



Fake

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Karen

William White sat across from me, fidgeting nervously with an empty packet of artificial sweetener while his coffee went cold, ignored on the table in front of him.

He rolled the torn yellow paper up like a tight little spliff, then unrolled it, smoothed it out flat, and then rolled it again.

I was midway through my third cup of coffee with no intention of stopping soon. I was tired and edgy, irritated at William for dragging me out at this time of night, and getting even more irritated at his refusal to get to the point.

"Did you know Philip K. Dick had a twin sister?"

I stared at him blankly.

"Her name was Jane. She died shortly after their birth. They were six weeks premature," he continued, his eyes drifting off to the window to his right. I wasn't sure if he was looking at something through it or staring at his own reflection in it.

"Dick never got over Jane's death; her ghost haunted him throughout his life, and the idea of a *phantom twin* pops up throughout his work. Some have even speculated that Dick's inability to make peace with the loss of his sister contributed to his drug abuse, and by extension also his death at the relatively young age of 53."

He unrolled the sweetener packet, laid it on the table, placed both index fingers together in its center, and then spread them outward, smoothing the paper flat.

I reached out and slammed my own hand on top of the packet, preventing him from fiddling with it anymore.

"Sorry," he said sheepishly.

I let out a sigh. "Not that this isn't fascinating, but did you seriously call me out to Denny's at 3 am for this?"

William took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, then curled his lips into a bitter half-smile. "My whole life I've always felt like two people, like there were two sides to my personality - one masculine, one feminine. As a child, I almost convinced myself that I had a twin sister, like an imaginary friend, onto whom I projected this feminine side of me. It was like, I felt so much shame for having these feelings, wanting to dress up and play with dolls and all that - that I had to create an entirely separate identity that I could attribute these desires to."

I groaned and buried my head in my hands. This wasn't the type of mind fuck you should lay on anybody at 3 am, least of all your girlfriend. And considering that in college, my freshman-year boyfriend ended up leaving me for a man, I felt pretty sure I knew where this conversation was heading.

"Karen, look at me," he said, reaching across the table to lift up my chin with his hand.

"Why are you telling me this now?" I asked.

"I'm trying to make you understand," he said. "I'm trying to explain why I ended up committing one of the biggest journalistic hoaxes of our time."

And then he did explain.

By the time he finished, I actually wished he had been trying to tell me he was gay.

William

This isn't so much a story as it is a confession.

It all began a few years back - around 2005, I think, shortly before we met - when I was covering a big fire in the Santa Cruz Mountains for Syndicated Media wire service. Just as things were finally starting to wind down, a rumor started circulating around the base camp about one of the houses that had burned down near the source of the fire. It started out with the firefighters, quickly spread through the other rescue workers, and within a matter of hours it had made its way into the press corps.

The house was a modest wooden cabin that had probably been there since the '70s. A team of rescue workers stumbled upon it while sweeping the area for survivors. The owner was found pinned under a giant onyx statue and burned alive; it must have fallen over while he was trying to escape the blaze. Which was gruesome

enough, getting burned alive, but that wasn't necessarily a story - to the press corps, that was just another stat to be tallied.

It became a story when one of the rescue workers realized what the statue was - a nine-foot-tall representation of the Hindu goddess Kali, her face twisted with maniacal fury, poised to strike with a sword raised above her head, nude but for the belt of human arms around her waist and a necklace of human heads.

That got their attention enough for them to take a closer look at what else was left behind in the cabin. Traces of goat's blood soaked into the floorboards. Charred remnants of books on black magic. Metal jewelry shaped into occult symbols. A ceremonial dagger with a pentagram carved in the hilt.

The worst of it, though, was what they found underground, in the small makeshift basement. It had survived nearly untouched by the fire due to a thick concrete lining. At first the rescue team thought it was just some survivalist nut's fallout bunker, which is probably what it was originally built to be.

But when they descended into the basement, they didn't find any of the expected emergency provisions. Instead they found an empty room with no furniture or supplies of any kind, only a seven-foot metal chain tethered to the far wall.

Someone clearly had been living down there. There were pools of human excrement on the floor - urine, feces, menstrual blood. But there was no furniture, no clothes, no sanitary products. The only other thing they found down there was a small toy piano with fingertip-sized indentations where the grimy white plastic keys had been worn down.

I heard about the cabin from a forest ranger named Dave Redstone over dinner with another reporter, Amy Hunter-Greene, with the local public radio affiliate. After a lot of nagging and plying with wine, Amy and I finally convinced Redstone to drive us out there. The fact that he had spent the last two weeks trying to nail Amy probably helped.

The drive up took about forty minutes just to navigate the narrow, unpaved back roads twisting through the charred wasteland that had once been dense forest. The cabin sat at the bottom of a small but deep valley tucked away in the middle of the mountain range, deliberately inaccessible to the casual camper or hiker.

Pulling up, I could already feel a weird, palpable energy in the place. The three of us climbed down from the jeep and approached the burned out shell of the cabin, illuminated by the headlights. We treaded lightly through the debris, and then Amy and I both froze as we simultaneously saw the Kali statue, which someone had stood back upright. We stared at it, transfixed by the way the shadow and light played on the grotesque features, so intricately carved into the stone. Redstone finally broke the spell only when he uncovered the trap door leading underground.

Descending into that basement was the most chilling experience of my life. The air felt electric; every hair on my body stood on end. My heartbeat had slowed to an almost imperceptible murmur, my breath was stilled, and I felt a coldness penetrating my skin all the way to my bones, making me feel brittle and weightless.

The stench of human waste was so thick as to be almost palpable. It hit us in a violent burst as soon as we pried open the trap door and never let up. We had to tie bandannas over our mouths just to be able to stand walking down there.

After a few minutes, it got to be too much for Amy, and she fled upstairs to be sick. Redstone followed after her, eager to play the sensitive, caring protector role. Left alone, I continued sweeping the room with my flashlight. That was when I found the toy piano.

I was never one to believe in ghosts, but *haunted* was the only way I can describe the feeling that came over me. As soon as I knelt down and touched the piano, I instinctively spun around to look behind me, certain that someone was watching me from the darkness.

But of course, no one was there. I was all alone. Meaning that no one saw when I reached out for the piano again, scooped it up and stuffed it in my backpack.

Amy and I debated for hours over how exactly to write about the cabin, or whether we should even publish the story at all. Sure, there were a lot of good, sensationalistic angles - Satanic rituals, a kidnapped girl, probable sexual abuse. But there were also a lot of unknowns, the biggest of which was the victim. If they had found the girl - alive or dead - then you would have had a real story. Without her, Amy maintained, everything was speculation. "We can't even be sure that someone had been kept down there unwillingly," she insisted. "For all we knew, it could have been a couple of weirdos playing out some disturbed sex fantasy. There are a lot of freaks in the world, after all."

Despite these reservations, I eventually did write the story, being careful not to play it as too over-the-top. I only brought up the really salacious stuff when I quoted the more speculative idol chatter I had heard from the rescue workers, mostly when they thought they were off the record.

It turned out to be one of my most heavily syndicated pieces, despite the inherent open-endedness. Based on its success, I was able to convince my editor to let me do a couple follow-ups with information I managed to dig up about the cabin's owner.

His name was Aeneas Cole, as confirmed both by dental records as well as the deed for that parcel of land. He was an associate professor of Theology and Philosophy at a local private university, and his body of published work showed an ongoing interest in the occult.

His wife had died seven years before the fire, and by all accounts it didn't take long for the grief to consume him. He bought the cabin shortly after her death and drove up every weekend religiously. Soon, he withdrew completely from his old life, quit his job, sold his house, and took permanent refuge there.

Beyond that, the trail went cold, and I soon dropped the story - at least as far as anyone in my public, professional life knew. Privately, however, I couldn't stop obsessing over it.

The plan for the hoax didn't come all at once. It was really more like a puzzle - a lot of little bits and pieces that didn't look like much of anything individually until they are laid out beside each other and a larger picture eventually emerges.

That damned piano was definitely an important piece. I kept it hidden in a box that I buried under a bunch of junk in my closet, only taking it out late at night, like it was some dark secret - something clandestine, something special. I'd close my eyes and picture that basement, the cold concrete walls, the acrid, noxious smell, the darkness. I'd imagine *her*, how she looked, what it felt like to be trapped down there, and then lay my fingers delicately on the keys - in the grooves made by her fingers - and start to play.

As the weeks passed, I played it more frequently. Soon it became a kind of compulsive ritual, digging it out of the closet every night, playing it, and then hiding it again for the next night. Mind you, I never made claims to any musical talent, and most of what I played was terrible, pointless noodling. But all the same, I felt something whenever my skin touched those keys, an electricity surging back through my body, like touching a live wire.

Another piece of the puzzle came in the form of a chance assignment at work, an interview with an author - a ghostwriter, actually, someone who wrote celebrities' "autobiographies" for them. What fascinated me about him was his method of preparing for a book, for being able to write convincingly in another person's distinctive voice. He immersed himself completely in his subjects' lives, not just talking to them, but living with them, shadowing them, going to the grocery store with them, sitting down at the table for family dinner, watching them interact with their kids.

It takes a certain type of person to be able to do that, to subordinate your own personality and allow another person's to take over so completely. It's like letting someone else's soul invade your body - could you be sure they wouldn't leave a piece of themselves behind? Could you be sure of finding your own identity again once theirs has moved on?

The next piece was a conversation I had with a colleague. It was a wanky, purely speculative bit of happy hour pseudo-intellectual sparring, fueled by two dollar pints and gristly, undercooked wings. The question was this: in the digital age, when so much of our existence takes place on the internet, would it be possible to actually fabricate a completely separate identity online?

My colleague, a fellow newswire reporter named Matt Marrón, had a penchant for all things bizarre, macabre, or perverse. He was the kind of guy who surfed the net for photos of murder scenes and autopsies, the kind of guy who named *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS* as his all-time-favorite movie. When I first told him about the occult stuff found in the cabin, it launched him into an incoherent twenty-minute rant about Crowley, Jack Parsons, and the Whore of Babylon.

Anyways, we are at the topic of online identities on that particular night because Matt had recently become obsessed by the phenomenon of pedophiles who posed as teenage girls online. He apparently spent hours memorizing the surprisingly elaborate details these freaks had manufactured to give credence to their alter egos. He hypothesized that for some of these guys, the web identities became more than a means to an end, they actually got off just on the fantasy of picturing themselves as young girls, like the way that some otherwise straight men get turned on by wearing women's lingerie. It was all about becoming the object of your own desire.

After staggering back home from the bar, I stayed up all night online - convincing myself it was just a lark, harmless curiosity - to see how easy it would be to actually fabricate an imaginary person's existence on the internet. As it turned out, it was shockingly easy.

The final thing that solidified my plan, though, was an article I read about three sisters in Linz, Austria, who had been held captive in their home for seven years by their mother, completely cut off from the outside world. When they were finally found, the house was buried in trash and excrement piled over a meter high. They were kept in darkness, and by the time they emerged had skin so white that they couldn't stand prolonged exposure to natural lighting. With no one to talk to but each other and the mice that infested their house, the girls had invented their own language, a whimsical, sing-song mixture of gibberish and German that was indecipherable to anyone but them.

It was their made-up language that sparked my imagination.

Returning to the toy piano, I played a simple, seven-note figure over and over and tried to imagine what the girls' language might have sounded like. With my repetitive figure as accompaniment, I began singing random gibberish, something between actual words and pure vocalese, not thinking about the sounds that my mouth formed, just letting the melody flow through me to fit the shape and feel of the music. While I sang, I closed my eyes and saw an image of a woman - faint, ill-defined, but somehow still very real.

A few weeks later, when I happened to have a free weekend, I called up my old college roommate to hook up some acid, knowing he still hung around with the kind of people that could get it on short notice. Then I covered the windows in my apartment with dark sheets and shut off the lights, making sure it was pitch black. Once the acid started to peak, I the dug out the piano.

The drugs created a kind of phantom reverb in my head, and the music echoed and shimmered around me in ethereal waves, rippling across the darkness. For every note I played, countless others sprang from it, like a psychedelic flower blossoming infinitely - or more appropriately, like cells dividing, birthing a new living organism. Soon, I was able to actually perceive the sound as tangible light-forms, the way I imagined a synaesthetic would.

As the lights intensified, a euphoric sensation swept over me, and before I realized it, my cheeks were wet with tears. In the midst of this, a single image was burned into my mind - a woman's face again, but this time more vibrant, more alive, painted in pulsating, electric shades of pinks and oranges.

And then it was over, and I slowly came to my senses to find myself once again alone in the darkness.

A couple hours passed.

Soon daylight peeked into my apartment through the cracks between my venetian blinds. I sat in my desk chair, twitchy, restless, and coming down hard.

I couldn't focus enough to get any work done. I didn't have the strength to do anything else productive around the apartment. My stomach recoiled at the thought of food. And I just couldn't bring myself to even try to go outside.

Not really knowing what else to do with myself, I went on the internet.

I stumbled onto an online support group for people with mental illnesses. Their stories stirred something inside of me, a resonance as if their struggles were my own. They were ashamed of who they were. They felt constant, sometimes crippling, fear, knowing that their own minds could betray them at any time. They got frustrated dealing with those closest to them - family, friends, lovers - who, for all their trying, simply could not wrap their heads around what it was like to live with mental illness. They felt guilty about hurting or burdening those same loved ones. But through it all, they survived, and they were able to accomplish amazing things with their lives.

Before I even had a chance to think through the ramifications of my actions, I started typing. *Hello, my name is Zoe Amaranth. I am nineteen years old, undergoing treatment for schizophrenia and depression, and trying to remember who I am. For seven years, I was held captive in the darkness, trapped like an animal, alone and frightened. I don't know who was before that or where I came from. All I remember is the darkness.*

I didn't sleep or leave the apartment at all that weekend. By the time I dragged myself into work, "Zoe" had an e-mail address, a MySpace page, a blog on LiveJournal, and registered accounts on a few dozen forums dedicated to mental illness and victims of sexual abuse.

Zoe started out as my hobby at first, something to kill a few minutes on the net while having my morning coffee. The more I immersed myself in her, however, the more she started feeling like a dirty little secret, something I had to hide from the rest of the world - even you. There were times when you and I sat across from each other, just having a normal conversation, and then suddenly I'd be hit with an intense feeling of shame. I'd remember this other piece of my existence that meant so much to me, but that I couldn't share with you out for fear of how you might react. Would you think I was a freak? Would you be offended? Would you leave? I knew in my heart of hearts that it was something you would never be able to understand. But I

couldn't stop - I didn't want to stop - and soon my *hobby*, my *little secret*, became a full-blown obsession.

And then, one day when I was in the middle of a dry streak at work and my editor was chewing me out about my dearth of real, substantive stories, I realized that a plan had indeed finally materialized out of the disparate puzzle pieces I had been collecting, and I was ready to put it in action.

"Remember that story I did three years ago, the one about that cabin they found in the Santa Cruz Mountains after fire?" I heard myself say. My editor nodded slowly in response, his body slumped back in the chair to broadcast his exasperation.

"Well, I think I might have found the girl."

Call me naïve, but I never imagined the firestorm that my article would set off.

Front page in all the major dailies from New York to LA. Feature articles in several national news magazines. Segments on 24-hour cable news channels. Invitations from network TV talk shows.

But while everyone around me was celebrating, I felt nothing but encroaching darkness, like slowly sinking into quicksand, feeling myself suffocating under the weight of the guilt and the fear of being discovered.

I was able to buy some time by citing Zoe's fragile mental state to excuse her refusal to do interviews and public appearances. And while I claimed to have met with her personally, I insisted that I promised not to release her phone number or address until she agreed she was ready.

But I knew I could only stall for so long. It was only a matter of time before people started getting suspicious, and I would eventually need to produce Zoe in the flesh.

Miraculously, my salvation appeared one morning at Starbucks. It was a flyer, a cheap black-and-white photocopy, announcing a performance by Zoe Amaranth at a local club called *Glossolalia*. I had to stare at it for five minutes just to process what I was seeing.

I took the flyer home and called the club to see if it was some kind of joke, or if maybe some band had adopted that name as a really tasteless attempt to be edgy. The manager, though, insisted that she was just woman who came in off the street to audition, and that was the name she gave.

Of course I had to show up. I wasn't sure what I was expecting, but I certainly wasn't prepared for what I found. When I saw her take the stage, I became convinced more than ever that it was a joke. She had long, violently pink hair and wore a black lace corset, red plaid schoolgirl skirt, and a pair of big heart-shaped sunglasses like *Lolita*. She was alone, just her and a single keyboard and a microphone beside a large rack of sound processors. I almost left right then and there, but before I got a chance to get up, she started to play.

I was paralyzed. The music she started playing was exactly what I had heard in my head on the night I took the acid, except it was richer, more intricate, more alive than I could ever have imagined. Then she leaned into the mic and started singing lyrics that didn't sound like any language spoken on earth. And yet it wasn't random gibberish, the way the words flowed together seemed deliberate and structured, as if it was a completely new language with its own grammar, its own consistent internal logic.

As I sat awestruck, it was like everything else melted away - there was no more club, no more people, only her and me and the music filling the vast open space around us. All sense of time and place dissolved, and I watched for what seemed like an eternity as she constructed an entire universe made of sound.

When it was over, I went back to the club's cramped makeshift dressing room to talk to her. It took me several minutes of staring at her in silent wonder from the doorway before I managed to actually say anything. Meanwhile, she shifted uncomfortably in her seat, probably trying to decide if I was there to rape her, rob her, or ask for an autograph.

"My name's William," I finally said, tripping over my words. "William White."

"I'm Zoe," she replied, her posture relaxing noticeably.

I shook my head. "No. I mean, I'm *the* William White. I'm the one who's been writing the article about Zoe Amaranth."

She gave a gentle, amused nod. "I know; I've read your articles. It's so good to finally meet you." Then she gave me what they call a *knowing smile* and added, "Finally meet like this, I mean. Face to face. In the flesh."

The shutters lifted, and for the first time in months I felt relieved - intensely, rapturously relieved.

"How do you feel about talk shows?" I asked.

Zoe and I made the rounds on the talk show circuit together, riding the wave until public interest in her story finally faded as these things always do. After the initial media frenzy was over, I settled into ghostwriting her memoirs, for which the two of us raked in an advance so big that my share alone was more than I had made in all seven years of my career as a fledgling journalist combined.

I never pressed her about her real identity or her life before we met, since any time I even hinted at the subject she became moody and irritable. Of course, I was curious - and further, I was nervous that someone from her past might expose our deception. She had to come from somewhere, after all; she had to have parents and teachers and childhood friends out there in the world, one of whom was eventually bound to turn on the TV and wonder why she's sitting there in a pink wig and calling herself "Zoe" and talking a lot of nonsense about being held prisoner for seven years. However, after a couple discreet inquiries didn't pay off, I was content to leave it alone and not let my curiosity jeopardize a good thing.

Instead, I focused on quietly renewing my search for the girl who had been trapped in that cabin - I mean, the one who *really* was there. It seemed likely that she died in the fire, but I wanted to make sure. If she was in fact dead, at least I would at least have a little more peace of mind to show for my efforts. And if she was still alive, I wanted to be the one to find her and make sure she was going to stay quiet.

I started by going through the records of everyone who had died in the fire, since enough time had now passed for them to sort out everyone's identities. It didn't take long for me to find a likely candidate.

Valerie Gray from Alamogordo, NM - nineteen years old when she died in the fire. According to her parents, she had gone to California with her gymnastics team at the age of twelve and never returned. That meant she was missing seven years, the same time frame as Aeneas Cole's seclusion.

The blood that they found in the bunker under the cabin was a rare type. According to Valerie's medical records, she was a match. It had to be her.

I was in the clear. Not only was she dead - and therefore unable to contradict my story - but in talking to her parents, it never even occurred to them that she might have been the girl in the cabin.

Ironically, though, in trying to make sure I was protected, I ended up bringing about my own downfall.

Somehow, Amy Hunter-Greene got her hands on the information I compiled about Valerie Gray and reached the same conclusion about her identity. She resented the the success that the cabin story brought me and somehow blamed me for her decision not to run it, as if I had tricked her. She came to see me one night and blackmailed me, demanding a share of the book advance in exchange for her silence.

I had to pay her of course. Even though there wasn't conclusive proof that Valerie was the girl from the cabin, there was enough evidence to raise questions. And I knew that my hoax was too flimsy to stand up to any real scrutiny, having succeeded based only on people's willingness to believe it in the absence of any more plausible alternative. All it would have taken was a little skeptical digging to check the IP records for the web sites that I posted on, and I would have been done.

So I paid off Amy, and then some time later she asked for more money, and I paid that, too. For the last six months, she's bled me dry. She's taken all the book money, she's wiped out my savings, she's maxed my credit, and still she demands more.

That's why I'm telling you this. I don't have any other choice, I have to come clean publicly. Tonight, before I called you, I sent an e-mail to the news desks at all the major papers and networks explaining what I'd done. But I wanted you to hear it from me first, before you see it on the morning news. I wanted a chance to explain to you why I did this thing. Not so you'd excuse what I did - I know that there's no hope in that - or even so you'd forgive me. But so that maybe, at least, you can understand.

Karen

Watching someone you love destroy himself is the one of the most agonizing, heart-wrenching experiences you could ever have.

In the weeks following Will's confession, I saw him retreat from the world, letting the guilt and shame consume him a little more every day. He stopped bathing, stopped answering his phone, and eventually stopped leaving the apartment altogether, deciding all his basic needs could be met over the internet.

I'd like to believe that I tried to help him the best that I could, but there were parts of me knew this wasn't true - those were the parts of me that felt personally betrayed by his deception, that wanted to see him punished as much as the outside world did. He was a fraud, after all - an opportunist who had emotionally exploited so many people. As much as I loved him, there was that part of me that hated him with equal intensity.

Of course, he didn't seem to want my help anyways. If anything, he resented my attempts to comfort him. I found my role in his life quickly marginalized, feeling myself become like a ghost occasionally drifting in and out of his apartment, barely noticeable except at the very edges of consciousness.

Then one day I showed up at his apartment to find that his lock had been changed and an eviction notice had been posted on his front door.

I never saw him again.

That night - maybe driven by guilt, maybe desperately grasping at straws for any semblance of meaning that could possibly be wrought from this ordeal - I went to see Zoe Amaranth perform.

She was playing again at the club *Glossolalia*, the same one where Will first saw her, having returned to playing dives after Will brought her fifteen minutes to an abrupt end. It was a bright, gaudy hole-in-the-wall downtown whose front window was covered by a large, Lichtenstein-esque pop art mural depicting a man and a woman locked in an embrace. Inside, every inch of wall space was covered with art, the lighting was harsh and unforgiving, all the tables and chairs were made of a pink hard plastic, and the bar was covered with tiny mirrored tiles like a disco ball.

I took a seat right near the front of the stage, sharing a table with a young, zealously-pierced hipster couple in matching tweed coats. After a twenty-minute wait, during which I nursed one whiskey sour, Zoe finally took the stage. Her pale, cherubic face was mostly hidden behind a huge pair of pink cat's eye sunglasses and a straight-banged wig of thick, pink hair that fell all the way to her waist. As much pains as she took to conceal her face, though, her pallid, anemic frame almost completely exposed. She wore only a black lace bra, black lycra hot pants, and a pair of twenty-eye Docs.

The giant wig and glasses made sense, given that one could easily imagine why she'd want to hide her identity. I found it strange, though, that she would so brazenly show off her body. Especially considering that I - and most women - tended to do the opposite, getting self-conscious about showing too much below the neck, but not thinking twice about walking around with our faces exposed. Then I realized, her body is a distraction *from* her face, another layer to help protect her anonymity. In a week's time, any guy in this place would still be able to pick her midriff out of a lineup, and yet would never recognize her fully-clothed, even if she was standing right in front of him, face to face.

She led a trio consisting of her on keyboards, an electric cellist, and a guy programming beats with his MacBook. All three musicians were plugged into heavy duty processing rigs, making liberal use of digital delays and samplers in addition to more standard effects. The result was a shimmering, pulsating wall of sound cascading down on the audience like waves crashing on a shoal, much more intricate and layered than you would think possible with those three instruments.

Figures were repeated, echoed, stretched, and snipped, then looped back around on each other and embellished with colorful fills. The song shifted from frantic, arrhythmic syncopation to murky, amorphous tone poems to sweeping operatic themes, eschewing any semblance of traditional compositional structures.

Zoe's vocals fit the musical accompaniment perfectly, being so heavily-treated that at times she sounded like a full choir, and at other times she sounded as if she were singing through speaker phone held up to a bull horn. Her lyrics were not in English, although I couldn't quite place what language she was using. It didn't have any identifiable characteristics of any language I had heard spoken, be they Latin-based, eastern European, or south Asian.

And yet somehow, the emotions of the lyrics were so raw, so pure, that they translated clearly through her delivery, resonating deep within me, filling me alternately with the sensations of loss, struggle, pain, fear, and ultimately redemption. On some instinctual, primal level, I knew that through these songs, she was telling the story of her captivity.

Except that was impossible. She was a sham, a fake - just like Will. I had gone there with a hard heart and every intention to confirm her as a phoney.

But as she finished her set, I wasn't so sure. I glanced at the hipster couple at my table, seeing their faces rubbed raw with emotion, and our eyes met to openly acknowledge that we had all just shared in the type of experience that strips you down to the core human essence, beneath all the bullshit posturing and affectations.

Fifteen minutes after she left the stage, she re-appeared on the club floor, heading towards the bar. I followed as discreetly as I could, trying to look as little like a manic stalker as I could manage, but she spotted me all

the same.

I squeezed in next to her at the bar just as the tender was passing her a gin and tonic over the counter.

"Mind if I get that for you?" I asked.

She flashed me the kind of half-grin you give someone when you're still not sure if they're genuinely nuts or just hopelessly awkward. "That depends, are you trying to pick up on me?"

I let out a small, self-effacing laugh and responded, "No, sorry, not like that. I just meant as a token of how much I liked the show."

She shrugged. "Be my guest."

After passing the bartender a bill big enough to cover both Zoe's drink as well as another whiskey sour for me, I offered her my hand.

"My name's Karen."

She glanced down at my hand without shaking it and gave me that same half-grin. "I know who you are."

I stared at her, frozen in place as I tried to figure out if she was for real, my hand still hanging awkwardly in the air as she threw her head back and drained her glass dry.

She wiped the back of her hand across her lips in an exaggerated gesture, then leaned in close to me conspiratorially to ask, "So should we go back to my apartment, then?"

I recoiled from her, perhaps a bit more than was called for. "No, I'm not gay," I stammered. "I mean, I'm really not trying to pick up on you. I just--"

She cut me off. "You want to ask me questions - about who I am, where I came from. But a bar this loud is crap for having any civilized conversation. And besides, these aren't the sort of questions I want to answer out in the open. So we should go somewhere quieter. Like my apartment, which is only a few blocks away."

Zoe's place was a cramped, sparsely-furnished studio above a derelict storefront. We entered through a side door, and I helped her lug her keyboard and sound rig up the flight of steep, concrete stairs to her place.

After we set down her gear, she motioned for me to sit on a overturned plastic milk crate that she'd fashioned into a makeshift chair with the addition of a ratty, stained throw pillow strapped to the top. Meanwhile, she sprawled herself out on the bare concrete floor, picking a half-smoked spliff out of a glass ashtray and relighting it. After taking a healthy toke, she held it out to me, but I declined.

Aside from my crate, the only other identifiable pieces of furniture were a frameless futon mattress in the far corner and a single bent brass floor lamp that barely lit the room. There were no dressers or shelves, so everything was strewn carelessly across the floor - piles of clothes, a small cosmetics case, a few errant tubes of lipstick, a roll-on deodorant, a blackened metal pot sitting on a hotplate splattered with layers of grime, crumpled up bits of trash, and other random sundries that seemed to confirm someone actually lived in this squalor.

"So, do you mind if I ask those questions now?" I ventured, trying to ignore how inadequately the cushion

protected me from the hard, uneven surface of the plastic crate.

Zoe swept aside a handful of fast food wrappers to unearth a cheap digital clock. She shook her head and answered, "Give it a couple minutes."

I squirmed in the awkward silence while she finished smoking the joint until there was absolutely nothing left for her to hold onto, feeling my butt starting to go numb from my uncomfortable seat.

Just as she stubbed out the last smoldering bit of paper in the ashtray, there was a knock at the door.

"It's open," Zoe called out.

I turned to see a woman entering the room, a scrawny little waif in a cream-colored ribbed turtleneck and a pair of dark brown slacks. I guessed her to be about my age; her diminutive frame would have made her seem a lot younger if not for her stern, angular features and the premature worry lines forming at the corners of her mouth and eyes. She had the no-nonsense look of a school teacher, or possibly a librarian, with her eyes dwarfed by a pair of thick-rimmed glasses and her dirty blonde hair pulled back into a severe ponytail.

The new woman paused noticeably when she saw me - not so much in shock, but more like amused surprise. Her lips twisted into a smirk, accentuating the asymmetry of her face. "Looks like you were right. It *was* only a matter of time before she came snooping around."

She scooted one of the speakers from Zoe's rig across the floor, positioning it across from me. As she sat down on top of it, Zoe slid over and laid her head affectionately in the new woman's lap.

She lit a cigarette and casually exhaled a perfect ring of smoke. "So have you heard from Will recently or is the poor boy still playing the self-pitying recluse?"

I shook my head in confusion. "I'm sorry, do I know you?"

"We haven't met formally," she answered, before pausing to take another drag. "My name is Amy."

Amy

Sorry if I disappoint you, but this isn't going to be a confession. This is my side of the story.

First off, Will wasn't even supposed to come with us to the cabin that night. He only happened to walk into my tent when Redstone was telling me about it, and then invited himself along. And the only reason he wanted to go was out of jealousy that I might have been fucking Redstone, whereas he had been trying - unsuccessfully - to get into my panties ever since we'd met.

And for the record, yes, I was fucking Redstone, and yes, he was an awesome lay. Much better than Will turned out to be.

Anyways, Will was the one who talked *me* out of running the story, just so he could turn around and published it himself, the two-faced prick. But whatever, I was still young and naive enough to let him pull something like that on me, so frankly I couldn't begrudge him a brief moment in the limelight. If he had left it at that, I'd have been happy to write it off as a life lesson and been on my merry fucking way.

But then the bastard got greedy.

When I saw his first story about Zoe Amaranth, something inside me snapped. It was bad enough that he stole my story, but to actually watch him fabricate news, to shit on journalistic integrity and everything I believe in and get away with it - actually get applauded for it - was more than I could stomach.

There was no doubt in my mind that it was bullshit - I knew it instinctively, feeling it deep down in my very fiber. The problem was that he had been too careful about covering his tracks; as much as I searched, I couldn't find any hard evidence linking him to the creation of the Amaranth posts. Sure, I could have probably proved it with IP logs, but I couldn't justify a subpoena based solely on my gut intuition.

Without that, the bastard had left himself too many outs. He hadn't actually written that Zoe Amaranth *was* the girl in the cabin, only that someone named Zoe Amaranth *claimed* to be the girl in the cabin. Even if Zoe's identity could be disproven, it wouldn't necessarily be proof-positive that he was lying; he might have just been careless.

Also, Zoe's delicate mental state and insistence on anonymity was the perfect excuse for her continuing refusal to come forward in the flesh. It would have also provided the cover for her to simply disappear if ever the heat became too much for Will to handle.

In short, he had thought of everything, and while I did have to concede a modicum of begrudging respect at his inventiveness, it only fed my seething, bitter contempt. I became obsessed with bringing the fucker down.

The first step was to trick him into crossing the point of no return, where he would no longer be able to excuse his lies as a simple misunderstanding. That meant helping him to finally produce Zoe in the flesh.

By pure luck, I happened across a young street musician in the park who was perfect for the part. She sat in her underwear on a plastic milk crate and played a cheap battery-powered keyboard through a busted old guitar amp. The sounds she managed to coax out of that primitive rig were the most haunting and otherworldly I had ever heard. It was as she had never listened to music before, and therefore crafted her compositions without any preconceptions about structure, tonality, or melody.

I introduced myself and invited her out to lunch. She said her name was also Amy and that she had been living on the streets for two years, ever since she ran away from her home in Palo Alto. After we finished eating, we went for a walk through downtown while I explained my plan to her. I offered \$50 a week in addition to putting her up in an apartment and helping to line up gigs. She didn't take much convincing.

Once her first performance was set, it wasn't hard to make sure Will was there. He's painfully predictable in his routine, as you are no doubt aware, so a single well-placed flyer in the Starbucks near his apartment did the trick.

I wished I could have seen the look on his face when he saw it, or been there to watch him stammer like a retarded hillbilly when he met "Zoe" - but of course my presence at that first show would have made him suspicious.

Luckily, though, he was just dense enough not to think twice when I "accidentally" ran into him at another show three weeks later, after the two of them had already started taking their little song-and-dance routine on the talk show circuit. I needed to get closer to him so I could find proof that he was a fraud, and it seemed like a tight black dress and a few-too-many drinks in a dim dive bar were the quickest means to that end. Like I said, he was always painfully predictable.

If it'd make things easier for you, I could say that he struggled with guilt over cheating on you. It wouldn't really be true, strictly speaking, but what the hell, you're free to believe any fucking thing you like.

Anyways, after a clumsy, brief, and altogether unsatisfying fuck, he passed out cold and left me free to snoop around for incriminating evidence. Which I found, obviously.

Valerie Gray. It was perfect.

But I didn't turn him in - not right away. As satisfying as I found the thought of publicly shaming Will and destroying his career, I enjoyed the sensation of having so much power over him, of watching him squirm like a worm on a hook, of knowing that I literally held his life in my hands. And I couldn't stand to let it end so quickly, I wanted to make him suffer a prolonged and agonizing downward spiral. I wanted to watch the bastard implode.

So I blackmailed him, slowly bled him dry, and laughed as the guilt consumed him from the inside out - knowing all the while that it was only a matter of time before he broke and turned himself in.

Painfully predictable.

Karen

I thought I saw Will in Safeway, once. I followed him down two aisles before he finally turned his head enough for me to see his face and realized it wasn't him.

I actually did run into Amy shortly after that. She was walking down Santana Row while I was having lunch with a couple friends from work. She passed right in front of our table on the patio, close enough for me to see that she still had the shiner I gave her before storming out of Zoe's apartment. Seeing it made me smile.

All the same, I decided that I needed to get out of this city for awhile; it had too many ghosts.

I took an extended leave from work, rented a great big topless shark of a car, cleared out what little savings I had in my bank account, and hit the road.

I sped down the open highway faster than I had ever dared to drive before. I let down my hair and felt the wind whip it around wildly. I cranked up the Raveonettes on the stereo and navigated purely by instinct and providence.

Eventually, I ended up in Alamogordo.

The Grays were listed in the phone book, and the truck stop waitress was more than happy to give me directions to their address.

They were a friendly but maudlin old couple and invited me in just a bit too eagerly, betraying how desperately lonely they were. I told them that I was a reporter working on a story for the five-year anniversary of the fire. For their part, Valerie's parents willfully ignored the flimsiness of my lie and led me back into her old room, which had been converted into something of a shrine with framed pictures, old trophies and awards, yearbooks, and photo albums all gathered together in a massive mahogany curio cabinet. We spent the better part of the afternoon inspecting each item one by one while they recounted their daughter's life through fragmented anecdotes. These stories had clearly been embellished bit by bit over countless retellings until they attained mythical proportions.

And then finally, after three hours of this, they dropped the bomb on me. It didn't look like a bomb of course; it was such a simple, unassuming little thing, a cream-colored envelope measuring six inches wide by four high, made of thick, pulpy handmade paper, postmarked Santa Cruz and dated two months before the fire. They delicately opened the back flap and slipped out the single, neatly folded page inside. It was a simple note

handwritten in loose, loopy script, signed Valerie.

Oh Will, you poor, hapless idiot, I thought. How could you not have found out about this? I imagined him on the phone with the Grays, too absorbed in his own bullshit to pay much attention to this old couple, talking so much that they could barely fit in a word edgewise. It's a flaw one often finds in reporters, confusing the difference between *finding out what someone knows* and *getting confirmation of what you already believe*.

Valerie had written to tell them that she was okay, that she was sorry she hadn't written since she disappeared, and wanted to explain what had happened. She ran away during the trip because her gymnastics coach, Mr. Silva, had raped her. She didn't know what to do, she was scared and confused and ashamed. She couldn't bear the thought of having to explain to her parents or teammates what happened, or having to look at Mr. Silva's face again. So she just ran away.

At first, she was too ashamed about what she had done to go to any authorities or seek help getting home. Somehow, she felt guilty because of what *he* did, like somehow it was her fault. Eventually, she grew up and realized it wasn't her fault, but she was still ashamed - ashamed now because she had run away, ashamed at what a stupid, scared little girl she had been.

She said that life had been hard during the seven years since she had seen them, but that she would do her parents the kindness of not going into the details. The important thing was that she had survived, that she was alive, and that she was finally happy.

She was living with her boyfriend of a year, waiting tables in a vegan diner, and had just learned that she was pregnant. She promised that once the baby was born and they had saved up enough money for a flight, she would make the trip back home so her daughter would be able to meet her grandparents.

Her mother's voice cracked as she read the letter aloud, tears streaming down her face, but she didn't break down. She stopped allowing herself to break down long ago.

I decided not to return home and instead dropped the rental off at the closest Enterprise and booked a flight to Boston, where my old college boyfriend lived. We had kept on good terms, and he didn't mind me staying on his couch until I got myself set up with a new job and a place of my own.

The first night in my new apartment, I took a folding lawn chair and a bottle of Zinfadel up on the roof, sat facing west and got pleasantly smashed while meditating on the vast amount of land I had managed to place between myself and the ghosts. For the first time since that night in Denny's, I felt free, unencumbered, like I was finally my own person again, no longer trapped in someone else's shadow.

That was a little over a year ago.

Tonight, a couple friends twist my arm into going with them to a charity art auction at a small local gallery. I am deep into my fourth glass of free Merlot when suddenly some familiar music starts up, a simple, haunting piano melody run through layers of echo, the waves of sound spreading throughout the gallery space like tentacles, gripping me tightly and drawing me to the source with inescapable magnetism.

And there she is, perched behind her keyboard, hidden beneath a black Venetian mask and a big wavy Farrah Fawcett wig, but still unmistakably her. I check the program, which lists her under the name Karen Jaune.

I listen to the rest of her set, and when she is finished playing, I join her onstage, seating myself on her keyboards amp.

"It's amazing," I say, "but after everything that happened, everything you did - encouraging Will's hoax, helping Amy tear his life apart, all of it - I still find myself unable to hate you."

As she listens, her face remains completely stoic, not betraying any hint of remorse, of indignation, of any recognizable human emotion at all.

"It's the music, isn't it?" I continue, wiping away the tears that have been welling in my eyes since the start of the set. "It's so beautiful. More than that, it's almost magical - the way that it makes people feel. It heals them, doesn't it?"

She nods her head and leans in conspiratorially to whisper, "Actually, it *is* magic."

I pull back and look at her wordlessly, wondering if she's being serious or not. She manages to hold onto her straight face for all of twelve seconds before breaking into a smile so wide, it seems to expand the size of her face twofold.

I can't help but laugh along with her - a few chuckles, nothing more, but enough to release the tension.

I help haul her equipment out to a van waiting behind the gallery. Just as she's about to climb into the driver's seat, she pauses and turns to me. Pulling off the wig and mask, she reveals the short-cropped auburn hair hidden underneath as well as the slightly asymmetrical features of her face, which is just a plain, ordinary face, neither particularly ugly nor particularly beautiful.

"Goodnight, Karen," she says she wraps her arms around me.

"Goodnight," I repeat, but then stop myself. "Well, I'm pretty sure your name isn't really also Karen. It's probably not Amy, either." She shakes her head. I continue, "And you're not Zoe, and you're not Valerie. So who the hell are you?"

She smiles.

Zoe

I'm going to tell you a story.

Once upon the time, there was a girl who could remember only the darkness. Actually, she could only remember the darkness some of the time. Sometimes she remembered nothing at all, like she never even existed before this very moment.

And when this girl emerged from the darkness, she was filled with the desire to create something beautiful.

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