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### The Hearing Aid

Karen Musial's father came home unexpectedly while she and Toby Dodson, illuminated by the silent flat screen TV a few feet away, were making out under a blanket on the carpeted living room floor. Toby was on top of her, kissing her neck. Karen's back was slightly arched and her head twisted, facing the entrance foyer. She would have seen the door swing if her eyes had been open; she might have heard the thwick of the deadbolt withdrawing, the scraping of the strike plate, or the squeak of the hinges as the door swung free, if she had not been breathing so hard. But she opened her eyes only when the door slammed shut, in time to see her father's feet at the step-down to the living room, still and pointed in her direction, then twisting and disappearing down the hallway to the bedroom section of their split-level. Beneath the blanket her legs unwrapped from the small of Toby's back; her left hand—the one that had been squeezing Toby's back—was instantly re-assigned to push away his right hand—the one that had been roaming under her sweatshirt; her right hand—the one daringly close to his zipper—she used to withdraw his left hand—the one that had been slowly and consistently moving down her spine and underneath her jeans.

It didn't matter that they were fully clothed. The sounds they made as they dry humped, and the fact that only their heads were visible outside the blanket, created the illusion that they had actually been fucking. This, of course was part of the delight for Toby. He'd never fucked a girl. He didn't know any other 15 year-old boys who had. Only after Karen had thrown off the blanket and sat up, too late for her father to see that they were both fully clothed, did she explain to Toby the reason for her abrupt termination.

"It's my father," she said, between breaths.

Having already fantasized that their movements—with Karen so energetic and passionate, pressing up against his erection, fingers pressed into his flesh, kissing hard enough to grind teeth—would have passed for fucking if his friends had been watching, he easily imagined that Karen's father might have thought the same.

"I thought your dad was away for the weekend," said Toby as he moved from the floor to the couch, for the moment holding out hope that Mr. Musial had rushed by without getting a good view. Toby started to raise the volume on the TV, but Karen snatched the remote from him and shut it off instead. She sat on the couch near—but not next—to him, hands refastening the bra underneath her sweatshirt, head cocked to one side, peering down the hallway. When her hands were free and visible, she held one finger up to her lips—and waited.

Karen had a sweet face with blue-green eyes, full lips, and long, straight blonde hair. Unspectacular—except for her shape. She had been blessed—or cursed—with a full figure that boys at school ogled, and most girls resented. She thwarted the more obvious,

lustful urges of the older boys—and tempered the mean-spirited envy of girls—by dressing in drab, loose clothing.

Toby was thin and wiry, but muscular, with deep-set brown eyes that suggested an empathetic nature—perhaps that was what she had sensed when he had asked her out. As true as that was in general, regarding Karen he had entertained lustful urges, just like all the other boys he knew. Before asking her out, he had spent considerable time in the lunchroom, in study halls, on the school bus they shared, asking her questions—at first about how she felt about certain teachers, did she like sports, what movies she'd seen, what music she liked, then later about herself, her family. She seemed accessible and open except about her family. She mentioned that her mother had left five years ago without contesting the divorce or custody, and that she lived alone with her father—beyond that nothing. He didn't press. When he asked her out—a movie and perhaps Starbucks after—she had immediately said yes to the movie, but suggested they go to her house after, to watch music videos and just “be together.” “Be together” immediately triggered his imagination; might he get to see her naked, at least from the waist up?

Seated in the back row of the movie theater, they had talked during the previews. She told him he was the first freshman to ask her out. She was used to being asked out by the older boys, boys with “experience,” who swore they didn't believe the rumors about her, and they were just looking for a normal date. In the beginning she had said yes if they were good looking, but every time—“every single time” she emphasized—that she had allowed a boy to kiss her, they had wasted no time trying to go all the way, which she was not going to do, “just so we are clear, in case that's what you are looking for.” But she also said she had a good feeling about him from the way he behaved in school.

When the feature began, she had taken his left hand and guided it behind her neck to her left shoulder. Later she had leaned her head against his. Halfway through the movie, her forehead touching his cheek, she had twisted her face so her lips brushed next to his. It took only the slightest movement on his part to initiate the kiss. She stayed with the kiss, eyes closed, ignoring the movie, until she pulled away, saying, “You kiss nice. You’re gentle.”

Convinced that she was not going to let him do anything more than kiss her, he had relaxed for the rest of the movies, content to feel her lips gliding and roving over his, as they took turns being the aggressor, she initiating the tongue, he happy to comply.

But at her house, she had allowed Toby to discover her hidden voluptuousness; his response—as they lay together on her living room floor—was to be aggressively thrilled and silently thankful for the opportunity, his erection unaffected by her insistence that they stay clothed. He hoped that, after a few minutes’ hiatus due to her father’s entrance, she would announce that they could continue—if they were quiet and kept the music soft.

“You should know,” she cautioned him in a loud whisper. “My dad is ex-Army.”

His erection still awkwardly positioned in his jeans, Toby sighed and sat back into a pile of soft cushions. She hadn’t mentioned that before. “So your dad was a soldier,” he said casually. “What’s he gonna do? Shoot me?”

“He keeps guns in the house,” she said curtly. “Don’t joke about shooting.”

“Have the young man meet me in the kitchen!” came a booming voice from down the hall. Her disconcerting reprimand combined with her father’s directive to end all hope Toby had of he and Karen returning to the floor. Huddled together on the couch, Karen

and Toby watched her father stride by with military bearing, carrying a laptop-sized leather case in one hand. His crew cut, muscular physique, and chin-in posture suggested that the “ex” in “ex-Army” meant only his uniform had been retired.

Mr. Musial offered Toby the chair opposite him at the breakfast table, and placed the unzipped case between them. Karen stood to one side. Her father slowly began unzipping the case, without looking at it. His focus was on Toby. The veins in his forehead stood out in relief, and his skin seemed stretched tight over every facial feature. Toby felt light-headed, and scratched at the sweat beading in his armpits. He had the urge to bolt, to run out of the house, to escape whatever was about to happen.

“Daddy, this is Toby—from school,” said Karen suddenly, leaning into Toby’s back and over the table. Mr. Musial ignored her, and continued to pull slowly on the zipper. She waited a few seconds for him to react. “We were just making out. Clothes on!” she added, stridently. Then softly, “Swear to God, daddy.” When he opened the case, Karen withdrew to her place behind Toby.

"Do you know what this is, son?" said Mr. Musial grimly. Inside the case was a pistol with the magazine partially exposed.

“A handgun, sir,” said Toby. He was no stranger to guns, was a junior member of the NRA like all his friends, and had achieved Marksman certificates with a .22 rifle. He was familiar with a 12-gauge, and had been duck hunting with his uncle. He did not recognize the firearm on the table, however, and the strangeness of it served to increase his anxiety. Beneath the table he pressed the fingernails of one hand into the sweaty palm of the other.

Karen sighed and stepped back from Toby. “Sweet Jesus, daddy, do you have to do this?” She walked around the table and stood next to her father. “I told you we were just making out!” Mr. Musial grabbed her wrist and squeezed; she froze in position. Toby imagined that if the grip tightened further Karen would let out a scream. Mr. Musial fixed her with the same gaze he had been directing at Toby. “God,” she said, “You are such a control freak!”

Mr. Musial turned his attention back to Toby. “A pistol, actually. A 9mm Browning Semi-Automatic to be precise. Favorite of ex-military like myself. But not tonight,” he said, every consonant snapping to attention. “Tonight, young man, this”—he pressed the clip up into the bottom of the grip until it clicked and locked into place—“is a hearing aid.” He pulled at Toby’s right arm and placed the loaded pistol in his hand.

Karen ripped her wrist from her father’s grasp and returned to Toby’s side; she wrapped her arms around his neck while he cradled the weapon uneasily. Her father retracted his hands. Despite the pistol’s light weight, Toby’s arm quivered, strength leaking from it like air from a balloon. He felt he was in one of those dreams where you showed up naked for school, or kept falling forever.

For a few seconds, Mr. Musial looked at Toby as if he were sighting a weapon, head tilted sideways to the right, left eye shut. Karen whispered in Toby’s ear, “Do you realize you could shoot him right now?” she said. It wasn’t a question. She slid her fingers down his arms and over his hands. “Pull the trigger. And put me out of my misery.” She lifted his hands and pointed the pistol at her father. “Pull the trigger!” she cried out. “Pull it!” She tightened her grip around his hands, but did not attempt to press the trigger herself.

“Are you nuts?” said Toby nervously. His entire body was shaking. Karen’s head was next to his. Her arms paralleled his. Her hands lifted the gun so that it pointed at her father’s head.

“You don’t understand!” She screamed. “He’s a monster! He’s been—do I have to explain it to you? Ever since my mother left!” Sweat dripped into Toby’s eyes and stung them. Within a few seconds he couldn’t see Mr. Musial’s face clearly. His hands shook. His shoulders ached.

“Well, there’s different interpretations on that,” said Mr. Musial. “But in any case, this young man is not the answer to your problems, sweetheart.” With those words, Karen loosed her grip, and Toby let the pistol down gently on the table. He looked back and up at Karen, who had withdrawn, and whose face was contorted, exposing a feeling Toby could not fathom: pain or anger, or fear or confusion. A mix of all four? When their eyes met, she shook her head sideways—a rejection of him certainly—and ran out of the room and down the hall. He heard a door slam.

Mr. Musial grabbed the weapon, ejected the magazine, and reinserted both into the container. “OK then,” he said. “That’s that. Nobody’s going to shoot anybody. Agreed?”

“Yes, sir,” said Toby, his knee-jerk response to power. He struggled to rise, so rigid had his body become under the stress of the last few minutes.

“Good.” Cradling the gun case in both hands, Karen’s father stood up, and followed Toby out of the kitchen. “Time to go, son.”

In the foyer, Toby stopped and looked down the hallway towards the bedrooms. “I want to tell her goodnight, at least,” he said sheepishly. “It’s only polite.”

Mr. Musial fondled the gun case, and Toby thought he could see the skin loosen around the man's cheeks and mouth. "Give it a try. I believe she's quite disappointed in you, however."

"Karen!" Toby shouted. He was sure she could hear him. "I'm leaving!"

"I know!" came her voice from down the hall and behind a closed door.

Mr. Musial opened the front door and positioned himself between Toby and the hallway. He seemed to relish giving Toby time, confident in the futility of his request. After several seconds, Mr. Musial stepped closer to the front door, forcing Toby towards it. They both turned when they heard Karen walking down the hallway. She gave her father a determined look, like the face she wore when she asked Toby to shoot, a hateful look, with tinges of anguish. She had been crying.

"I'm going to walk Toby out to the street," she said. She grabbed Toby's arm and ushered him outside.

Halfway there, she kissed him lightly on the cheek. "Are you going to tell? Are you going to go to the police?" she asked.

"Should I?" said Toby.

"No."

"What has he been doing to you? Has your father—I don't even want to think it, much less say it—"

"Oh Toby," she interrupted. "You poor boy. Do you think I would stay here if he were forcing himself on me? Do I seem to you like a girl who would put up with that?"

"I don't know what to think anymore," said Toby, turning away from her. She seemed alien to him, and he felt suddenly as helpless with her as he had been with her



father. “You told me to shoot him, for God’s sake! To put you out of your misery is what you said.”

“Well, that’s what I wanted. It’s not good, what my father and I have.”

Toby took a few steps more away from her. “I barely know you! I’m not going to shoot somebody for you! Not your father. Not anybody!”

“Then who’s going to save me?” she said, cavalierly, the way a teacher might request a student stay after class to help clean up.

Mr. Musial appeared at the front door. “That’s enough, now! Time’s up!” he called out.

Karen looked back at her father, and as if to taunt him, grabbed Toby’s head with both hands and kissed him again, with hard, almost painful, pressure. When she finally pulled away, she said, “It could’ve been you,” and ran back into her house.

“You’re nuts!” he cried out to the stars that had begun to appear.

He looked back at the house. Karen stood in one of the large bedroom windows, silhouetted against a bright interior light. She might have been facing him, but he was in dark shadows now and doubted she could see him if she was. When he took a last look down the long driveway after reaching the road, he thought he saw someone else enter the bedroom and join Karen at the window. He thought he saw her remove her jeans and toss them behind her, then jump up into the man’s arms and wrap her legs around his waist. He turned away and lurched into the darkness, struggling to keep his balance on the unstable gravel shoulder.

He tried unsuccessfully to picture himself back at the kitchen table, pulling the trigger as Karen's hands closed around his. In its place the image of Karen and her father in the window, disturbing and draining, sustained itself against his will.

By the time he got home, he was convinced that he had conjured up the image of Karen with her father in the window, as some perverse reaction to his display of gutlessness at the kitchen table. Had she actually asked him to shoot her father? What a bizarre notion. The gun had been real though. He was certain of that. He could feel the weight of it, the cool metal of the barrel, the ribbed wood of the handle, as if he were still holding it. Hearing aid? Her father had barely said a word—it was Karen's voice that resonated with him, her unexpected and languid request that gripped his imagination and kept him awake: *...and put me out of my misery.*

Lying face down, spread-eagled on the bed, the sheets became Karen's soft skin, and his erection returned with a vengeance. He reset the scene in his imagination: her hands tightening around his, his finger on the trigger, the soft, heated voice in his ear, his finger moving, the flash and explosion of sound, the kickback of the pistol, the look of shock on her father's face, him falling backwards. Toby reached for the Kleenex next to the alarm clock and rolled onto his back. *You can do this*, he told himself as he began. *You can save her.*