Remembering Karen

This astonishing pair of memoirs arrived unheralded at *Saturday Night* from an old friend and contributor, author Andreas Schroeder of Mission, B.C., who was still a bit stunned at the coincidence that had brought them his way. As judge for a "creative nonfiction" competition staged by *Event*, a West Coast literary magazine, he had picked as one of three finalists a powerful description of what it was like to have had a drug-addicted sister, entitled "Remembering Karen." The competitors' names had been blacked out so Schroeder had no idea whose work he was reading, except that the author was clearly Karen's older sister. Then, several months later, conducting a writers' clinic at the Surrey Public Library, Schroeder found himself reading about the same Karen, but from a very different perspective. The piece, entitled "Trips from There to Here," had been submitted by a woman named Marjorie Simmins, who was the youngest daughter of a writer, Richard Simmins, and, as it turned out, Karen's kid sister. Zoë Landale, author of "Remembering Karen," was Richard Simmins's oldest daughter. The effect of reading the two memoirs back to back was, Schroeder wrote us, "stereoscopic, like one of those Ansel Adams photos that seem to have more depth of field than the technology can account for. It's the sort of phenomenon one can't really engineer – for one thing, one doesn't usually find two writers in the same 'bombed-out' family." The overriding coincidence is of course that, after years of trying to come to grips with the explosion that had gone off in their lives, both sisters should decide, within months of each other and each without the other's knowledge, to tackle the experience on paper. ▸

Remembering Karen by Zoë Landale

I open the front door at Mum's to a blue-uniformed cop and think: *Karen*. There is no other reason for him to be here. What has she done this time? Skipped out on an ambulance bill? Mum shouldn't be responsible any more, damn it. Isn't it just like Karen to wreck Christmas! I can't figure out where the policeman's questions are leading. It must take a good three minutes before he comes out with it: Karen is dead.

Dead? The world splinters into multiple thin cold lines. That's what he says. I don't believe him. She's sold her ID... it wouldn't be the first time.

By this time the cop is standing in the front hallway, and Mum is crying in the living room. Aunt Anne has her arms around her and is encouraging her to ventilate. Aunt Anne is big on ventilating. It comes from her time as an art therapist at Warrendale, an institution famous for its work with schizophrenic, autistic, and generally disturbed kids. John Brown, who founded Warrendale, has a centre in Vancouver. We once tried to get Karen in. No level of government would pay for her treatment. It would have cost us $7,000 a year.

Mum is sitting on the rust-coloured couch and going on and on about the last time she saw Karen, just three days ago when Dad came over from Victoria to take her out to the AA Christmas dinner. Mum had accused her of being stoned and Karen had said no, she wasn't, it was the heels on her boots making her wobble. Now that's all Mum can think of, what an awful person she was to have thought Karen stoned when it was the HEELS ON HER BOOTS. If she'd had Karen's HEELS fixed maybe this wouldn't have happened.

She must've been in a bad way for Mum to have caught on.

Thank goodness Aunt Anne is here.

Poor Aunt Anne, to have come all the way from Toronto for this.

I take the cop back to the kitchen. He is young, with a regulation moustache, dark and bushy. The stripes on his pants seem awfully yellow. They remind me of a wasp, there is that edge of irritation, of menace, in the colour. He asks and asks and asks me questions. Who *cares* what Karen's real birthday is? It is either December 16 or December 18, but we always celebrate it on December 1 so she can get two sets of presents just like everyone else.

The cop cares. I have to ask Mum. December 18 it is. Back in the shabby kitchen, its ancient linoleum shining with Mop & Glo, I plug in the kettle to make tea. We have to pull ourselves together. I offer everyone, including the cop, tea and aspirin on a tray. I have been well trained. This is what one does in a crisis.

I take my own advice, two aspirin and a cup of tea. I am surprised when the cop refuses both. If I had to cope with a situation like this, I'd need tea, the stronger the better. Maybe not the aspirin; he *is* on duty.

I wonder, vaguely, what the cop thinks of the kitchen. Back in the sixties, Dad had it painted white with Easter-egg-purple trim. There are five doors, back, pantry, hall, basement, and dining-room, so it makes for a lot of purple. What I mind are the kitchen counters, made from tiny tiles that have permanent mildew between them.

It is beginning to sink in that very probably Karen is dead. Someone is. Someone died of an overdose in the Blue Boy hotel down on the South-East Marine, where Dad had paid for a room for Karen. Of course it could've been Lana... any of Karen's junkie friends.

"What did Karen die from?" I ask, finally.

"Mandrax," the cop says. He sees my frown. "They're a kind of barbiturate." And there's more about the assistant manager knocking on Karen's door, but I'm thinking about Mum getting phoned up by little old ladies who lived on tree-lined streets, "Excuse me, but I think this is your daughter I found lying unconscious," and how Karen is known by name at every emergency department in the whole Lower Mainland, and that she can't really be dead now.

That'd be too easy. Any moment she'll come in, laughing, though she's supposed to stay away from here for good. Very very funny. Like the blackmail she twisted out of at least one of her girlfriends' boyfriends. First of all she slept with the guy, then she came to him and said she was pregnant, that'd be $500 for an abortion. Right now. Then she wouldn't have to tell.

"So she'd be twenty," the police officer says.

"That's right." My math, as always, is weak, and in times of need deserts me completely. If he says twenty, twenty it is. I'm twenty-two, so he must be right.

"She just turned twenty," he repeats, as if he finds it incredible.

"She's been on drugs since she was eleven," I say. Harshly. That's nine years of hell, buddy boy. You have no idea of the kind of shit that went on in this house. Ever try to keep a full-grown person in her room? What do you do when she won't stay, comes roaring up from the basement, time after time after time, so stoned she can't speak, but ready, willing, and determined to wreck the house?

Think about it. I do. I'd sworn I wouldn't ever spend another Christmas in this house but I had agreed to come back for tonight's Boxing Day dinner because Aunt Anne was here and Mum finally, I couldn't believe it, FINALLY, said Karen couldn't come.

She couldn't come back for Christmas. She couldn't come back to live. Imagine! After me telling Mum for years that having Karen in the house was destroying my younger brother and sister, and Mum giving Karen fifteen more chances: "I really think she's changed, Zoë, this time will be different." Mum, the one-more-chance-forever Mum, didn't believe any more that things were going to change.

"When was the last time you saw her?"

I have to think. "A year and a half." I'd cut her venomous presence out of my heart. I had had no middle sister for years. This cop knew nothing. I'd have thought he'd have seen a few horrifying things by now, enough to stop being so surprised. "She's been over in Victoria for the last year in the psychiatric wing of the Royal Jubilee Hospital.

"She was discharged and wanted to come back to Vancouver. Dad brought her over and took her out for Christmas dinner," I explain. "AA had some big do. Mum finally said she couldn't come back here. Dad got Karen a room at the Blue Boy so she could think about what she wanted to do."

The cop is so earnest, so straight. How can he understand all the horrible Christmases we've had with Karen stoned, black make-up smeared under her eyes, throwing fits, throwing scenes, throwing gravy, picking up and heaving the big dragon pitcher our great-grandmother painted, ugly

her various scams (always swore with heart-wrenching sincerity *this* time it was true), I had grown quite upset thinking about the awful life any child of hers would have. She'd undoubtedly have given the baby to Mum to raise, then come back and caused horrendous scenes, run away with the child, begged for money....

Ah, Karen. As a family we have carried you about with us from the day of your death. Guilt. Mum and Dad were flattened with it for years. It had been up to them as parents... if only... if only. They wished they'd done... *Star light star bright, first star I see tonight.*

Our sister, Marjorie, still dreams about you. I hated what you did to her, the malicious power you held, the way you made her jump, played on her fears. When she was little, you'd make up stories about animals for her. Nice, except all the animals would die. Marjorie would cry, but you'd never make them come back to life again.

I had nightmares for ten years after you died, Karen. In the dreams, you'd still be alive and coming after me. You'd put on weight in hospital. I incorporated that into my dreams, a heavier you, but with the same almost-waist-length hair, the white face, black eyeliner above and beneath your eyes à la Cher all those years ago, or Cleopatra on TV. Your slack, open bottom lip that let me know you were stoned, and I was in for it.

It took us years, as a family, before we got past talking about you every time any of us were together. What could we have done differently? Were there places we could have got help for you and hadn't tried? We did try. Although it would be more honest to say that Mum did. Every year, it seemed, Condé and I would sit down with Mum when we came back from that season's fishing and try to Straighten Things Out. No problem was impossible to solve if approached logically. We'd come up with lots of ideas. Mum would either have tried them already, or would try them only to find out one more time that things wouldn't pan out.

Was it our fault, the way you turned out? Psychiatrists like to suggest that a family will pick one member, usually a middle child like you, onto whom they foist all their craziness. Knowing that, if it's true, could we have acted differently? Our failings still beat us about the head. Failure to love you. The withering away of belief in what you said. Failure to care, finally, what damage you did, as long as it was not our curtains you pulled down, our white walls smeared with blood from your cut wrists. We'd stopped jumping when you screamed.

Why can't I remember some good things? You were a wonderful actor. You could imitate anyone, do gestures, accents. I remember sitting in the kitchen nook, crying with laughter as you told a story about something that had happened to you. You could make us all laugh.

Lana came to your funeral. She was the only one of your friends to turn up. Me, I felt like punching her, she'd been hanging around doing drugs with you in the days before you died. I think it was Lana who insisted the assistant manager open the door. Once again an ambulance was called, again your stomach was pumped out, but this time you didn't revive. Dad was kind to Lana, who slunk in, a small figure in black, sobbing, at the beginning of the service. He pointed out to me afterwards that Lana was the only person there who cried. I've liked her better ever since, or her memory at least. I've never seen her again.

I don't know if I ever cried for you.

Wait, maybe I did. Condé and I had to go pick up what the police called "your effects." It didn't sound too terrible. We went down to the main police station, identified ourselves, and waited at a counter. An officer came back with a duffel bag, a knapsack, I can't remember now, and that was *all*. Then he opened an envelope that contained your "valuables" – five dollars and a watch. He checked them off against a list. The stuff in the knapsack we got to take home and sort out on our own. I pressed the nails of one hand hard into the other, below counter level so no-one could see. That was when tears came and I choked them back. Control, control, but I saw through a haze of sadness so deep it was almost anger.

It was so little. You'd had so little. Was that all you'd left to mark your life?

My real farewell to you came ten years afterwards. Garney, my second husband, and I were living up at Sechelt. Our house had a great tangle of blackberry behind it, out of which we'd hacked a yard, and there were several vacant lots to the east, which were bush. So looking out the windows, we had the illusion of being adrift in a sea of green. I was in the living room one sunny morning. It was early spring. I could hear hummingbirds zipping by the window, see magenta salmonberry flowers, the fresh crinkle of unfolding leaves. The sun was so warm I had the window open to let in some air. And I heard you laugh. I'd forgotten you ever laughed.

What really surprised me was that I was glad to hear you. It was like watching you eat toast. You ate it piled with more butter than anyone I've ever known. The flavour of you was unmistakable.

You laughed, and went out the window.

What a blessing! The sound swung me, released me. I was given you back again, all of you, not just your dead face, which I will see as long as I am alive, but a Karen who laughed, who made jokes, who in spite of everything remains sister. SN

1969.

Trips from There to Here

by Marjorie Simmins

When I think about Karin, I remember bacon and marmalade sandwiches and chocolate milk, the kind that comes out of the carton thick and sweet. And fried pork chops and baked potatoes with sour cream, her favourite dinner, back in the days when she was allowed to eat with us. I don't remember who banished her from the dinner table or when, but I remember why.

Throwing up. Anything that went down when she was stoned came flying back up within minutes. We tolerated this vomiting, even accommodated it: we always made sure she had the outside chair in our kitchen nook. That way, when she felt sick, she could run to the bathroom without tripping all over us. Sometimes she wasn't fast enough to make it to the bathroom. The back door would smash open and we'd hear food splatter onto the cement walkway below the veranda. We kept a garden hose coiled at the side of the house.

First memories of my sister always come with the sound of raised voices and the feeling of dread in my stomach. I used to run to the bathroom upstairs, the farthest corner away from the noise. I'd turn on the tap and hum as I brushed my teeth, trying to block out the yells from downstairs. I knew she wouldn't hurt me – I was too young to have anything she wanted – but she hurt the others with a bewildering and relentless accuracy. I couldn't stand ▸

watching the fights and I couldn't prevent them, so I created my own territory with her, the safest one I could think of: sister as shadow. I decided to be friends with her, to move beside her, where I could keep her in my peripheral vision.

Karin went through a magician phase; maybe sorceress is a better word. She used to put on performances in her incense-sweet bedroom in the basement. She had special clothes for these occasions, harem pants and gauzy scarfs that she wrapped around her red-gold hair. Sometimes she would make things disappear and other times she'd open cupboard doors just by looking at them. A neighbour who watched one of these shows couldn't resist trying to destroy Karin's illusions.

"Look," she said, "she's using a string to pull the door open! I can see it, can't you?"

Karin's eyes searched the darkened room, looking for mine. Speak up, guard the magic.

"Mrs. Williams, you're wrong. There's no string. This is real magic." I glared at her. The show concluded to loud applause.

Cats loved Karin, loved the way she rubbed their wet noses and hypnotized them with soft words and fishy treats. Some days I felt like a cat, gut-happy and mind-stroked with gentle words and promises. As long as I protected her – accepted her choices and her rules – the anger never came my way. I didn't know how else to protect myself.

We used to play horses out in the back yard. We'd take our horse collection – plastic and china figures – and set up a farm in the rock garden. Usually we chose the spot where the water faucet was hidden by a low, thick azalea bush. There were flat rocks beneath the faucet. When it rained, or when the faucet was left on a steady drip, the rocks held a shallow pool of water. We called this the pond and took the horses to swim there. I could play for hours, but Karin eventually got bored and the game would end with a ritualistic drowning of the horses. Hands that had moments earlier created bridles out of elastic bands and gently braided silky manes and tails would now seize the small animals and shove their heads under the water, making them gurgle and scream. I could sense the mood change, could see impatience in the movement of her fingers – but the vibrancy of her imagination was irresistible. In the garden of our make-believe world, death was a temporary condition; I knew I would play with her again the next day, when the sorceress pulled us up from the chill waters to start a new game.

Karin's eyes were dark blue, with a silver star around the iris. She plucked her eyebrows thin and wore heavy eyeliner. Pale skin, with a few freckles scattered over a finely shaped nose. Her stride was short, almost bouncy. In nearly all of her photographs she has her head tilted to one side – her expression a strange blend of coyness and misery.

I don't remember when her blue eyes started going grey every day. Around the same time she started taking her meals in the TV room. It was a relief to eat quiet dinners; I even started enjoying spaghetti again. But I was uneasy with the separation – and disliked cutting her off from the rest of the family. The non-offenders would exchange news of the day, pass the butter, salt, and pepper around the table, and I'd be worrying if she wanted more food, or if she'd nodded out over her plate. As soon as I could I'd join her in the den. We'd watch TV together, sprawled out on the couch, me leaning on her side with a pillow underneath my elbow. Her cigarette ash would burn longer and longer and without thinking I'd reach over and bump her arm over the ashtray.

"Karin, watch your smoke."

We started to find burn holes everywhere. The couch, the pillowcases, the bed sheets. She always seemed to wake up just before the smoke turned to flames.

Karin kept her methadone bottles in the refrigerator. She lined them up tidily, on the right-hand side of the door, nestled in with the Velveeta cheese. The methadone was mixed with orange juice, which masked the bitter taste a little bit. Karin told me never to touch them. But I did. I was curious about those white-capped bottles, even jealous of their daily importance. After everyone was asleep I'd sneak down to the kitchen and pull a bottle out. Sometimes I'd just smell the stuff, and wonder what she felt like when she drank it. One night I took a tiny slurp, then, terrified she'd know I had tried it, I filled the missing half-inch with water and ran back to bed. I lay awake a long time, wondering when I'd get smashed. I fell asleep with a trace of orange-sweet drug juice on my lips.

The year we bought Coqeyn, I recorded the event in my journal: "Over the weekend we bought a horse. He is an Arabian and Karin and I are going to look after it." Every twelve-year-old girl's dream come true. A living, breathing horse, to ride and love.

Coqeyn scared me. Mostly because I was sure we'd lose him, the moment our reflection in his purple-brown eyes became steady. Vet bills, board bills, and my mother teaching day school and night school to provide for us. I'd watch Mum disappear into her bedroom for a twenty-minute rest before dinner and hate the horse for filling the house with dragging steps and exhaustion. But Coqeyn was going to save the day: he was going to make Karin permanently straight and functioning. Like magic.

Karin's all-time straight record in seven years was three months. Straight from heroin and barbiturates. She drank the methadone every day, although at one point she weaned herself down to a quarter of a bottle, selling the other three-quarters to buy things for the horse. The endless supply of methadone came from the Narcotic Addiction Foundation, on Broadway at Oak, where we went each day after school. On the bus down there Karin would drink Coke, to fill her bladder for the sample she had to give to the doctors. Some days her bladder wouldn't cooperate. She'd park herself by the water fountain in the foundation's foyer and drink until the twinge in her gut felt certain.

"Okay, I'm ready." I'd watch her disappear into the bathroom, followed by a woman in a white lab coat. Minutes later, she'd return, smiling and giggling, jerking her thumb at the full sample bottle carried by the nurse: "Success!" Then she'd line up with the other junkies to get her methadone for the week. They always made her drink a cup of methadone before she left. She'd throw back her head, toss the liquid down, and make a major production of swallowing it. Actually, she didn't swallow any, but kept it in her mouth until we left the building from the back entrance. If I felt like teasing her, I'd poke her in the ribs, trying to make her laugh and spit the liquid out of her chipmunk cheeks. She'd shake

her head, look furious, but I knew it was like the horses in the pond – no permanent damage done.

In the lane behind the foundation she'd take out one of her bottles and spit the methadone into it. She spat it out fast, discreet; you'd think she was stopping to cough and delicately wipe her mouth. We'd walk another half-block and sell the topped-up bottle to the first junkie with cash.

Karin loved Coqeyn as much as she loved smack. We groomed our horse, one on either side, until our arms ached. We read horse magazines and made plans to truck Coqeyn into the Interior, where we could go for long rides into the mountains. He would be an endurance horse, a jumper, a hunter – he was going to do it all and we were going to have a roomful of ribbons and trophies to gloat over. We took riding lessons, sold methadone, and bought expensive tack. Summer 1972: Jethro Tull (*Thick as a Brick*), paisley T-shirts, Export "A" cigarettes, and the barn, every day, all day.

There were triumphs in those years. The first time we won a ribbon at a recognized show I cried so hard I could hardly see where I was going as I ran over the bumpy hogfuel to meet Karin coming out of the ring.

"It's only a sixth place, Marjorie," she protested as I grabbed onto her gloved hand and squeezed it hard.

"But a ribbon, Karin! A rosette!"

She dismounted, leaned against Coqeyn's sweat-darkened shoulder. "Next time we'll do better."

Doing better. The words throbbed under our skins as the boundaries between us blurred. Doing better this week, only lied once about no bombers in the house. Found a rainbow assortment in her jewellery box, flushed them down the toilet. Doing better, though, no clouds in her eyes for three days. Relax, play the twin game: Levi jeans, blue ski jackets, black boots, velvet hunt caps, long hair in braids. Walk close, shoulders touching, steps synchronized. No-one can tell us apart. You protect me and I'll protect you.

These periods – the quiet, symbiotic ones – vanished. One week we were inseparable; the next I was a Siamese twin, slowly ripping my body away from hers. We all tried to keep out of her way, to hide from the cruel taunts, the thievery, the broken dishes. My brother hid by going out with his friends; he spent nearly all his time at parties or in bars and pool halls. I used to ask him, as he was leaving, where he was going. The fringes on his leather jacket would swing as he shrugged his shoulders. "Out," he'd say, "going out." The door would slam behind him and I'd be left standing in the hallway, wondering where I could go. In six more months I would seek out all of Geoffrey's haunts and claim them as my own, but before then I spent many evenings walking around the back lanes behind our house.

Sometimes she'd still be up when I returned.

"Where have you been? I'm making a milk shake, would you like some?" Maybe she felt guilty or ashamed; maybe she just wanted to keep me on her side. I'd watch her pour the milk shake and accept the glass timidly. We'd go to the TV room and before I had a sip from my glass I'd wait, knowing she'd either spill hers or demand the rest of mine.

Her eyes and her moods were dead giveaways. Easy to know when she was high. When she got really affectionate, I knew it would be a back-lane night.

"Oh, Marjorie, I feel so good today. I'm so glad we're friends, aren't you? I love you, little sister, I love you so much." Words like those coiled every muscle in my body for flight. Karin's love always careened into anger.

Eventually even the horse wasn't safe. When Karin started coming to the barn stoned, I knew that I had to complete my separation from her. If I didn't, I'd find myself explaining not just a broken dish, or a missing wallet, but a death.

The final break came. I was in the feed room, mixing up a steaming bran mash. Karin burst in the door, eyes as wide as they could be when she was that high. Her face was white and sweaty, her words so slurred that at first I couldn't make out what she was saying.

"Come quick. It's in his stall, the cigarette, right by the door, I can't find it, hurry, hurry – come!"

He's gonna burn. He's gonna rear up in a box of flames and cook like a pig in a bonfire. Fear for Coqeyn made my heart lurch, but stronger than the fear was the pattern of hiding Karin's mistakes. No-one would know what had happened, not if I moved quickly. I wanted to hit that pasty, out-of-focus face, but I just told her to get a wheelbarrow and start shovelling out the stall. I led Coqeyn out, tied him to a post. Stepped back inside the stall and glanced back over my shoulder to see who could see me. No-one around. I tipped over the three-foot-high water bucket in the corner where she said she'd dropped the cigarette. All this time Karin was babbling and weaving, getting in my way. My hands, sticky with warm molasses, shook so much I could barely hold the shovel.

She took the bridle in both hands and jerked it down with all her weight. Coqeyn lunged, I lunged, she laughed. "This bother you?"

"Get out of my way. Get the fuck out of here." New and raw words I hurled at her, words that had nothing to do with the cigarette and a lot to do with the twin feeling its air supply being choked off. Breathe, little sister, breathe hard and fast.

Her expression was terrifying – dead straight and stoned ▸

to the limit. Of all her unusual abilities, this was the one that frightened me most. While anyone else would have fallen flat with the amount of chemicals she pumped into her body, small Karin staggered on, even casting aside, for a few minutes, the total effect of the drugs she had taken. "Thought I was a goner, sister/brother dear?" she'd sneer at Geoffrey and me, when we'd crouch beside her, deciding whether or not to call an ambulance. "Not yet, motherfuckers."

I concentrated on cleaning out the stall. By now I wasn't even scared about the cigarette. More was coming. Every hair standing up on my arms was preparing me for it.

When I came back from soaking the chips with water I found Karin tightening the girth on Coqeyn's saddle. The bridle was already on.

"What are you doing?" I kept my voice low and prayed she couldn't hear the pleading note beneath it.

"Gonna ride in the ring." As she spoke she lost her balance and caught at the bridle to steady herself. Coqeyn, jabbed in the mouth from this motion, threw up his head and took several quick steps backwards.

"Stand still, you bastard." She kneed him hard under the girth.

"Stop it!" I was shouting now, didn't care who heard me. "Leave him alone."

"Why? This bother you?" she asked, eyes for one instant clear and sober. "Watch, it gets better."

She took the bridle in both hands and jerked it down with all her weight. I could feel that iron cut down as though the bit were in my own mouth. I sucked in cold night air and howled. Coqeyn lunged, I lunged, Karin laughed. I pushed her down onto the tarmac and felt her rise up against my arms strong as a tidal wave. Fluid strength, like water all around us, and me twisting, kicking, punching to keep my head from going under.

I lost the fight. And I never walked shoulder to shoulder with Karin again.

That autumn I started grade nine. School was something that passed between hours of wondering whether Karin had died that day. Her eyes looked like grey cauliflowers now, with hardly any colour in them at all. She overdosed so many times that I got used to seeing her face blue. I distanced myself from my hands when they slapped the breath into her. She hurt herself, horribly, when she was stoned – gashes, bruises – but I didn't help her any more. I ate my meals in the kitchen with the rest of the family and afterwards I retreated to my room.

One morning I came downstairs and found her passed out, with her eyes open, in the chair beside the front door. I stepped close to her, to see if she was breathing. It was a quarter to nine; if I didn't hurry, I'd be late for school. I couldn't bring myself to touch her. I imagined that she was a corpse that would suddenly reach out and crush my body into the deathland behind those unblinking eyes. Geoffrey walked into the hall, saw me staring at her slumped figure.

"She alive?"

"I can't tell. I think so. Wouldn't her eyes be closed if she was dead?"

"Maybe, don't know. Let's get out of here."

We walked up Dunbar Street towards the bus loop. Geoffrey's strides were long and fast; I took two for each one of his. Suddenly aware of our mismatched steps, he slowed down, until our shoulders brushed together. He reached into his jacket pocket and took out a Bar Six chocolate bar.

"Want some?"

"Yeah, sure."

Karin died a year later, in a room at the Blue Boy hotel. On Christmas Day. Unlike the china and plastic horses, she would stay dead.

I didn't ride for about eight years. Barns, with their cold cement floors and draughty corridors, felt like tombs. The smell of molasses made me sick. And when I saw young women with long hair and blue ski jackets walking close together, I'd stretch out my arms and feel oceans of empty air on either side of my body.

My hair is short now. I wear a purple and black Gore-Tex jacket when I ride in the rain. Black leather chaps, too; Karin would have loved them. Since my sister died, I have travelled in Europe, Canada, the United States, and the West Indies. I have lived on boats, in downtown high-rises. I went to university and worked, as a waitress, a driver, an editor. Men, for days and daze, and two, loved unconditionally. I kissed/kiss them, remembering Karin's precise explanation of the perfect kiss.

Last year I even dated a brother of one of her lovers. I met him, in one of those small-world situations, and wanted to be near him, because his brother had loved Karin. A tall and strange order to fill, and he only five feet eight inches, with a mind more focused on gains and losses.

"Yeah," he said, "Kevin did heroin, but he's been clean for years. Your sister didn't make it, eh?"

"Where was your brother when Karin died?" (First date, the Holiday Inn on Broadway, him figuring out my income-tax return, me scanning his face for one flicker of shared memory.)

"I don't know. Maybe they weren't friends any more. Besides, drugs weren't really a problem for Kevin. He hasn't used in years. He's married now, has a kid, and works as an actor – very talented. Why are you so hung up on the past?"

"He wasn't at her memorial service." (Only saw Lana, ward-of-the-state Lana, crying and gibbering with fear because Karin was the smart one and why were her ashes in an urn when all the dummies were still living?)

"Really? I wouldn't know. Now listen, do you want to get some money back – or a lot of money back?"

I wanted to sleep beside him, reach out for a dream fragment of his brother, my sister. I wanted to remember, for a moment, soft rubber tied around my fourteen-year-old arm and the sharp press of an empty needle against a blue, untravelled vein. Karin? Where do I stick this thing? Right in the vein? Or beside it, or under it, or in any part of my arm that is willing? Does the needle have to have heroin in it, or will water from the basement sink give me a rush?

Couldn't do it – needles belonged to Karin. I watched her, though, and tied her arm when I couldn't stand her bad moods any more. She wore a lingering perfume called Omar's Delight, which she bought from a store on 4th Avenue. She smelled sweet, as I leaned close to watch her perfect aim with the needle. SN