

The Hearing Aid

Karen Musial's father came home unexpectedly while she and Toby Dodson were making out under a blanket on the carpeted living room floor. It was their first date. Toby lay on top of her, illuminated by the flat screen TV a few feet away, playing a music video without the sound. He was 15, but looked older. Naturally tan, with a mouth that turned up at the edges giving him a perpetual, unforced smile. He knew he didn't deserve the attention girls had always given him, but he relished it. Karen was two years older, very pretty, with bright blue eyes that she could hold perfectly still, unblinking, and silky blonde hair that curled gently and swayed when she walked. She had a full figure—breasts and hips that Toby thought moved like waves in a contained space—which in school she hid under sweatshirts and baggy jeans.

Karen's legs were wrapped around Toby's back. No girl had made out with him so aggressively before, and as a result he was more earnest in his kissing. He kissed her neck, her cheeks, her ears, her lips. Her back was arched. Her head twisted and faced the entrance foyer. She would have seen the door swing if her eyes had been open. She would have heard the thwick of the deadbolt withdrawing, the scraping of the strike plate—the squeak of the hinges as the door swung free—if she had not been breathing so heavily. But she opened her eyes only after the door slammed shut and her father's shiny

brown dress shoes came into view. At the step-down to the living room, they pointed towards her and Toby. She held her breath until the need for air overruled her urge to remain silent, and the shoes moved down the hallway of her split-level home. She tracked her father's footsteps down the unlit hall into his bedroom.

Beneath the blanket her legs unwrapped from the small of Toby's back. Swiftly, her left hand—the one that had been pressed against the back of Toby's neck—pulled his right hand out from under her sweatshirt, where it had been roaming over her breasts. Her right hand jerked his left hand away from its promising position near the zipper of her jeans. Because his head had been buried against her neck, because Karen's breathing was so loud, Toby had not seen or heard Mr. Musial come in, and was taken aback by her sudden movements.

Karen threw off the blanket and sat up. "My father's home," she said, her voice sagging. She rolled onto her stomach and peered down the dark hallway. "Fuck."

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Toby understood that it didn't matter they'd been fully clothed. It must have looked to her father like they had been, underneath the blanket—could he say it, even just to himself?—*fucking*. He understood it wasn't the kissing, not even the groping, but the positioning; the lying down, him on top of her. And she had been making those sounds—panting, straining noises—and she had been moving her hips, pushing into his erection. Her father might easily have assumed that he was inside her. Earlier, just before they had pulled the blanket over themselves, before she had allowed Toby to position himself over her, she had sworn that her father was not due home from his business trip until after midnight. Then, holding him at arm's length above her, she had asked Toby if he had

heard the older boys in school talk about her. He had hesitated. Then opted for the truth. Yes, he said. She asked if he believed them, and if that was what he was hoping for. He said no—the answer he was sure *she* was hoping for. According to his mother, boys told lies about girls all the time, to make themselves feel better. Your father left me before you were born, she'd said. He lied about wanting to be a father. The right thing to do is to listen to what a girl tells you she wants, she'd drilled into him. Then that's what you do.

The home date had been Karen's idea. At school one day, during lunch period, she'd sat next to him. I have to get away from those boys, she'd said, nodding towards a table with junior and senior athletes in their letter jackets. She talked to him about teachers she'd had as a freshman, and asked if he had Mr. Beech for Biology, and they talked about their mutual hatred of him. She asked him about his parents and he said there wasn't much to tell. She didn't inquire further—more eager to explain her situation than to listen to his. Her mother had left just before she started high school. She was an only child, so there was just her and her father, and he was often away for business, and she was alone at home a lot. Toby asked why her mother had left and she said it was a long story and she'd rather learn more about him—starting with the question: did he have any idea how many junior and senior girls thought he was pretty hot for a freshman?

You're shy, she'd said, eyes unblinking and fixed on him. Girls like that in a boy. It occurred to him that his mother would agree, and he must have blushed, because she smiled and touched his hand, and told him how attractive—and rare—it was when boys blushed. She asked if he'd ever dated an older girl before. He shook his head no. Would he consider it? she'd asked him. Yes he would—at that point thinking she was just enjoying a conversation she was unable to have with older boys. He'd heard them talking,

all about how some of them had *put it inside her*—and others wanted to. So why not *ask* me? she'd said. Her eyes, unblinking, focused on him, while she waited for his answer. By the end of lunch, he'd actually begun to feel a little sorry for her. Broken home. Only child. Would she have thought the same of him if he'd mentioned he had only a mother at home?

He hadn't hesitated to tell his friends that he had a date with *Karen Musial!* They didn't believe him. Karen Musial? *The* Karen Musial? Asked *you* out?

When they had settled into place on the floor in front of the TV an hour earlier, she had cupped her hands around his cheeks as he hovered over her, and said, "Well, I'm not going to let you fuck me. Not tonight. Maybe not ever." But because she had used *that word*, the word he could barely whisper to himself, the word his mother hated the most of all the words in the English language, he had instantly become more aroused. She had turned the TV sound off, and after a few minutes had let his hands go wherever they wanted, announcing, "You're a really good kisser. You should be proud of that." And a few seconds later, "That's important. Even some grown men don't know how to kiss right." She had kissed him on the lips so hard it pushed his head back. She had a long tongue. Longer than his.

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Toby moved from the floor to the couch. Karen silently folded the blanket they had been under and placed it on the armrest of the chair in the corner, then snatched the remote from the floor and shut off the TV, darkening the room. 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, Karen whispered, “He’s going to be pissed.”

“He’s really here? You’re not making this up?” asked Toby. “He saw us?” She nodded, without looking at him. He tried not to appear nervous.

“I got the time wrong, I guess,” she said, matter-of-factly. “So it’s not your fault. Don’t let him make you feel guilty.”

“Should I leave? Is he going to come back out here and yell at me? At you?”

He thought she would say yes, that he ought to leave. That she hadn’t told him to leave outright gave him hope that perhaps there was nothing to worry about. “Would you rather leave?” she asked him.

“I’d rather go back to doing what we were doing,” he said.

She smiled and said, “Me too, but, well, that’s not going to happen. My father is very strict about me and boys. He’s ex-Army. If you’re still here when he comes out, I don’t know what he’ll do.”

“So do you want me to leave or not?”

She paused before answering. “I think you should probably leave.” She kept looking down the hallway.

“That’s not what I asked.” Toby’s eyes had by now adjusted to the dark, and he could see her face. She looked at him the same way she had when they’d first met, her eyes still, unblinking. In profile, each time she turned to peer down the hallway, she looked like a young woman, not a teenager.

She edged closer to him on the sofa. “Of course I don’t want you to go, but that’s not the point. Any second now and it’ll be too late.”

He heard the sound of a door opening, and stood up. “Too late for what?” He looked across the living room at the front door. Only a few steps away. He could be out of the house in seconds. He heard footsteps.

“It’s not too late,” said Karen. “You can still go, if you go right now.”

Toby thought that she might be testing him, and if he ever wanted her to give him that chance, to do what she would not do earlier, he would have to stay. When it was clear, as the footsteps grew louder, that Toby was not going to leave her, she leaned against him. Close up, with the porch light filtering through the front door glass, her blue eyes seemed even more radiant. He imagined the speech he would make, the commitment to defend her, if it came to that. He would be a man and take all the blame, if that’s what she was hoping for. With their shoulders and hips touching, her left hand found his right and squeezed. He pictured the full figure his hands had felt, but which he realized just at that moment he had not yet seen. He did not know the skin tone of her belly, or if her breasts were a lighter color—like if she had a bikini tan. Her body was still a mystery to him.

“Have your *young man* meet me in the kitchen!” came a booming voice as Mr. Musial walked out of the shadows. Karen’s earlier warning, combined with her father’s directive, brought to an end all hope Toby had of continuing what they had started.

Mr. Musial strode by with military bearing, carrying a laptop-sized leather case. His crew cut, muscular physique, and chin-in posture suggested that the “ex” in “ex-Army” meant that only his uniform had been retired.

Toby and Karen followed Mr. Musial into the kitchen where Toby took the chair opposite him at the breakfast table. Her father placed the case between them. Karen stood

to one side, holding Toby's hand, while her father slowly unzipped the case. He kept his gaze directed at Toby. His eyes, like hers, were blue and unblinking. The veins in his forehead stood out in relief. His skin stretched tight over every facial feature. Light-headed, Toby scratched at the sweat beading in his armpits. Funny how only now did he have the urge to bolt out of the house, to escape whatever was about to happen. To reach the front door he would have to pass within inches of Karen's father. The closest door now was behind Karen, leading to the garage.

"Daddy, this is Toby," said Karen suddenly, leaning into Toby's back. She released his hand, and placed both of hers on the chairback, behind Toby's head. "Don't call him my *young man*, by the way. He's my friend," she said. "From school," she added, in a sarcastic tone that surprised Toby. Ignoring her, Mr. Musial continued to pull slowly on the zipper. She waited a few seconds for her father to react, then said, plaintively, "We were just making out, that's all." Her father kept pulling the zipper. She edged out from behind Toby's chair and put her hands on the table, arms straight and stiff. "Clothes on! Okay?" Ignoring her, Mr. Musial finished with the zipper, and turned the case around. Karen sighed, "Oh God. Not this again."

Again? thought Toby. He knew better than to say it aloud. *What does that mean, Again?*

Karen rolled her eyes and looked up at the ceiling. Then she dropped her head, threw her hands in the air, and said, "Fuck!" She turned and walked away from the table. Her father's hand darted out and caught her left wrist. He shifted his gaze to her, and she froze. It appeared to Toby that the veins in her father's forehead darkened, and he

expected to see fear in Karen's eyes. Instead, he saw resignation, a languid giving-up, matched by her sagging posture.

"Don't say fuck, Karen," said Mr. Musial, calmly. Toby flinched, but Karen's expression didn't change. There was grit, and a calculated firmness in her father's voice, as if he were commanding a lesser-ranked soldier, not his daughter. He and Karen stared at one another for several seconds before he let go of her wrist.

Toby thought if he could manage to lift himself—just a few inches—off the chair, it would be enough to create momentum, and he'd be able to continue the action, to stand, then run, then open the front door and leave, and then he'd be safe. What would her father do—chase him down? Wasn't this whole show about getting *her young man* to leave? But he couldn't get the required muscles to engage. He was just a dead, dumb weight, his limbs useless, except for the fingernails of one hand digging into the palm of the other, under the table.

Her father opened the case, and Toby stared at the contents.

"God, daddy!" Karen yelped. "You are such a control freak!"

"Do you know what this is, son?" said Mr. Musial grimly. Inside was a pistol with the magazine partially exposed. It lay snugly in black-foam, form-fit casing. To the left of the handle, two ammunition clips sat in long vertical slots, with the bullets pointing down. A cleaning kit fit into a square-shaped depression below the muzzle.

Beneath the table, Toby's fingernails dug deeper into his skin. "A handgun, sir," he said. His mother did not allow guns in their house, but Toby was no stranger to guns. He was a junior member of the NRA, like all his friends, and he'd achieved his Marksman certificates with a .22 rifle. He was also familiar with a 12-gauge, having

hunted duck with his uncle. He did not recognize the firearm on the table, however. The strangeness of it served to increase his anxiety.

“A pistol, actually,” said Mr. Musial. 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 elbow, forcing his hand out from beneath the table. He placed the loaded pistol in Toby’s hand.

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. His entire body was shaking.

“What are you afraid of, son?” said Mr. Musial. “You’re holding the pistol. What do you want to do? Do you want to shoot me?”

“No sir,” said Toby. Karen, who had been pacing back and forth across the kitchen floor, returned to Toby’s side.

“What has Karen told you about me?”

“Nothing,” said Karen. “Toby is just a friend.”

“Yes, yes. From school,” said her father. “So you said.”

For a few seconds, Mr. Musial looked at Toby with his head tilted slightly to the right, left eye shut, as if he were sighting a weapon. 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,” she said. 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, trying to force his finger onto the trigger. “Do it! Put me out of my misery!”

She pressed his finger with hers. The trigger did not move, despite her effort.

“Are you nuts?” Toby cried out. His entire body was shaking. He brought his hands, accompanied by hers, down to the table. Her grip prevented him from releasing his. She pressed her lips against his ear. The same, moist lips that earlier had aroused him with her kisses.

“Three years!” she screamed. “Can’t you see it in his face?” Her father’s expression didn’t alter. “Ever since mother ran off!” Sweat dripped down Toby’s forehead, into his eyes, stinging them. He blinked in a futile attempt to clear his vision. His hands shook. His shoulders ached. She pulled her lips away and loosened her grip on his hands. He lay the gun gently on the table. Her father slid it back towards the case.

With the gun out of reach, Toby felt a little less shaky. He craned his neck to look back and up at Karen’s face. Her cheeks were wet with tears, her features 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.

“My god, you really don’t get it,” she said, pulling away. She walked out of the kitchen, brushing past her father, down the hallway where he had come from earlier. She didn’t look back.

“I can see why you like him!” her father called out to her, while he deftly removed the magazine from the pistol and placed both items back the case. “He’s a mama’s boy!”

A door slammed, startling Toby, but not the ex-Army man, who turned the case

back around and slowly re-zipped it. He held the zipper in his right hand, and with his left maneuvered the case in a circle until the task was complete. "OK then," he said calmly. "There you go. Nobody's going to shoot anybody. That's good." He rose from his chair. "Stand up, then, young man."

"Yes, sir," said Toby. He struggled to rise, so rigid had his body become under the stress of the last few minutes. He managed to stand, awkwardly, unsteadily.

"I assume we are clear," said Mr. Musial, cradling the gun case in both hands. He led Toby out of the kitchen. In the foyer, Toby stopped and looked down the hallway towards the bedrooms. "Are we clear, son?" asked Mr. Musial. He held Toby's elbow and squeezed until it was painful.

"Yes, sir," said Toby.

"Well, then. Time to go," said the ex-army sergeant. "Say goodbye to Karen."

"Karen!" Toby called out, his voice cracking. "I'm leaving," he added sheepishly. Karen did not respond.

Mr. Musial opened the front door and positioned himself between Toby and the hallway. His grim, intense demeanor morphed into a sneer. "Just so you know, you're not the first boy she's had over here. If you were listening closely, I'm sure you could tell how disappointed she was in you." A few seconds later, the look on Mr. Musial's face transformed into a smile, and he ushered Toby through the doorway onto the front porch. "Seems she's always asking the wrong young man."

The sound of Karen's footsteps in the hallway surprised them both. She gave her father a spiteful look when she passed him, like the face she wore when she asked Toby

to shoot. A look of anguish. Of hate. Of remorse. Her cheeks were red. Her eyeliner streaked along the outside of both eyes. She stepped off the porch and onto the front yard.

“Your thumb never got close to the safety,” Mr. Musial whispered to Toby, just after she passed them. “I’d have broken your wrist if it had.”

“I’m going to walk Toby out to the street,” Karen announced from the middle of the lawn. “You can’t stop me.” She led Toby down the length of the driveway. He caught up to her.

At the edge of the yard, she turned suddenly and kissed him lightly on the cheek. He half expected Mr. Musial to bolt towards them after the kiss, but her father remained in the transom of the front door. “You’re not going to tell anyone about this, are you?” she asked Toby.

“About what?” asked Toby. The loose neck of her sweatshirt had slipped to one side, exposing the skin of her shoulder, creamy white under the glow of a streetlamp. “That your father threatened me?” He grabbed her by the shoulders. He was confused, and wanted to shake her, as if by doing so the truth would fall out of her. “I can see why you would blame him,” he said.

“Blame him for what?”

“For your mother leaving.” He wanted to kiss her shoulder. Her neck. Her lips. Perhaps at school next week she would explain herself. Why she had begged him to pull the trigger. That was some heavy-duty shit right there. But for now, it was enough that she had come out to say goodbye—again. He had never in his life felt so many conflicting impulses.

He yearned to finish what they had started.

He wanted to scream at her, because of what she had asked him to do.

He wanted to run away. Away from her.

He wanted to pull her close, lift her sweatshirt and feel her skin against his.

He wanted to examine her skin for bruises. He'd heard about ex-military men becoming violent, something about post-traumatic stress. Like he'd been active duty and seen combat. So maybe he'd taken his frustrations out on her. Maybe that's the reason for the oversized baggy clothes. The reason for the blanket she insisted on using to cover the two of them.

"Oh, Toby," she said, grabbing both his hands. "You poor boy." She did not sound like the girl he had felt sorry for when they first talked in school. But did not sound like a girl consumed by hatred for her father, either. She sounded composed, as if nothing bothered her, as if she were above it all. "Do you think I would stay here if he hit me? Do I seem to you like a girl who would put up with that?"

"I don't know what to think," said Toby. He resumed walking along the street, out of the streetlamp's aura. "You asked me to shoot your father. That's pretty wack."

She accompanied him into the darkness. "Your hand was never near the safety," she said, echoing what her father had said. "I knew you weren't going to shoot him."

Toby held her shoulders and focused on her blue, unblinking eyes. "To put you out of your misery, is what you said."

"Well, that's how I felt right then," she said softly. "We'd been—you know—and then he came home and ruined it." The calm in her voice infuriated him, but her face, illuminated by another streetlamp they were approaching, recalled the moment they had first kissed, with the light from the TV caressing her features. Her mouth open, her eyes

wide with expectation. But expecting—hoping for—what? Against all reason, against his will, he felt the tingling of arousal yet again, and fought the urge to give into it. He felt as helpless with her now as he had felt with her father in the kitchen.

She kissed him. “We could still see each other.”

“How?” asked Toby. “I’m not coming to your house again. Your father made that very clear.”

Mr. Musial stepped off the porch. “That’s enough, now!” he called out. “You kids wrap it up out there!”

Karen looked back and, as if to taunt her father, grabbed Toby’s head before he could react. She held it tight with both hands and kissed him with hard, painful, pressure. When she finally pulled away, she said, “You could be the one,” and ran back into her house.

“You’re nuts!” Toby shouted, watching her until the front door closed. He looked up at the stars and spun around until his vision was filled with circular streaks of white. He stopped turning only when he felt he might fall. The nausea he felt was only partly the result of spinning his body around. He felt like his brain was twirling inside his skull: *Why hasn’t she run away? There are social services that can help. The high school has counselors. Her father had said he was not the first boy from school she had brought home. Perhaps there were other boys at school who knew the truth. But what was the truth?*

Still dizzy, he looked back at the house. In one of the large bedroom windows, Karen stood, silhouetted against a bright interior light. She might have been looking out at him. But he was in dark shadows between the pools of light cast by the streetlamps,

and he doubted she could see him. After reaching the intersection, he took a last look down the bend of the Musial's long driveway. Through the space between a couple of slim tree trunks that framed the window he had seen her in, with the remnants of white star-streaks circling in his peripheral vision, he thought he saw the silhouette of Karen's father in the background. He thought he saw her father approach her and their two silhouettes merge into one. The single mass slid to one side, out of view, and then the lights went out. He turned away and lurched into the black night, struggling to keep his balance on the unstable gravel shoulder.

The walk home was chilly, and he hugged himself to stay warm. The cold night air, however, had the effect of balancing out the heat that accompanied his anxiety, keeping the nausea at bay.

By the time he got home, his mother was asleep, and he allowed for the possibility 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. *Hearing aid?* Her father had barely said a word. It was Karen's voice, not her father's, that resonated with him now, her unexpected and dramatic request that gripped his imagination and kept him awake: *...and put me out of my misery*, she'd said. Suddenly, as forceful as a hammer strike, he understood.

Lying face down, spread-eagled on his 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

thumb unlocking the safety, index finger squeezing, the flash and explosion of sound, the kickback of the pistol, the look of shock on her father's face as he fell backwards.

Toby set the Kleenex box next to the alarm clock and rolled onto his back.

You could be the one, he told himself. *You could be the one.*