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Karen Thompson

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Karen Thompson

by Barbara DiBernard

Karen Thompson's lover Sharon Kowalski was severely injured in November 1983 when a drunk driver crashed into her car. Sharon is now paralyzed from the waist down and has serious brain damage. The two women had exchanged rings, bought a house together, made each other beneficiaries of their life insurance policies, and made a lifetime commitment to each other, but were extremely closeted. When Karen, at the suggestion of a counselor, came out to Sharon's parents after the accident, the Kowalskis reacted with anger, denial, and hatred. "They said I was sick and crazy and they never wanted to set eyes on me again," Karen Thompson says. A legal struggle began which resulted in Donald Kowalski being appointed Sharon's legal guardian, and Karen being prevented from seeing her lover for 3½ years, even though after the accident she had worked with Sharon 8–10 hours a day, during which time Sharon made signi-

ficant progress in communication, movement, and skills. In March 1989 Karen was able to see Sharon again, by court and medical order, and it appears that she will be able to continue doing so, although she has to drive several hours to the Medical Center where Sharon currently lives.

Karen Thompson is an activist who travels the country talking about Sharon's case and the connections between sexism, homophobia, ableism, and other forms of oppression. She has done workshops at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, and has spoken at Albany Law School, the National Gay and Lesbian Health Care Providers Conference, the National NOW Convention, Take Back the Night marches, and the Iowa City Conference on Racism and Other Forms of Oppression, where I heard her speak.

Thompson begins her speeches like this:

"Why is there an increase in violence against Native Americans, Blacks, other people of color, women, lesbians, and gay men? Why would the U.S. rather spend money building bombs than providing for safety, food, clothing, housing, and health care? Why wasn't I allowed to see Sharon Kowalski for over three years? Why can't Sharon come home?"

Before Sharon's accident, I didn't understand any of these issues. More importantly, I didn't understand that if I didn't come forth today and fight for anyone's human rights that are being violated, then tomorrow Sharon's and mine might be stripped away."

Yet, in Iowa City, Thompson wanted us to also recognize how non-political, how closeted, how unaware she had been before the accident. Knowing that would be hard to believe of the out, politically active, articulate lesbian feminist we heard and saw before us, she looked at us and said, "I voted for Ronald Reagan." Then, after a well-timed pause, she said, "Twice."

This is what moved me most about Karen Thompson—her journey, and her sharing of that journey. Hers was a horrible way to be jolted out of her complacency, her belief that as long as she

didn't recognize oppression it did not exist. But her telling of her story may help us to recognize oppression and speak out against it, to realize that to remain silent is to collude in that oppression.

Another powerful part of Thompson's story for me was its example of the ways in which we can help each other. Thompson tells of a faculty colleague at St. Cloud State who was known as a feminist and an activist, someone she deliberately avoided for just those reasons. In her book she writes, "Over the years I had avoided her like the plague. It wasn't that I personally disliked her; I had never even met her, but she represented the type of person who fought for issues that I didn't even think were problems." (26) Yet because this woman, Julie Andrzejewski, was active and known, Thompson went to her for advice when she felt she had nowhere else to go. Eventually Julie became a mainstay for Karen, played a major role in bringing Sharon's case to national attention, and co-authored *Why Can't Sharon Kowalski Come Home?* with Karen. She was also the plaintiff-intervenor of a class-action sex discrimination lawsuit against the Minnesota State University system. Ironically, although Thompson had steadfastly refused to take any part in the suit on the grounds that she believed she had never been a victim of sexism, she received money from the University when Julie won the suit, money which came at a critical time for her financially in her legal battle with the Kowalskis. What this part of the story reminded me of is the importance of some of us being "out there," identifiable and accessible when other women are ready to "come out" politically.

Before I got home from Iowa City I had bought and read *Why Can't Sharon Kowalski Come Home?* (spinsters/aunt lute, 1988, \$10.95). *Everyone should read this book—and soon.* Thompson and Andrzejewski meticulously chronicle the legal struggles, the care Kowalski has received (and not received), press coverage of the case, and Thompson's personal journey. Any naïve belief in going to the legal system for justice, or to the medical system for health care or rehabilitation, is abolished quickly by this book. It is a chilling story—yet an empowering one, in knowing that Thompson did not give up, and that she

came to see that the struggle is for everyone, not just for herself and Sharon.

An important part of Thompson's message is for all of us to protect ourselves. Her book has forms for Durable Power of Attorney, which when filed should ensure that when we are injured the persons *we* designate will be able to make decisions for our welfare. Thompson says we must do this *today* with those we love and care about. When Sharon left for the trip on which she was injured, she whispered to Karen, "Save Monday night for me." For them that Monday night never came.

Karen Thompson has over \$120,000 in legal bills. If you would like to contribute to help her pay them, send your money to: Karen Thompson Legal Fund, 2501 Stockinger Drive, St. Cloud, MN 56303.

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