

Sister Love

Susan Morgan

“You’re acting like a child,” said Karen.

“I’m not,” said Lynn, and looked with determination at her dinner plate. She could feel Karen’s anger vibrating against her skin.

“Oh, don’t talk to me—”

Lynn glanced sideways at her sister. Karen had taken off Fritz’s ring before she came into the house, the one he’d given her a week ago, so her long, tapering fingers were bare. The chain around her neck was hanging inside her white cotton blouse.

Not Karen’s blouse, Lynn reminded herself. My blouse.

Lynn was sure the ring was on the chain. She turned her head, trying to see.

“It’s not polite to stare,” Karen said, and then stood up. Her napkin fell from her lap to the floor in an awkward pyramid. Lynn didn’t turn as Karen left the room. She could hear Karen’s feet going up the stairs to the room they shared. Lynn counted the steps. At the top, Karen took two steps instead of one and slammed the bedroom door.

Both parents were silent. Lynn waited.

“You did start it,” her father said in an apologetic voice. She looked at him without comment. He was stroking the edge of his water glass, circling the rim with one finger.

“I know.”

“Don’t you think you could apologize, Lynn?” This time it was her mother, sitting at the other end of the table.

“It’s my blouse.”

More silence. She could see the way her father mulled the words over in his head before speaking. “Is it just the blouse, Lynn?” he asked.

She thought, Can’t you see? Karen’s so far from us, like a car on autopilot. She lifts her fork and makes a comment; she even smiles. It’s like

making a marionette dance. Karen knows exactly how to move its strings, but she doesn't ever really join us anymore. I just want—

What? Attention? No use saying so, of course. She turned and picked up Karen's napkin from the floor, folding it carefully and setting it next to Karen's plate. She waited for her mother to say something about the floor being dirty, about putting the napkin in the dirty laundry instead. Her mother sat, relaxed, watching her, silent. Talking about any of this with them was impossible. If she started talking, she'd say too much, or say things wrong. Not talking at all was a lot safer.

"It's just the blouse," Lynn said. Her voice was too loud and there was another long silence. She picked up her fork and then put it down again. "I'm not hungry." She folded her napkin next to Karen's, and then pushed herself away from the table.

She looked at the pictures on the wall as she walked up the stairs. The picture of the Salt Lake Temple was at the bottom. Karen's picture was next, the one taken three years ago for school, then Lynn's picture. She still had braces. Next was her parents' wedding picture, and above that was the prison picture of her father's maternal great-great-grandfather, standing close to other well-fed polygamists who wore bow ties and pajama-like suits with broad, mismatched horizontal stripes just like his. They seemed relaxed as they stood or sat on the steps of the prison door, and they held striped caps. George Q. Cannon seemed to be sitting in a chair in the middle, with a small houseplant in his hand. No one smiled. Lynn found it hard to believe that even one woman would marry any of these old, dry men. Mom had said the picture was taken at the old federal prison, where Sugarhouse Park was now, but Lynn thought the dirt they stood on and the stone-and-brick building behind them was more like Fort Douglas, up by the University of Utah.

The bedroom door looked strange when it was shut: flat, blank wood. Lynn stood at the top of the stairs and knocked. Her hand was shaking. She watched it but couldn't make it stop.

"Go away."

"Karen—"

"I said go away." Lynn could hear one drawer of their dresser opening and closing. "Your blouse is on your bed, if that's what you're worried about." Slam. "But you know as well as I do that you said I could borrow it."

"Let me in, Karen, please?"

She stood there, leaning against the door. The wood was smooth against her face. She could smell the varnish. Karen's feet moved about in the bedroom, back and forth. Lynn put the palms of her hands flat against the door.

"Karen?"

No answer. After a few minutes, she went downstairs again. Mom was washing dishes in the kitchen. Dad had gone in the living room to watch some basketball on TV. Lynn sat down across the room from him, pretending he wasn't there, picked up some magazines and tried to read them. She'd gone through three of them before she heard Karen come out of the bedroom. Lynn kept her head down, hoping Karen would come in and sit down on the couch, ready for peace. Karen went outside instead. When she came back in, she went into the study and shut the door.

Lynn waited a long time. The study door stayed firmly shut. She said goodnight to her dad, who was watching the news now, said goodnight to her mom in the kitchen, went upstairs, and went to bed.

* * *

It was still dark when Lynn woke again; a car driving down the street roused her. She'd been dozing on and off for hours and could still feel the tension in her neck and arms. The house was making hot, creaking sounds. She turned over in bed. In her dreams, her sister Karen was still angry. "You're acting like a child."

"I'm not," said Lynn, and shoved the blankets away from her body. The other twin bed was still empty.

So dark, she thought now. When does the sun rise? She didn't want to look at the clock again. The last time she had looked at the clock, it had been almost four in the morning. The sycamore was scratching at her bedroom window. It had rained earlier in the night, but there was no rain now, and even the smell of the water had faded. Lynn rubbed her hands up and down her arms. The palms of her hands felt hot, and she wondered what had made her shake so much earlier.

That other bed was so silent. And Lynn wanted to talk—or to hear Karen talk: half-yawning, sleepy, with that husky voice of hers.

But not about Fritz.

Dinner was late because Karen had been with Fritz again. Mom and Dad didn't know that part. Lynn had covered for Karen as usual, waiting for her sister at Sugarhouse Park in the pavilion closest to the pond. She

sat at one of the picnic tables with her homework, working trigonometry problems, but after a while she felt hungry. A couple of seagulls were waddling in mud next to the water. She packed up her homework, picked up an empty bag from Kentucky Fried Chicken that was lying on the ground, put it in the nearest trash can, and slowly walked east under the trees next to the stream. Karen and Fritz were on the bridge at the east end of the park. Fritz had his arm around Karen.

Their family had known his family for a long time, ever since his family had moved onto their street ten years ago. Mom had taken them cookies; Dad invited them to a barbecue. They reciprocated, once, by inviting Lynn's family over for dinner. The meal had been a lot more casual than the kind of meal Mom liked to prepare: paper napkins instead of cloth ones, and a casserole instead of a meat, a vegetable, and a starch. Mom brought a tossed green salad with silver tongs to serve with and some rolls she'd made from scratch. Mom and Dad had talked about the ward. Fritz's mom and dad talked about their wonderful Presbyterian pastor. After that dinner, the two sets of parents had settled on being friendly but uninvolved.

It was different with the children. Fritz was an only child with short blond hair and a quiet way of speaking. He moved quickly—more like a gymnast or a dancer than anything else. His sense of balance was superb. There was assurance in the way he walked or sat or smiled; it wasn't as if he was trying to attract attention, but it was as if he knew he was worth watching, and he didn't mind knowing. When he looked at you he made you feel as though he thought you were worth watching, too. Both girls liked that. And he was the only other child who lived on their street.

Fritz taught Lynn how to ride a bike and taught them both how to nail two pieces of wood together. Fritz's dad built him a tree house in the backyard. When they got older and it was summer, all three of them walked together once a week past Sugarhouse Park, carefully crossed the busy street west of the park, then walked to the Sprague Branch Library. They would help each other carry the books home and spend hours together, reading out loud or quietly, and talking about ideas and stories while they ate apples and cheese or peanut butter and jam sandwiches. Gradually, Lynn realized that somehow she had gotten outside their conversation, and she couldn't get back in again.

If their parents had known how serious things were between Karen and Fritz, there would've been trouble. Their parents didn't like him. No,

that was too strong; how could you not like someone who understood so well how adults like to be treated and who was so willing to oblige? But they didn't like the fact that he wasn't a Mormon and that his mother wasn't a member of Daughters of Utah Pioneers. They were glad he was planning to go to Stanford after he graduated from high school in the spring. California was a much more comfortable distance than just down the street.

Sometimes Karen talked to Lynn about Fritz incessantly. Sometimes she got abstracted and could not successfully navigate from one end of a conversation to the other without falling silent, losing the ends of her sentences in some private thought. If she talked, there was always a sense of things being left out. The important words were still inside, and the outside words were merely placeholders for all the things she did not want to share. Lynn didn't know which was worse: to listen while Karen talked and talked and talked, or to watch her sister's face and the way it shut her out.

What would have happened if Lynn had said something about Fritz at dinner? Lynn closed her eyes tight.

What if she'd said, "Did Fritz like the blouse, Karen?"

She hadn't said it. She smoothed the covers with one hand. She shouldn't have made such a fuss over the blouse. She hadn't been able to stop herself.

Lynn got out of bed and felt her way to the door cautiously, groping for the door handle. It took three careful steps, brushing the floor with her toes, before she found the edge of the top stair.

Downstairs, the doors to the study and the guest bedroom were both closed. Of course, Karen would be in the guest bedroom. Lynn repeated that to herself as she made her way into the kitchen and got out a glass. The water was warm coming out of the tap. She filled her glass and carried it out of the kitchen. The guest bedroom was just down the hall.

Lynn opened the door, holding the glass of water as her excuse for being up at all. The room was light enough that she could see the bed.

Karen wasn't in bed.

Lynn stood at the door. Her legs itched, and she was sorry she hadn't dried off her hands after getting the water. She could hear the sound of the kitchen clock and the refrigerator. Maybe Karen was still in the study after all.

She was thirsty. She drank the glass of water and took it back to the

kitchen. Then she walked to the study. The doorknob was cool under her damp hand, and she turned it gently before pushing the door open.

No Karen.

Lynn walked in, went to the window, and examined the screen. Karen had detached it and then had carefully propped it against the window from the outside. Lynn could feel the night air, cool and delicious, against her face; the window was open just enough. It was warmer inside than out.

Lynn went back to the desk. Karen liked to do her homework here. The desk was bare, though. If she'd done her homework here tonight, she'd also put away the books and papers afterward.

Karen's with Fritz again, Lynn thought. Of course she is. She probably waited here just long enough to give their parents the impression she was working late on homework before going to bed. They would have kept their distance, letting their girls work things out without too much comment, giving Karen some space. Lynn pushed her thoughts away, opened the door, and started to go upstairs, then stopped halfway up. Karen's picture watched her from the wall, smiling.

What was I doing when she took the screen off the window? While I was looking at the bedroom wall, waiting for her to come upstairs?

Lynn turned around and came downstairs again.

It was easy to put the screen back. When she had finished, she walked into the living room. Their father usually bolted the door; she wondered whether he had forgotten tonight.

He had not forgotten.

Lynn went upstairs quietly, trying not to make any noise on the stairs. Not that it mattered: her parents always slept soundly. She wondered whether she would be able to sleep. The bed was comfortable, and the house felt cooler. She pulled the covers up to her chin. Gradually the darkness began to lessen, and she heard a car outside. She lay staring at the ceiling. Another car went by. Her heart was beating hard, and she lay with her hands pressed against her body.

She waited for the front doorbell to ring. There was enough light for her to see the small crack that was in the corner of the ceiling. Her anger was gone somehow, or maybe it was just waiting. Putting the screen back and making sure the door was locked—that had changed things, balanced them out. Maybe Karen would try throwing pebbles at their bedroom window instead of ringing the doorbell, and Lynn would let her in.

The doorbell didn't ring. Her eyes were on the crack in the ceiling, and she listened without making a sound. She heard her parents get up: water running, the smell of bacon. Karen had always been home before morning. Always.

Outside, the sycamore scratched at the window while Lynn lay silent in her bed.