality, that it is as if I experienced him in life. He was a Lutheran minister, came here at age 17 from Norway, already an orphan. I guess I do feel a connection to the sense of stepping into the mantle of continuing with this life and honoring that which was the best of those we mourn. There still are the little differences that were never resolved in my 64 years of my mother's 100, but we had a peace

Family, neighbors, coworkers, students, politicians, athletes: all a pack of tormenters, bullies, interlopers and con artists and adversaries.

The intensity was uneven; here an explosive paragraph, there a passing reference to some drive-by injustice she'd suffered. As with the tale of the kindergarten molestee, the letters also contained guileless accounts of herself being wildly inappropriate, or even openly victimizing other people in sometimes far-fetched ways, while also explicitly stating herself to be the victim.

And then there was herself and her romance and the urgent need to listen to herself relive and narrativize it. The hum of background conflict was almost drowned out by a flood of *cheesiness*.

there in the distinct manner of uprights, I had this lovely sensation. We started making our coffees. I have to drink decaf or waking up at 8 becomes waking up at 4. I eat my usual dark 92% chocolate to break the fast of the night, and I then could put a description on the sensation. I feel that I have accomplished my 19 year old's ambition, and became an ex-pat in Europe. That was a fantasy I had after a few months in Germany when I graduated high school a semester early. I especially liked Denmark. The people there changed clothes on the beach without a thought to who saw them naked for a few seconds. Unlike the Swedes, they had the modesty to change into swimsuits. My family background on my mother's side is Norwegian, and they changed inside at the time and wore really dowdy, scratchy, unflattering swimsuits. I know, because I borrowed one. In any case, I told [redacted] about this feeling and he was quite pleased. He is playing the piano so well now. We are in some sub-category of American society, a place we decorate with the good colors and listen to beautiful music.

I know it is a hard world to be young in, but there are these small things to observe and rejoice in. I am so glad you have [redacted]. The smartest thing about your situation is that you never married. You are doing very well with all you are going through. I was once helpless in a divorce that lasted seemingly forever, from the father of my children, who used the gender issues he/she had, (she when through gender reassignment surgery) to accuse me of prejudice. I was just trying to keep both hands on the steering wheel for the boys.

imagine sending someone like 20 of these letters in a row even after it becomes clear they're not gonna respond.

Around this time, I was less in touch with my dad. If he was at his house, I tried to call him at least once or twice a week. If he was at Karen's, I tried not to call, because she would ask for the phone. She especially seemed inclined to do this if it was an emergency, though, or if she sensed we were speaking about sensitive family topics.

She would straight up take the phone and start telling me about her divorce. More than once, she got him to hand her the phone and told me, "You sure keep him on the phone an incredibly long time. It's kind of excessive."

to be safeguarded and encouraged, not groomed and humiliated. I myself was accused falsely, ludicrously, but officially in court, of pushing him, attacking him and of "physically ejecting" him from our home when the last deception during the marriage was the straw that broke this camel's back. In fact, he moved out when I and the children were several states away in June, 1995.

<-- for some reason this detail is on the front page of her blog.

Breakup #2: Old and Overweight

She dumped him again within a few weeks of the pandemic beginning; as before, first ghosting, and then reaching out obliquely. I think it started when he tried to take her on a trip to visit his brother and sister-in-law, and predictably she first agreed to it, then explosively took issue with being *forced* to endure physical discomfort while traveling.

I believe during this breakup she told him he was "too old" for her (I think they have an age gap of like 6 or 7 years), and also that she didn't like that he was "overweight" (both things that, if they were true, hadn't exactly changed in the first 6-7 years of their relationship). As flaky and mean and weird as it was to do something like this to him, I figured naively that he had probably seen the last of her.

So he went through the first year of the pandemic single. It was understandably rough, and surely stressful, but I'm proud of how well he took care of himself, playing music a lot and taking

long solo walks. I called or texted with him every day, and he spent a lot of time talking about Karen, wondering what could have gone differently, wondering why it was like this, if maybe just the fear of COVID was too much for her already shredded nerves.

Their breakup lasted most of a year before, again, things rebooted. Before long, they were back in their visiting routine: he would go to her house for a week or two at a time, then go home for a week and change for his music lessons and to keep up with the house.

He was happy and relieved to have her company again, and I made an effort to be happy for him and supportive, even though by now she had solidly gone full-blown TERF.

News: I think I did sell on the idea of doing abs exercises every morning. He got a nice yoga mat and I use it in the evening, when I am most limber, leave it out for him to use after breakfast. My selling point is that when you have strong abs, your back is in better shape, and that makes the piano practice flow. He has gotten past the first sore muscles and seems to be on a roll with the morning exercise. I am a bit of a crusader for abs exercises, as it helps with balance, digestion, mood and body mass. I have a collection of moves I do incorporating breathing and the abs work, and I find I sleep better if I do this in the evening before bed.

Unfortunately the path of this pathogen we live with is going to require a long time to solve. I am also very happy that you and [redacted] have been in close touch and that you text him every day. I could not get that commitment from my sons. I don't like to place that into a sexist category, but my friends say daughters would call and be in touch more. My sons also could not handle my depth of grief over my mother and were not in touch so much before and after

she died. I know I was kind to her in her last years and I have no regrets. I do also blame the daughter-in-law and girlfriend for my sons' casual attitudes, which is probably, as well, some kind of old fashioned sexism. I feel too much technology takes the compassion and humanity out of people, and the millenials are a case in point. You have a sensible stance on that.

The Letters

To be honest, the letters are probably the most benign weird thing Karen involved me in. Basically I just think she got all hopped up on dark chocolate, sat down at her PC and typed up a multi-page letter to me as soon as my dad left her house, no doubt thinking consciously that she was bonding with him; being, in some form, connective.

But it wasn't possible for me to share that interpretation. You can tell when someone writes you a personal letter but still somehow addresses you as an abstraction, right? I'm sure I've done it to people too in my life. It's one of the pitfalls of writing, if you get lost in the sauce with your own narrative you could start to fuzzy-forget that people are real.

In Karen's case, the sheer crushing volume of words belied the fact that they were not really addressed to an actual person. She was talking to herself, or listening to herself talk about her boyfriend, in a sort of mental masturbation around their relationship and her self-image.

It wasn't that she didn't mention other people besides my dad and herself. It was just that everyone else fell into two categories: me/my daughter (whom she gratuitously flattered to an uncomfortable degree), and any other living person she'd ever interacted with (who were all, without exception, fucking her over in some way).