

The foiled meats and quarts of frozen liquid formed a frosty wall around Karen Slattery as she knelt before her opened freezer. She'd got up early that morning to make a new batch of gazpacho and wanted to freeze another quart before she and Tom went to the farmers' market. But to do that, she had to shift the frozen drumsticks. The drumstick shift crowded the chicken stock containers, which in turn forced out the half-dozen packs of boneless breasts and the slabs of steak. Before long the entire contents of her freezer were on the floor, which is where her husband found her.

"I had to find a place for the gazpacho," she said at the approach of his footfalls. She glanced up at him, in plaid and jeans, ready for their Saturday. "I didn't think it would be such a project."

"Why don't we have that soup for dinner tonight?" he said.

"We already are," Karen said. She balanced a whole frozen chicken on her thigh. "This is the extra meal. For winter."

"I'm sure there's a pork chop or something waiting for a shot to defrost," he said. He leaned closer in, counting foil packs. "Just take something out."

"Don't tell me what to do," she said.

He poured himself some coffee. "I read once, in Japan, it's a sign of intelligence if you can fit objects into small, contained spaces."

"Tom? Would you keep your jokes to yourself, please?"

"That's not a joke. That's a fact," Tom said. "All I know is, if our power goes out, we'll have us one hell of a hurricane party. You just about ready to go?"

"Does it look like I'm ready to go? Give me ten minutes."

Twenty minutes later, Karen had got the fresh soup to fit in the freezer. Tom sped along the roads that lined acres of cotton and tobacco fields to the large cement garage that passed in this county for a farmer's market. It was already packed when they pulled up to the entrance.

"I think I'll just go on to the hardware store, and come back to get you in an hour," Tom said.

"We were going to shop together," Karen said. "The therapist said."

"Well, we got a late start to a long day," Tom said, leaning toward Karen for a peck.

"It's only 8:30," she said.

"And it's getting later all the time. I'll see you in a bit," he said.

The early risers at the Mewborn Farmer's Market arrived yawning in ball caps and sweatpants, holey work shirts and flip-flops, milling about for local eggs and a few heads of lettuce or a sweet potato pie. Dozens of bodies moved from stall to stall in an easy, cordial way under the pavilion, out of the grasp of the morning's steamy heat. Somewhere in the din, a toddler asked for strawberries, even though it was past Labor Day. What was left of the season was mostly tough-skinned root food: Potatoes. Sweet potatoes. Squash and more squash. A few farmers sold hand-jarred pesto and comb-in honey. Scuppernongs and string beans. Some still had late-season tomatoes and peppers.

Karen kept her eyes on the produce, knowing that any kind of eye contact, let alone a well-timed "Morning there!" would guilt her into buying a pound or two of something she did not need, like last week's mustard greens. But she found the dozen eggs she'd been searching for and wiped out the cashbox at Compton's Farm with her twenty. Compton's teenage granddaughter, who sold her the eggs, thanked Karen with a sneering "ma'am" that made Karen vow to bring only ones and fives next time. She bought red peppers and half her tomatoes and an English cucumber for her next batch of gazpacho.

At the far side of the farmers' market, in a corner near the back entrance, stood a black man dressed in white. His thinning hair was greased back, and he held in his gloved hands a gleaming white book. It was nearing 9:00. Karen usually came too early to hear the man's weekly missives and in any case had figured him among the most desperate of shepherds if he thought he'd find converts at the Mewborn Farmers' Market. This week, next to him, was a large woman seated before a small upright wooden organ. The organ was so tiny that the woman hovered over it to play. And the woman was so big that a casual glance in her direction did not at first reveal the three red wooden stool legs beneath her, so it appeared as though she were floating.

"This Bible," the man said, in a strong voice to no one in particular, holding up his thick book. "This! Was the only thing

left the water did not touch as it passed through our church. This! Very Bible reminded me, ladies and gentlemen, it reminded me as it lay there open on the pulpit amid the rotting wood and puddles of floodwater, of what was truly important, even as the water came and took everything else away.”

The woman played encouraging notes on the organ, as though she were agreeing with him in sound, egging him on. Tom and Karen had moved to Mewborn a year after Hurricane Nestor destroyed the homes that had lined the Neuse River. Nearly everyone they’d met had a story about their survival and loss in the flood that followed. Tom was a surveyor. He’d been hired by a firm to revise maps of the flood-struck neighborhoods. When Tom’s temporary job went permanent, Karen had found a part-time job as a collections agent for U-Pay Co., and in spite of her hating to cold-call errant bill payers—she could never filter out the apologetic tone in her voice—she had quit looking at the Sunday classifieds. She’d heard the bulk of the flood tales over the phone. Nestor was the main excuse—or reason—for quite a few folks whose names and number cropped up on her database.

The organ had a breathing, nasal drone that harkened bagpipes rather than the bright notes of a piano or the tinny tone of a keyboard. It had a breathing chamber, like a bullfrog’s bellow. Karen moved closer. The man seemed to grow angrier, his words more forceful, as the organ wheezed notes.

“The waters divided, smashed, destroyed, even. Destroyed! But it brought us together, too. Those waters brought our neighbors . . . together. It brought our churches . . . together. White and black, we were all . . . together, ladies and gentlemen! We lifted ourselves up! We lifted UP, I say, and when everything was in disaster, when all of your food was rotten and your mattress was growing mold in a tree in your backyard and all your magazines and toothbrushes and kitty litter and sandwich meat came charging out of your house, pushed by the Water of God—the Water that beat down your door and charged through and cast everything precious to you out into the street, for the world to see—your embarrassment of riches! Your embarrassment, ladies and gentlemen! All the things you had and owned—those things you thought you owned—those photographs and books and armoires and televisions sets?” Sweat moved through his white suit coat.

“Where are they now? Where are they? They are but memories!”

Karen envisioned all of her and Tom’s things in their front yard. All those yogurt containers dripping chicken stock on the lawn, their furniture and vintage Cream albums, their eight years of joint tax returns like postage stamps cast across the grass. Just then, Harriet McAllister clicked past the preacher in high heels and her hot pink can-do capri pants. Her green straw beach bag concealed her fresh produce finds. Harriet’s husband worked with Tom. Karen noticed the glossy white tips of Harriet’s nails and rearranged her ball cap.

“Hey, Karen,” Harriet said. “Getting your dose of religion?”

“That Bible he’s holding is the only thing in his church the flood didn’t get,” Karen said.

Harriet snorted. “Apparently *every* Bible in Mewborn has some miracle flood savior story. Some reporter was stupid enough to put it in the paper. Now it’s one of those suburban legends.”

The man in white clutched the Bible, which did look brand new. Even his tennis shoes had a glossy spaceman shine to them, like rock-hard Adidas.

“Hey, you’ll never guess,” Harriet said. “Greg and I were at the Collinses’ last night? For drinks? And Shar and Cran were there and *guess* who didn’t drink the wine?”

Karen felt her stomach turn at Harriet’s singsong voice. The Collinses had a party?

“Um, who?” Karen asked.

“Shar! She sipped water out of a wine stem all night. Didn’t even bother to share the news. I think that’s rude. I mean, if you’re pregnant, you’re pregnant. The whole world isn’t going to stop for a baby,” Harriet said. “Just out with the news and move on, that’s what I say.”

“Maybe they aren’t sure yet,” Karen said, still thinking about what the man had said about lost toothbrushes and photographs. Two children in striped shirts ran between them toward the organist. The woman’s hair was thin and slick, like the man’s, and the flesh of her dark arms jiggled in sync with the movement of her hands. Both of her arms had a half-dozen dark marks, age-old scars about three inches long, just under the crook of her elbow. Harriet squinted at the organ.

“That thing looks familiar. I think Harold Crossen, my old

yoga teacher? back in Ohio? played one of those in my yoga class. Some lady—not this one, for sure—did some chanting. Kundalini style? She was all yippie-yi-yay, rolling her tongue, and all that,” Harriet said.

“How would you find a Kundalini organ?” Karen asked.

“Maybe a dime-store find? Who knows? I think it’s from India or something. Strange to see one here at the farmers’ market,” Harriet said. “You’d think a Hindu music machine wouldn’t do so well with the Baptists.”

The man turned his attention toward Karen and Harriet. He spoke over them, over their heads, as though two very tall people loomed behind them. Karen sensed he was speaking to them directly and then realized they were among just a handful of people who had stopped shopping to listen.

“Let us give thanks that each of you can be here now, choosing your tomatoes for lunch! For your B!L!T! Sandwiches! Choosing your dessert pies for your children!” he said. “Yes, ladies and gentlemen, we lost much in our lives, but did we lose our will to go on? To keep having? To keep wanting? No, ladies and gentlemen, we did not. And even though, sadly, my church is not fit for visitors, I certainly am. My body is my temple, and I choose to welcome you in! And each of you today can choose the same! We! Are making a choice!”

He closed his eyes and extended his arms as he prayed over the market as the organ droned on. Harriet sighed and swept her sunglasses from her face to atop her head. “And my choice? is to continue shopping,” she said. “See ya, Karen.”

Harriet disappeared into the crowd. Karen still had some change from her split twenty and looked around the market for one last buy. She spied pumpkins at Craydle’s stand, the first of the season, and suddenly all Karen could think of was November. Tom had suggested they ask a few of the other North Carolina transplants to Thanksgiving that year. She thought of the people seated around her table eating pumpkin pie: Harriet and her husband. The Collinses. Shar and Cran and the precious bump in Shar’s abdomen. Maybe Syona from U-Pay. The man in white began to thunder again about choice. She gave Jo Craydle her last six dollars and selected a huge pumpkin for pie filling. With a half-dozen plastic bags dangling from her wrists, Karen balanced

the pumpkin between her hip and stomach and went back to the woman playing the organ.

The two children were still there, kneeling near the woman as she played. Their eyes were fixed on her left hand, which pushed and released, pushed and released, a black flap on the back of the organ.

“Is that a piano?” one of the children asked, a candy bar cramming his mouth.

“No, love, it’s a harmonium,” the woman said, her voice hushed.

“That’s not a harmonica,” the other child said.

“That’s right, it ain’t,” the woman said. “Harm-o-nium.”

“Why does it breathe like that?”

“When I push this flap, the air gets sucked inside the box. The reeds inside fill up. When I hit the organ keys, it lets out the air and makes music,” the woman said. Harmonium. Karen had never heard that word before. It made her think of trillium, ammonium, sodium. An element for harmony. Harmonium. A noble gas. The essence of a musical note. She thought about molecules, splitting and filling the air, of whirring spectrometers and funnels that could manipulate and freeze substances, of a rock-solid Walt Disney suspended in a room somewhere in Orlando or Anaheim, lying in wait for a serum that would give him life so he could draw more cartoons of rats and dogs who wear pants and drive cars.

“But what does . . .” the child asked.

The woman held up her hand. “Now, hush. I have come all the way from Georgia to play for my dear brother Silas’s sermons. You just listen in and enjoy yourselves.” Karen could almost see the market’s oxygen suddenly sucked in and trapped and shaped and forced to be filled with notes, to be moved and to resonate, even for just a second or two: a thousand molecules assuming the form, holding the note, and dissipating in an instant. It was like those flash gatherings she had read about, where people would convene and eat a banana at a Starbucks in Spain or wave a pink feather at exactly 3:58 p.m. at an Origins makeup counter at Neiman Marcus in San Francisco.

The woman looked up from her organ and caught Karen’s eye.

“Are these yours, honey? Cause they are smart! Just loaded with questions,” she said.

“I don’t have any children,” Karen said. “We . . . can’t.”

The woman's smile softened. "Lord have mercy on you, child."

Karen wasn't sure if she should thank the woman, so she just gave her an uncertain smile and turned away, feeling the brunt of the pumpkin's weight, startled by what she'd just admitted. Karen had never admitted they couldn't have babies, not even to Tom. And they'd tried for a few years, but even after a few months, sex had devolved from a remotely pleasant recreational activity to an obligation. It wasn't long after that they'd stopped altogether and would not admit to each other what Karen had told the organist. She shifted the pumpkin from one hip to the other. The clock on the pavilion wall told her Tom would be here soon.

"Have a blessed day!" the woman called over her notes.

Karen left the drone of the harmonium and waited outside, watching the boys in the adjacent field play rugby. They ran in herds, and every few minutes would convene in scrum, arms and backs intertwined in a huge huddle, like a massive jellyfish waiting for the egg to drop amid the clamor of moving, kicking legs. In an instant, with their parents' meager applause as a soundtrack, they would disperse across the field to track the ball in play. Karen could never stand rugby, never saw the point, even as a child, of playing any game that could result in being bashed in the face with a ball. Her brother had played through college, and much of her girlhood had been spent in a dewy field somewhere in Vermont watching boys play. She remembered kicking at melting gray-white piles of months-old snow, of wet mittens in March after attempting a sidelines cartwheel. Karen and Tom had hardly seen snow since they had moved south, save for an occasional flurry on a cold day. September here felt more like July.

Karen spotted their Volvo entering the driveway. She walked from the lip of the field toward the parking lot and motioned with her chin for Tom to release the hatch of the trunk. He didn't catch the signal and instead pulled up alongside her and popped open the passenger door.

"I need to put this pumpkin in the trunk," she said.

"Karen? I'm sorry. I need to get back to the house. There's stuff in the trunk. Just get in."

Karen sighed her pissed-off sigh, as she lowered herself into the car. Tom turned to her.

"What?"

"As though two seconds of opening the trunk will affect everything," she said.

"It will. The trunk is full and I need to get home. Gotta get the lawn cut. Why did you buy that thing anyway?"

"What thing?"

"The pumpkin sitting in your lap?"

"I thought I would boil it down for pies this afternoon. For Thanksgiving. For our party."

Tom adjusted the rearview mirror and pulled out of the parking lot. "Karen. Thanksgiving is two months away. Why are you buying pumpkins now? We don't even know if anyone will come."

Karen adjusted the pumpkin in her lap. The plastic bags rustled at her feet.

"Even if they don't, we'll eat it this winter. When there's no fresh food. When we're too tired to leave the house. Or, if there's a blizzard or something."

"First off," Tom said, "there are no blizzards down here, and even if there were, the last thing we would crave is frozen mashed pumpkin. Second: Grocery stores are filled with food every day of the week. And third: That pumpkin isn't a pumpkin pie pumpkin. Only the little ones are. So you can de-seed and boil and mash this thing all you want. It will be the worst-tasting pie you ever eat."

They drove home, silent. Karen hadn't moved. The pumpkin weighed down her abdomen, pushing into her pelvis. She could hardly breathe as they pulled into their driveway. Tom came around to her side of the car and opened the door.

"C'mon, Karen. Let's unpack this stuff. I got a long day," he said. "Hedges, the lawn."

Karen didn't move. She had to pee. She contemplated forty-pound bags of kitty litter and dozens of Moon Pies and unripe watermelon and the man in white who had lost his church in a flood. She could imagine Shar at the Collinses' party, refusing wine in her coy way, pushing back her dark red curls to reveal that flushed, expectant complexion. She looked out, over the dashboard and beyond the windshield and could see the grass needed mowing and mulching and soon the pinecones would have to be gathered and it all began to descend upon her, like the constant, anxious gnawing of a rat. She thought of the woman, the preacher's sister

from Georgia, who played the harmonium in the pavilion, of her congruous notes aligned like the shiny golden teeth on a corn cob, of every molecule in the pavilion stretched with music. Karen longed to see her again, to ask her about her scars, to help her breathe life into the harmonium and push the bellow open and shut, open and shut. This was what she murmured, what Tom did not hear:

"I want my molecules to sing."

"Karen? What? Let's go. Look, we can toast the pumpkin seeds. Have an early jack-o-lantern or something, okay?"

Karen scooped up the handles of her shopping bags and clutched the pumpkin in her arms as she maneuvered out of the car. The morning haze was gone and Karen could feel the hot sharp angles of the day, the sun boring down into the Volvo. Tom moved to take the pumpkin from Karen's arms as she emerged from the car. Her grip grew tight around it.

"C'mon, Karen. Let me take it. I'll bring it in."

"No," Karen said.

Tom grabbed the stem as Karen edged toward the woodpile that bordered the house. She fell back and everything—the eggs, the tomatoes, the pepper, the pumpkin, the cord of wood—all of it lay scattered in plastic across the pavement.

"Karen," Tom said, moving toward the spilt bags, "I'm sorry."

The pumpkin's firm roundness was distorted and broken open from the fall. Its seeds lay scattered, the pulp on the driveway. It would soon stiffen and bake dry in the sun. The eggs oozed yellow from the plastic bag onto the grass. Karen ran into the house as Tom started to collect the bags, began to restack the fallen bundle of dried wood.

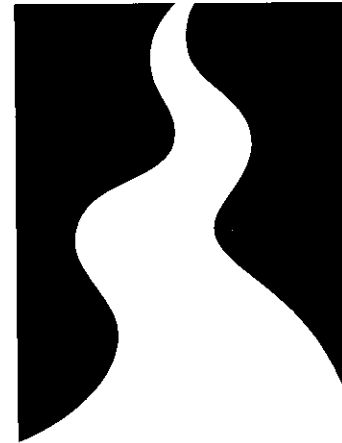
Let me breathe, Karen thought as she entered the kitchen, leaving Tom to order the mess outside. Just let me breathe. She opened the door of the freezer. She could feel the sweat on her face stiffen as whorls of the bright cold light cast around her, the lingering notes of the harmonium still with her. The cool air tinged with the stale scent of dried blood and stiff meat and months of vegetables, but even so, Karen breathed deep, taking stock of all that she had collected and lost.

*For Karen Erdman
(1964–2003)*

I remember the brightness
of your round eyes, brown and blazing,
as you looked up through a scrim of steam
over the soup pot in the kitchen.
And how your short black hair gleamed in light,
dwindled to that braided strip—
"all dyked out" you laughed—
and phrases you and Jenn flipped back and forth
as you cooked, as your braid bobbed
over your rounded tan shoulders,
yellow sundress strap.

I remember you embarrassed, serious,
showing me your corner shrine pasted
with drawings of Kali, Diana, Queen Boudica,
icons of the Virgin Mary
tinged with gold leaf
in that tiniest of bedrooms.

Young, you defied hunger,
your laugh an explosion, your words well-packed.
You were a cook, a jewel, a pulse of rough warmth,
and you should have lived.



**LITTLE
PATUXENT
REVIEW**

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