

I Wear Many Masks

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The first time I met Karen Manuel she was laughing as she entered my classroom for the introductory session of Language 10. Several other girls stuck close to her like princesses around a queen. Even at fifteen Karen Manuel was tall and heavy. Her hair was dusty blond, cut short, and gelled back from a pale face without make-up. Her eyes were dark magnets that drew you to her. In that first class she never spoke, but I was always aware of her. I was also scared, not physically afraid of her, but scared because here was a woman nobody seemed able to explain or predict.

In Karen Manuel's eyes I could see only a hint of the story she had helped write at St. Stephen's Junior High in the spring. Like a brush fire on a dry summer afternoon, the news swept through the milltown of St. Stephen's in minutes. My principal, Glen Dixon, convened an emergency staff meeting at Humberview Senior High. "I've got bad news, folks. Apparently there is a hostage-taking incident at St. Stephen's Junior High. I still don't have the details, but it sounds like serious business." Glen's voice was cool like a television reporter, but his lips quivered. All of us in the staffroom knew relatives or colleagues or neighbors at St. Stephen's Junior High.

"Has anyone been hurt?"

"Not that we know."

"How many people?"

"About seven or eight. The little information I have indicates that a student with a shotgun has taken seven or eight of his classmates hostage." Now Glen's lips shook, and his eyes were wet. Like a video on pause, the world seemed to stop. Everywhere silence. Then Glen began speaking again, "The police don't want anyone going near the school. All the other students have been sent home. The school is sealed off. The police are negotiating with the student with the shotgun."

"What's the world coming to?" asked Willie Drover, just months away from retirement. "This is St. Stephen's, not Toronto or Detroit."

"Perhaps the world is coming to St. Stephen's," grunted Cam Leyton, the staffroom cynic.

That spring afternoon marked everyone in St. Stephen's. "Anything can happen," people said. "The whole world's going crazy," as if the twenty-five thousand citizens of St. Stephen's were waking from a nightmare to realize the nightmare was real, realizing that the C.B.C. reports of the world from Peter Mansbridge and Barbara Frum were no fictions concocted about faraway people in big cities.

The people of St. Stephen's rode one wave after another like a skiff bouncing over a rough sea. First, the report of a hostage taking filled people with fear and images of murder and mayhem. Then people learned that most of the students and teachers at the school had been dismissed. The next report indicated seven were being held by a classmate who demanded pizza and Coke, *not* Pepsi. The police officer who received the request said the hostage taker spoke quietly and firmly.

A further report indicated that the hostage taker and hostages were all eating pizza.

Finally the classroom door was opened. Karen Manuel stood in the doorway with the shotgun. The hostages had wrestled the hostage taker to the floor, and were sitting on him when the police charged in.

"After he finished his pizza, Bradley stuck the gun in his mouth and tried to shoot himself. The gun didn't work. We jumped him."

That was Karen's story. Karen was a hero. But not for long. Other stories were told. Bradley Wilkins, pale and shaken, mumbled, "I didn't want to do it. Karen talked me into it." It wasn't until the next day that the people of St. Stephen's realized that the hostage taking was more feigned than real. The hostages had convinced Bradley to hold them with the shotgun and to order the pizza and Coke. "Let's have a party before you go," Karen said. And Bradley had agreed. He had agreed to have a party, to scare people, to get the police involved, before he committed suicide. A few minutes of fame, going out in fire. With his father's single-barrelled shotgun Bradley wanted to blow his head off, and Karen Manuel was his friend, and Karen was always good for a final laugh, and Karen was somebody you listened to. But Bradley had forgotten the safety catch on the gun, and at the moment he expected to hear a final blast, nothing happened, and all he smelled was the pizza and Coke, and he saw Karen's eyes, and something blue was dancing in them, something glacially blue like the middle of the ocean or the middle of the sky. And then the gun was torn out of his hands, and he was wrestled to the floor, but he couldn't feel anything because he was sure he ought to be dead.

The events of the story were slowly revealed in rumors and gossip. Everywhere in St. Stephen's — Woolworth's snack bar, Dunkin' Donuts, offices, the paper mill, K-Mart — the story of the hostage taking was constructed. Fear was replaced by anger, and anger by resentment, and through it all coursed a keen titillation that other people were worse off than those of us who were not related to Bradley and Karen and the others, all of whom were now caught up in the criminal investigation.

Bradley Wilkins went to Halifax for ten days of psychiatric examination and Karen Manuel and the other students involved in the hostage hoax, as it was now being called, waited with their parents through the dry, hot summer for the court case in the autumn.

Then in September I met Karen Manuel for the first time, and I liked her immediately. In her eyes seemed a constant challenge, "Read me if you can. Help write me if you dare." She carried an authority, an attraction. People responded to her as if she were a full moon.

And during the next months in Harbourview Senior High Karen Manuel grew bigger and bigger until it seemed that she was filling the school. If anything negative happened in the school, it was immediately assumed that Karen was behind it.

In October, about one week after a judge dismissed all charges against Karen for her part in the hostage taking, teachers were summoned to the staffroom. Glen Dixon spoke quietly, "I want to inform you that at lunch time today a gun was fired in the ladies' changeroom near the gymnasium. Details are still scanty. The police are investigating. But it seems that a student, Teddy Morrow, most of you know Teddy, brought a handgun to school, and put it in his locker. We don't know for sure why he brought it. Something to do with his girlfriend's seeing somebody else. He apparently was going to scare some people with it."

"What is this place coming to?" groaned Willie Drover. "It's not safe to walk the corridors anymore."

Glen Dixon continued, "Apparently some students took the gun from the locker without Teddy's knowing it, and when Teddy found out at recess time, he started searching for it. And you can guess who had it."

Without a pause several people said, "Karen Manuel."

"I'm afraid so."

"Nobody is safe around her."

"She frightens me."

"She's very, very dangerous."

"I'm just as concerned as you are," said Glen Dixon in a soft voice. "But I don't want us jumping to conclusions. Karen claims that she was just trying to protect Teddy and everyone else. She took the gun and hid it in her bag. She says she planned to give it back at the end of the day. Teddy guessed she had it since they all hang around together, and some kind of tussle took place in the changeroom and the gun was fired, accidentally, I assume. The bullet went into the floor. Nobody was hurt."

The police investigated, and Teddy was placed on probation, and Teddy's father was fined for owning a handgun without a license, and the man who sold Teddy's father the gun was fined for selling it without a license, but the judge again believed Karen Manuel's story, and she didn't even miss one of my Language 10 classes.

At the Halloween dance Karen Manuel dressed up as Elvira, and a circle of boys gravitated around her all evening. Several claimed that she had definitely

not used a telephone all night. So, she was never charged with the bomb threat called to the fire department even though some of the chaperons were sure she called because she was standing in the doorway as if waiting for the fire trucks when they arrived.

In December Cam Leyton received a note made up of block letters cut from photocopied pages of magazines. The note said only, "YOU WILL DIE." Cam said he already knew he was mortal. The school librarian remembered Karen had photocopied a large number of pages the day before the note. Cam Leyton said, "I hope I don't die soon. I don't want to miss the next episode of our soap opera."

Then Cam began blaming Karen Manuel for everything that didn't work right in the school. When paper stuck in the photocopier, he whined, "What's Karen up to now?" If Cam didn't like his lunch, he declared, "I think Karen is trying to poison me." If his classroom was too hot or too cold, Cam complained, "Please, get Karen out of the furnace room."

Karen seemed to be everywhere. Lingered outside the staffroom door, listening through the air vent. Joining the crowd huddled at the west end of the school to smoke in the rain and snow even though she didn't smoke. Marching up and down the corridors with friends like a shark with a school of dolphins in her wake. Though she sought no elected office and volunteered for no co-curricular activities, she was the acknowledged, even if uncrowned, leader of many students.

All year she wrote her story in Harbourview Senior High. And three times per six-day cycle she sat in the back corner near the window in my Language 10 class and wrote essays, stories, and poetry afire with heart and mind and imagination. And I knew only that I didn't know her and that I wanted to.

In her writing Karen Manuel gave me insights into her life like pieces of an ever-shifting jigsaw puzzle. In essays she examined issues of war and poverty and crime with the fervor of Old Testament prophets bent on challenging injustice. Always she displayed a keen intelligence and a wide knowledge of current events. Her poetry was confessional and steeled with her resolve to explore the dark labyrinths of the heart. Her stories bristled with humor, with an abiding sense of the ridiculous, including witty and sarcastic portraits of her teachers which I decided not to show my colleagues.

All year I had been seeking to write the story of Karen Manuel. The reports, rumors, accusations, charges, anecdotes, and complaints had swirled around her like mosquitoes on an early summer day. But an essay written in her final Language 10 exam was the piece of the puzzle I most needed. It was about masks. It began and ended with the sentence, "I wear many masks." And I knew that I would never know her.

