

Denouement

By

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Karen covered the coffee stains on her moth-bitten jumper by folding her arms – shielding herself from the cold air. Her tired eyes scanned the silent street for signs of life. She held herself tighter, tucking her chin toward her braless chest.

Abandoned buildings shadowed her. The doors were locked and windows were smashed in or boarded up. Dusk engulfed the sky and only a few street lamps showed signs of life, lighting the vacant path. Karen saw that the street ended with a skyscraper, cutting its way through the clouds. Newspapers caught her glance, gently dancing around her in the calm wind. One page landed on her worn slippers with the headline ‘Guilty?’ in black, bold letters. It didn’t interest her – reading never had. The paper flew away but got stuck against a bin heaving with rubbish she recognised. Screwed up papers that read ‘Bill’, ‘Final Notice’ and ‘Court Summons’ also spilled from them. The notices reminded her of her own life. Looking away, she realised she was lost. The only way to remedy that was to begin walking.

As she walked past a flickering lamp post, a strange breeze whispered in her waxy ear as loose dust hovered past. Her brown eyes followed it. It led to inside one of the many derelict shops. The word ‘Retribution?’ flickered in neon lights above the entrance. She saw movement through the murky window pane so approached it. The inside didn’t look like a shop, more like a house. A house she recognised. A small girl, no older than six, in oversized jeans and a grubby t-shirt was dressing a Barbie with its only clothes. Karen nearly took a step forward, mesmerised by the child’s obliviousness to her

surroundings, but was distracted by a man's entrance. The little girl recognised his suit, and smiled. He wore his grin for too long. Karen instantly recognised him. She had pushed memories of him into the darkest and deepest crypts of her mind and here he was, back to destroy another innocent life. Karen used a bin to hold herself up, knocking empty packets of cheap, processed food onto the floor. He slowly took the Barbie from the little girl's delicate, yet grimy fingers and sat beside the small girl. Karen felt her body contort with memories of this man, and then she heard a click. Unaided, the shop's front door creaked open – a chance to help the little girl. Her weakened legs made it to the door, tentatively pushing it open, and stood just inside. As the room revealed itself she noticed the peeling wallpaper and the smell of stale vodka and cigarettes. She even recognised the little girl through her flea-bitten hair and unwashed face. It was *her!* It was Karen at six years old in her old house. She almost smiled while looking at her own innocence, but then Karen remembered the man sitting next to her. As she focussed her eyes on him, he had already been gazing directly at her with a smile full of green teeth. The suit couldn't hide who and what he was. His sinister smile still apparent, he uttered, 'You were always my favourite, Karen. Do you love me?' Karen froze, petrified. His question terrified her. She backed away from the room with trembling hands covering her quivering mouth. The door slowly closed on her as she heard herself, at six years old, replying, 'Of course I love you, Daddy.' The light in the room faded.

Karen was left in a heap on the pavement, in shock and in tears. She was crying for someone else, someone she could have saved but didn't. She felt like a failure; had done all her life.

Light from a building across the road entered her wet eyes. With trembling legs she picked herself up and crossed the road. The word 'Embezzlement' flickered above the entrance. Karen didn't understand the word, but peered through the shattered window anyway. She saw the inside of a cheap retail shop. A teenage girl in school uniform caught her eye. A short skirt, trainers, no tie, unbuttoned shirt to reveal juvenile cleavage and the cigarette in her hand spoke volumes of her opinion of school. She was perusing a top, whilst keeping an eye on her surroundings. Karen watched closely as she recognised the green bow in her greasy hair. The young girl then suddenly pulled the top from the rack and shoved it into her bag, then shuffled to the exit, nearing Karen. Karen turned to the exit but instead caught glimpse of a different girl in a tasteless mini-skirt and boob-tube combination slightly farther down the road. This girl wasn't much older, or different, to the shoplifter. Surprising Karen, a car materialised from thin air and crawled towards the young girl, waiting under one of the few working street lamps. She leaned into the passenger window of the car to reveal cleavage. She got in. Karen knew that empty smile. She would always wear it when she was forced into something against her will. The car drove past her. She couldn't see inside, but she knew what was happening.

Like clockwork, another light flashed on. This time it came from a building with boarded up windows. She pressed her face up against a hole in the rotting wood and saw her son's bedroom. Mitchell's bedroom. He was playing with dirty toys on the floor until the silence shattered and Karen smashed open the door. Mitchell sprinted to the nearest corner he could find. Karen's hand was soaked in the whisky spilling from the bottle in her hand. 'Come 'ere, you li'l shit!' Mitchell cowered like a helpless puppy as Karen shoved the heel of her foot into his neck, cutting off his oxygen. She didn't stop punching him until her fist bruised. She twisted her heel into his neck and then emptied the remaining whisky all over her son's head, laughing. Outside, Karen stopped peering through and leant her forehead onto the wood. She closed her eyes in denial. Her life was being shown in retrospect. However, as of yet, she couldn't work out why. She turned away sharply, unable to see herself in her true form, pitiable.

Her gaunt face was smeared with tears, new and old. A light behind her compelled her to turn around. It was a flickering light through a window. The flashing was caused by a television on mute; Karen could only see the back of it. She stepped towards the building whose sign above the entrance read 'Equilibrium'. She saw a grimy but occupied sofa facing the set. It was her, again.

She was asleep. Her head rested on her right shoulder and drool slowly spilled onto her jumper, the same jumper Karen was wearing presently.

Karen's sleeping visual had fallen asleep with a cigarette in her hand. A long, crooked line of ash performed a balancing act on top of the butt. An empty bottle of whisky sat at her feet as well as empty cans of cider. Karen didn't recognise this moment of her life. At closer inspection her mirror image was snoring.

She almost turned away in repugnance until she saw a shadow at the back of the room. It slowly edged forward and came into the flickering, random colours of the television. It was a man, young, and holding something tight. Metal wiring. His red, unflinching eyes glared as he made his way to the back of the sofa. She could see on his face nothing but unconditional hatred. The wiring passed the sleeping Karen's sweaty hair and stopped at her neck. Karen was trembling as much her killer's hands. She didn't think he'd do it, she begged that she'd wake. She even tried shouting out, but her voice was empty. Her panic was interrupted by two words coming from his quivering lips, *'fuck you.'* With that, he squeezed the wiring around her neck and she instantly awoke. Her cigarette flew across the room and as cans and bottles were kicked around, she frantically gagged for air. As his grip tightened, her face turned red, her lips purple and her eyes as white as his taut hands. Through gritted teeth, spit fell from his mouth into her hair. She couldn't feel it; she couldn't feel anything except her lungs gradually losing oxygen. Outside, Karen's body was quivering in sheer disbelief. How could her flesh and blood do such a thing? She genuinely couldn't understand, regardless of

what she had been shown in previous images. She was dying. She was dying because of Mitchell, her murdering son.

Darkness clouded over. The other end of the street had all but vanished; the beginning of her journey. She was tired. She always thought she knew herself, but now her true form was exposed. She was cruel and neglectful. Her only excuse was her dark childhood, but she'd been given the power to change it, and didn't. She was a coward. Her vacant face at this realisation searched for some kind of answer, some form of redemption. Had she served her punishment? She felt she had. Her answer came in the shape of the building before her, a never-ending skyscraper beckoning her like a guiding light. All that she had seen filled a lifetime, and a terrible life at that. She noticed her hands were ageing, her skin turning blotchy and loose around her bones. She touched her face. It felt thin, worn and dry. She looked back at the street. All that she had witnessed now existed only in her memory, shrouded in regret. The lights were fading and the buildings blackened. Karen entered the colossal building.

On the walls, paintings of images stored in her head from years ago immediately hit her weary eyes. A couple of pictures were of good memories, most bad. The carpet was red. Her slippers stuck to it. She searched for a door, stairway or corridor in the foyer area. She thought that maybe it had been a mistake entering, until she heard a ping and so followed the sound. It was a lift arriving at its destination. It jolted into its position and sat silently

for several seconds until its heavy, metal door slowly slid open. The door screeched loudly against itself. She stole a quick glance inside and noticed a still figure standing by the lift controls, wearing a large cloak with a hood covering the face. She turned around to look at the entrance but was now just a wall. She edged closer to the lift and noticed the apparition hovering above the ground with only its broken, infected toenails scratching the floor. She searched frantically, praying for a miracle. Nothing came. She knew what she had to do, she was powerless.

The gate jerked shut. Karen stood, head low, eyes closed. Slowly, the creature's hand began to rise towards the rusty button. It pinged again then jolted. She couldn't tell if she was going up or down. As she waited, she could sense the figure in the lift slowly move behind Karen. She could hear the scrape of its cracking toenails along the lift floor. It stopped behind her and slowly edged forward. She could smell its rotting breath on her shoulder as the lift grew hotter. Her powerlessness made her sob. Smoke began seeping through the many cracks. She shuddered as its warm breath wetting her ear lobe, then began licking the back of her ear with its long sticky tongue, goading her to react. With a hard jerk, the lift stopped and Karen braced herself in the momentary silence. The door flew open and smoke fumes attacked her eyes and, almost blinded, the heat began to burn her skin. She felt a hard shove and fell out.