

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/4

Pat Brothwell

What Karen Did

"CAN YOU BELIEVE WHAT KAREN DID?," replaced, "What did you do for your summer vacation?" as the question du jour among the faculty when East Fulton High School opened its doors in the fall of 1986.

Karen Kline had been President of the Future Teachers of America Club for three years, had helped its vaulted advisor, Cathy White, create and implement the "East Fulton Future Educator Scholarship" and had shepherded it along to triple in size through fundraisers, faculty donations, and community donations. She was subsequently awarded a check for \$2000.00, \$2000.00 in 1986 mind you, to begin her career as one of the next generation's most promising teachers. Cathy White was so very impressed by her work, that she also got every teacher in the building to pitch in \$10.00, which would pay for all Karen's textbooks her freshmen year.

Then, once those checks were cashed, and book money safely stashed in a shoebox underneath her bed, Karen Kline had the audacity to change her major from elementary education to business because deep down, no matter what she said, Karen really did value a fiscally rewarding career over a career that does good. She rationalized that she could do good in her personal life, if need be, and didn't feel bad about the scholarship, or the book money. She had earned it. She had worked her ass off under Cathy White's tutelage, but she was a teenager and I don't know if you're aware, but those teens are famously fickle.

"Can you believe what Karen did?"

People were still talking about it when the class of 1986 started returning home for the Thanksgiving holiday. "I still can't believe it. Did she change?" they asked. Cherie Becker and Julia Stevens said she did. They said Karen ditched them as friends that fall. All three girls were supposed to attend West Chester University, room together, and become teachers, but first Karen switched her major, and then, well then she started partying, and moved out of their shared dorm. That was their story. That's what they've stuck with all these years later. That's what they've been telling any reporter that asks, anybody who asks, really.

Karen believed that she stopped hanging out with Cherie Becker naturally. Her interests just started diverging, sure, but she always maintained she could've stayed friendly with her had she not become so disgusted with her every time she went to a party on Friday night, or Saturday afternoon, or Saturday night, or Sunday afternoon, or Tuesday night, or Wednesday night, or...you get it. She chose to stop being friends with Julia. She was a buzzkill, she told several people that the fall when people asked her why they stopped hanging out. She said it this year at a party, when Julia showed up, and Karen spent her time making sure she was always the next room over, so they didn't have to interact. See, Julia said, when she heard. She's spiteful over something that happened years ago. Karen's the type of person who holds grudges, and doesn't get along with other girls, she told an intrepid reporter, one of 6 who managed an

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/4

exclusive with Julia Stevens, who now went by Jules Bevich. She's the type of girl who doesn't support other *women*.

Karen didn't get busted with drugs over Christmas break of her junior year. Drew Kornacki did, but she was in the car when Drew got pulled over for driving erratically, and the police found a few baggies of coke on his person. Drew got busted for possession *and* a DUI. People said it was something Karen did, and not the booze (or cocaine), that caused Drew to drive erratically. Karen didn't admit it to anyone, except her eventual husband, but she did exactly what people were saying. They weren't dating, but they were old friends, and he'd gotten very attractive since going away to college and joining the crew team. Karen also did some of the coke that night, I mean, she was 19 and it was 1986, and she was driving around in a Jeep blowing one of the stars of the Villanova Crew team. If there's ever a time to do a few lines, isn't that it? They never even asked if she did any, so she got off scott free that night, something that made her feel terrible, until Drew's dad someone managed to get all his charges dropped. Karen and Drew are still good friends, a fact some people noted when they gave their 7th and 8th exclusives.

One thing Karen didn't do, that people claimed she did, was cheat on Scott Peterson, her boyfriend of a year and a half, and despite being 3 years out of high school, still very much a beloved figure around East Fulton, when she gave Drew that fateful hummer. She had dumped him just two days prior, and yes, was it maybe not the best look to be hooking up with someone else just two days later? Sure. But no, she didn't cheat. Karen claimed to have never cheated on a partner before. She once said at a party that no one cheated on her either, but that's debatable, because another thing Karen did, and still likes to do, and anyone who knows Karen, like *really* knows her, will tell you is true, is that she likes to make grand statements at parties, and embellish stories here and there. She's not an outright liar, but she is a fan of the hyperbole.

Karen dumped Scott Peterson because he was too nice. That was true. She told a couple people at the time that she was into bad boys, which now embarrasses her, and wasn't even that accurate, as aside from the coke...and the almost-DUI, Drew Kornacki was regarded as a pretty nice guy. Scott Peterson, who, and we should've gotten this out of the way earlier because the ages match up, isn't the same guy who killed his wife Lacey Peterson, was nice to a fault, which Karen initially liked, but which she found herself growing increasingly bored with. Karen didn't realize at the time that she wasn't looking for a bad boy, but she was looking for a nice guy capable of sarcasm and a couple dirty jokes. Scott couldn't even be self-deprecating. Her now husband was a legitimately kind and patient man who was also the type of guy who'd tell you a Helen Keller joke on your first date, and then fuck you standing up between two garbage cans in the alley outside a bar the night you met.

Karen Kline became Karen Walker when she met and married Jonathan Walker in the spring of 1991. They didn't realize Julia, or, Jules rather, somehow knew about the garbage can tryst, so both Karen and Jonathan were surprised when it became public knowledge years later. Karen had even lied to most of her friends and told them she didn't see Jonathan's dick until their third date. She bragged to all her girlfriends about how

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/4

big it was, which wasn't exactly true. Remember, she had, has, a habit of embellishing, but she was just so enamored with Jonathan that everything about him essentially reminded her of a big dick. When the town turned on Karen the second time, this most recent time, someone leaked a picture of Jonathan's dick, meant for Karen, stored on his cloud, hacked by her enemies. It was average at best.

Karen didn't realize that Jules, Julia at the time, told people in town that Karen and Jonathan had fucked in a pile of garbage, which coupled with the road head, the cocaine adjacency, the scholarship bate and switch, and a shoplifting incident at Sears in 1983 (Karen did that, along with 48 hours of mandated community service), made her something of a persona not grata in East Fulton for a number of years. They mainly didn't realize because after their very rushed wedding, Karen and Jonathan traveled, got jobs in the Philly burbs, and generally stayed out of town.

Karen copped to all these things, when an intrepid reporter wore her down. She was young then she said. She answered because she was tired now.

Karen was welcomed back to East Fulton with open arms when she returned to raise her family a couple of years back, because she became successful.

She became the youngest female vice president of the bank she worked at.

She started her own business.

She and Jonathan built a beautiful home that has been featured in several architectural magazines.

She had three kids.

Most importantly, she became rich. Karen Walker became very rich.

Rich helped the people of East Fulton look past her past transgressions, the ones that besmirched the Kline name around town in the first place. It helped them look past some of her other foibles too.

Karen financially supported Jonathan, who didn't work.

He smoked pot every day.

Karen knew, and even approved of this, and joined him 3 or 4 nights a week, but in a moment of panic she said that it bothered her, and that she wished he did it less. It really didn't. Still, Karen felt pressure to say she'd talk to him about his drug habit.

That's how they'd phrased it.

Drug habit.

She didn't correct them. Pot wasn't one of their mutual interests, she lied. That was travel. Kayaking. Running. Music. Swinging? She did admit they did it a few times. There was irrefutable proof. She blamed Jonathan again, although technically it was his idea that she blame him this time.

Karen was actually the one who suggested that they try it. She told girlfriends at the time she wanted to see if it would make him stray. It

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/4

didn't, but that was a lie anyway. She'd simply been curious, and Jonathan had been open. She liked it, much more than Jonathan if she was being honest with herself, but when he offered to say it was his idea, to save her job, or rather, her reputation, because the school board was already working overboard behind the scenes to get her out, she said yes. I'll be forever grateful, she said. He asked if she knew who outed them. She had an idea.

That was one week after the shooting. Karen said it was what she and Jonathan did to cope, even though they'd been doing it for years at this point. This was immediately after she decided to be the adult who'd mentor the students protesting guns. She did that because she felt guilty.

When Karen came home, she'd even buried the hatchet with Cathy White, since she'd decided she wanted to make a difference after all, resigned from the bank, got a master's in education, and took a job as the business teacher at East Fulton High School.

Her first year went alright.

Karen started smoking again, cigarettes, which she'd initially quit in 2002.

She allowed Jacki Molloy, who was the niece of her best friend, to get away with murder.

She played favorites. She admitted this once, to the principal. This was noted by 3 different reporters.

But, Karen also started the FBLA.

She organized a field trip to Europe.

She got the school mentioned in the local news because of the career fair she organized, and started a job shadowing program that *Good Morning America* once mentioned.

She also wrote 122 letters of recommendation her first year. Take that how you will.

She also became known as being a little bit opinionated, but she didn't have tenure yet, so when she was told to tone it down she did.

Karen woke up on April 17, 2013, and kind of fucked up her daughters' morning routine. It was Jonathan's birthday, and she told him that she'd take care of the morning routine, and he woke up at 5, and set off on a 135-mile bike ride. She forgot to send Taylor's project to school with her. She forgot her purse, so had to return to the house after they'd already been driving 10 minutes, so Jen was late for show choir practice, and she neglected to make sure that Brynn was wearing a bra. She was late for school that day, and ate her breakfast at her desk, just a bagel and lox, and an apple, even though the kids weren't allowed to eat in her classroom.

When the gunfire started, she didn't react well.

She dropped the ball. She froze. She panicked.

She let the kids flee the room without seeing if the hallway was safe.

She left the room herself without making sure the students were all accounted for.

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/4

She didn't realize Nate Engle got shot in the head by one of the first bullets fired and was slumped over on his blood-spattered math homework while she was scrambling out the door.

"I left him. I left him. I left him."

She didn't say that, but the anti-anti-gun people made it into a meme in the ensuing policy war that followed. They superimposed her head on Lex, the girl in *Jurassic Park*, who says "he left us, he left us," when the lawyer who was in her jeep ran to the bathroom once the T-Rex got loose. You know that scene, right? Karen did. She let her kids watch that growing up. She let them watch a lot of inappropriate things. Anyhow, that lawyer ended up getting his head bitten off, a lot of internet commenters pointed out. When's Karen going to get her comeuppance?

Karen didn't follow protocol. She forgot the drills they had.

She allowed two additional students in her care, Avery Snyder, and Derrick Berman, to leave, and to get shot and die in the hallway.

Six students died altogether. One died fleeing the building. One died when a stray bullet ricocheted into the bathroom where she was hiding. Another died when her teacher allowed her to run into the hallway, but then that teacher, Josh Ressler, Karen's friend, was shot 4 times in the head, and he died too. Six students died, and three were in Karen's care: Avery, Derrick, and Nate.

Karen went back to her room after the shooter was taken down, sat at her desk and stared at Nate Engle, who could've been sleeping if it weren't for the light blood splatter on his wrestling sweatshirt and statistics.

She swore that day when she went home that she'd help whatever students wanted to fight what happened to them. She wasn't even sure at the time what they were going to fight, if she was being honest. She thinks. That next week was a blur for Karen. The pot probably didn't help, people said.

She knew it was Richard Lawson, *Congressman* Richard Lawson, she'd seen at the last sex party she and Jonathan had attended. She knew he was vehemently pro 2nd Amendment and pissed at her. She thought maybe he was the one who spread the word she was there. She didn't know for sure, but she'd bet on it.

She received threats. Death. Rape. Dismemberment. Her kids did too. So did Jonathan. He took one anonymous call that made his eyes well up with tears. Whatever the caller said terrified him. He never told her what that was, but they stayed at a hotel that night. When Karen told the intrepid reporter, who convinced her that yes, he was on her side, despite what she read, that the threat made Jonathan cry, pundits on TV talked about how the lack of *strong* male role models were hurting our youth.

She took the nude pictures that circulated online. Well, she posed for them. A college boyfriend had taken them.

She allowed herself to be filmed sucking a dick, not Drew Kornacki's mind you, or the same guy who took the nude pictures circulated online, but *another* college boyfriend, who pointed a camcorder at her while she enthusiastically swallowed his penis. People noticed that. Her enthusiasm.

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/4

They noticed she wasn't at all that enthusiastic when she spoke with the student activists on the news shows. It seemed like a sentence. She seemed rehearsed, mechanical. Karen didn't speak with conviction. Karen sucked a dick with a conviction that bordered on the absurd. She was the most animated dick sucker most casual television viewers had ever seen.

Karen walked in on Brynn watching the video online with some friends.

Karen told Devin Schumacher that the stories he wrote, scathing, sarcastic stories about his classmates in which he mocked them in hypothetical situations, were funny. Publically, she told him they were inappropriate, and if she caught him passing one around class again, she'd get him suspended. In private, she told him he was a talented writer, and that he was very funny. Devin told Charlie Fuller that Karen Walker told him that. Karen, as many pointed out, contributed to the culture of bullying at East Fulton.

Karen went to Charlie Fuller's funeral out of a sense of guilt. She blamed herself for the deaths of Avery Snyder, Nate Engle, and Derrick Berman. She quit teaching that year. She quit being an activist too. Karen moved out of East Fulton in the fall of 2014. People said the Walkers went to upstate New York. Or maybe Scranton.

Brynn's topless pictures circulated online that fall. Karen didn't teach her values. She showed her it was ok to disrespect her body. She'd exhibited years of questionable behavior, and plus, Brynn at 18, was an adult. She knew what she was doing. That's what Karen would've said. That's what she said about these student activists, that they may be kids, but they know what they're doing.

On April 17, 2013, the world was shocked by what Charlie Fuller did. He walked onto the grounds of East Fulton High School and shot 28 people. 8 of them died. 2 teachers. 6 students. 3 of those students were in Karen Walker's care. They died on *her* watch.