

Chapter Eight

Karen Richards

The late August sun is already beginning to lose some of its summer warmth as seven-year-old Kaarina Juusonon and her mother approach the docks in Goteburg, Sweden. Kaarina, a thin, wiry child, small for her age, holds tightly to her mother=s hand as they make their way through the milling throng and head for the pier where a large ocean liner is preparing to embark.

The journey from the Juusonon=s home in Finland was long and tiresome, but Kaarina perks up excitedly as they near the ship. Her mother, Marianne, had told her she was going to America where she=d never be hungry again and would have as many new dresses and toys as she wanted. So in her child=s mind, Kaarina imagines a huge store whose shelves are stocked with all the things her impoverished family can=t afford. The ship, she thinks, must be America.

When they reach the vessel, Marianne stops to speak to a uniformed stranger who disengages Kaarina from her mother and leads her up the gangplank. She strains at the man=s hand, looking back toward her mother who remains on the dock, her hand raised in a gesture of farewell. Before Kaarina can grasp what has happened, she=s alone on the deck of the ship as it weighs anchor and edges away from its berth. She runs to the side, hoping she=ll see her mother climbing aboard. But she=s too small to see over the top. Frantically, she pulls herself up until she can

wedge her face between the steel uprights that support the ship's rail and watches as her mother becomes a small dot in the sea of people who remain on the shore. Trembling with fear, she calls out, **A**Mama, mama, please, I don't want to go. **@** But there's no one to hear her plea.

As the ship picks up speed and the shoreline recedes, she looks around bewildered. The deck is crowded with people waving good-bye to friends and loved ones, chattering excitedly about the voyage that lies ahead. Kaarina closes her eyes, squeezing them tight in a child's magical hope that if she can't see it, it will all go away. But she's still there, alone and frightened, when she opens them again. She sinks down onto the deck and huddles against the bulwark, tears coursing silently down her cheeks and staining the little flowered dress her grandmother had made for her and that, just moments earlier, she had tended with such care and pride.

Soon the other passengers go off to their cabins to settle in for the journey while she remains in place, a small almost invisible bundle of fear. *Where am I going? Why is she sending me away? What did I do?* She doesn't know how long she sits there, her mind racing wildly, before a ship's attendant finds her and escorts her to the tiny cabin where she'll spend the next half dozen days so wretchedly seasick she's barely able to move.

Today, little Kaarina has become Karen Richards, a still small, still wiry, fifty-year-old woman who was referred to me for psychotherapy some years ago. **A**She's a very appealing woman; I think you'll find her quite interesting, **@** the

colleague who referred her said, as she sketched for me the outlines of Karen's harrowing past and warned also that she probably would be a **A**tough case. **@** But nothing prepared me for the tale of abandonment and cruelty that marked Karen's childhood and adolescence. Nor for the immediate connection I made with her, a connection so profound that I often found myself feeling her feelings and anticipating her words.

It's not unusual, of course, for a therapist to feel connected to a patient. Indeed, such a connection is essential to the success of the therapeutic endeavor. Without it, there can be no relationship; and without a relationship, there is no therapy. But there was something different about my response to Karen, something I couldn't name at the time but that seemed related more to who she was than to anything I brought to our encounters.

It wasn't until I began to do the research for this book and reflect on what I was learning that I understood that part of what drew me so powerfully to her was the same quality of adoptability I have spoken of so frequently here. Like the others who triumphed over the trials of their past, Karen Richards has the ability not only to attract people who can help erase the deficits left by the past but to use well what others can offer.

It's this capacity that she brought to the therapeutic setting--this, plus a well-honed intelligence, the ability to do psychological work that would enliven any therapist's heart, and an absolute refusal to engage in self-pity or to see herself as a

victim--that made her so attractive and engaged me so deeply. When, for example, I asked if she would be willing to tell her story for this book, she thought about it for a few days, then agreed saying, **A**The only reason I hesitated is because I can=t stand people who go around complaining about their lives, and I don=t want to sound like one of them. I hate this whole thing these days where everyone feels like a victim. I=ve had some hard times, but I=m not a victim.©

Now, as we begin the interview and I listen once again to the story of her voyage to America and the chamber of horrors she entered from the day her mother abandoned her on the ship, I feel the same pull I have always felt in her presence and the same sense of awe at the resilience of the human spirit. **A**Vomit and fear, that=s what stands out about that trip,© she says, her angry words striking the air like a whip. **A**I was alone in that little room for the whole crossing, and I was throwing up all the time. For some reason, they brought my food to me in the cabin, so I always ate there alone. The only other time I saw anyone was when they came to change the bed or wash me.

AEverything I had with me was in this little pressed cardboard suitcase not much bigger than a woman=s handbag: one dress, a pair of underpants, a pair of long pants, a shirt, two tiny copper coffee pots--gifts for the people in America--and a little wooden airplane my brother had made. Since I had so few clothes and I was throwing up so much, someone had to keep washing them.©

Complicating an already terrifying experience, the ship and its staff were Swedish and Kaarina spoke only Finnish. So although some of the people who tended her might have wanted to be kind, there was no way to communicate across the language barrier. For six long days and nights, Kaarina lived in terror, her voice stilled, her mind numbed by shock. **I** couldn't understand what was happening or why, and I couldn't even speak to anyone. It was like living in a nightmare. I'd never been alone before. I was so scared; I kept screaming for *aiti*, which is the Finnish word for mother. I've totally forgotten the Finnish language; it's as if I never spoke it. But that's the one word I never forgot--*aiti*.

Until the boat left without her, I thought my mother was coming to this America with me. In fact, when I saw the boat, I thought it *was* America because America as a country was totally beyond my understanding. What I understood was that I would be able to get clothes and toys and have enough food to eat, then we'd come back home and I'd show my brothers the things I got. I didn't get it until I actually got to America. And it didn't penetrate until I'd been in America for a very long time that I wasn't going back home. @

She stops speaking as tears spring to her eyes. **D**ammit, it was so long ago, I don't want to be crying over all that anymore, @ she says, shaking herself impatiently. Then, her voice crackling with emotion, she asks, **H**ow does a mother do that to a child? She sold me for a couple of bottles of booze, a few packs of cigarettes, some coffee, and a new dress. @

Karen was born in 1944, shortly before the end of World War II, a war that caused havoc in Finland, as it had elsewhere in Europe. Poverty was rampant, tuberculosis epidemic. Her father, who had spent most of his adult life in a TB sanitarium, died before her first birthday, leaving his thirty-three-year-old wife with three children and no skills.

Her mother, Marianne Juusonen, was never much of a caretaker, even when her husband was alive. Long before Kaarina was born, Marianne had served a prison term for negligent child endangerment, a conviction that grew out of the mysterious death of her three-year-old daughter, who either fell or was pushed out of an upper-story window.

Except for brief stints as a cleaning woman, Marianne was unemployed, largely because, with her husband's death, she became increasingly sunk in alcoholism. **A**I don't have a lot of memories of my mother's house. But when I think about it, I remember a lot of hollering and all kinds of violent noises. Her whole personality changed when she drank. She'd get very loud, and there'd be all this fighting. To this day, I'm never around alcoholics; I've simply chosen not to be around people who drink, **@** says Karen, her face a mask of distaste.

AMy brother and I used to go to the bars, sometimes at midnight, looking for her. We'd stand outside looking in, waiting for her to come home. Sometimes she'd come out with some man and bring him home; sometimes she'd be alone. **@**

As her memories surface, Karen turns pale, her mind returning to a scene she wants to forget. **A**There were bottles on the bureau, **@** she says, as if to distract herself. At the mention of the bottles, however, her composure fades, and she seems to become three years old again--a tired child lying on her cot, listening to the raucous laughter of her mother and a companion who had been drinking heavily for some time. She twists and turns, trying unsuccessfully to shut out the sounds they make. Finally, their voices are stilled and she relaxes into the quiet.

But before Kaarina can drift off to sleep, the man stumbles up to her bed and pulls her out of it. She stands there for a moment shivering in her thin nightdress, then frightened, begins to back away. But the room is small, and she soon finds herself backed up against the bureau. As he comes toward her, she takes another step backward, and with it, knocks the bottles to the floor. He grabs her, his breath reeking from alcohol, his rough clothes scratching her face. She screams for her mother, but Marianne doesn't respond.

AI don't remember exactly what happened after that, **@** says Karen, **A**only that I felt like I was being smothered, like there was a gun in my throat. I screamed and screamed, but my mother never came. She was there, but she never came. **@**

With these words, she seems to return to her adult self. Then, pushing her hair back in a characteristic gesture that signals her distress, she says, **A**The worst part of thinking about that isn't the sexual abuse. So many terrifying things happened to me later--like being alone on that ship and the life I had when I came

here--that the sexual abuse itself doesn't seem of primary importance. What feels so terrible to me is that my mother was there, and she let it happen; she didn't come to protect me. ©

But for protection, little Kaarina could look only to her older brother, who was confined to a tuberculosis sanitarium much of the time; or to her grandmother, Marianne's mother, who was a stern woman, undemonstrative in what Karen describes as **A**that typical Finnish way. © Nevertheless, she was there for the child, feeding her, sewing the few clothes she owned, allowing her to participate in the small chores of daily life, providing the stability her mother could not. **A**I don't know where my mother was; she didn't work most of the time. She just wasn't very good at taking care of us; she liked her liquor and her fun.

AI think I'd usually go home to sleep at night. But during the day, I was mostly with my grandmother. Like I said, she didn't show affection, but I think she cared for me. One of the few good memories I have of those days is of my grandmother's room. She lived in this sunny, corner room, and she had geraniums on the window sills, © she recalls, her face lighting in a smile as her memory takes her back to that room.

She stops speaking, lost in thought for a few moments, then looks up and, shaking her head in puzzlement, sighs, **A**It's a paradox, isn't it? I don't really have any mental picture of my grandmother. I can see her room but not her. The image I carry around is of my mother, yet it was my grandmother who would feed me and

take care of me. My mother never even cooked unless it was some type of oatmeal and weak coffee. ©

A few months before Kaarina's seventh birthday, her mother was solicited by an American lawyer of Finnish extraction who was looking for children to place with American families. No one will ever know why Marianne Juusonen agreed to sell her daughter, or how much she got for her, although it's a fair guess that it wasn't much. Whatever her more venal motives, however, it's reasonable to assume that she also really believed--or at least rationalized the decision sufficiently to convince herself--that she was sending her daughter to a better life. All we know for sure is that soon after the offer was made, little Kaarina Juusonen found herself alone on an ocean liner bound for America.

After what seemed an interminable journey, she arrived in New York to be met by Vivian Thompson, the lawyer who had arranged for her adoption, and her husband, Richard. Shaken from the voyage, dazed, and disoriented, Karen disembarked into a world she couldn't have imagined. **A**I was seven years old and had never even been sent to school. I did know how to read; somehow I learned to do that. But my comprehension of the world was very limited. We lived on the outskirts of Helsinki, right on the edge of the forest, and were excruciatingly poor. That was my world. I'd never even been in a private car before I came to America.

AWhen I got off the ship in New York, I couldn't believe it. Everything looked overwhelmingly big, she recalls, her arms spread wide to describe the scene that greeted her. **A**And the smell, the air reeked from diesel fumes. To this day when I smell those fumes I remember that moment.

Perhaps because she was so determined that no one would take her mother's place, perhaps because she had a premonition of things to come, Kaarina had an immediate aversive response to Vivian Thompson. **A**This man and woman were standing side by side. I'm not sure, but I have the feeling that the woman made a gesture toward me, like putting her hands out, but I remember looking at her face, and something I saw there frightened me. She spoke Finnish, so she was the one person I could talk to when I arrived. But even so, I knew the minute I looked at her that I didn't like her. So I went to the man instead. He smiled and picked me up and gave me a doll.

AThat was the beginning of my trouble with Vivian Thompson who, it turned out, was going to adopt me. The family that was supposed to adopt me changed their minds before the papers became final because they were leery of taking a seven-year-old. Vivian could have stopped the whole thing, but unfortunately, she didn't, so I ended up with her.

AI didn't know any of that then, of course. I didn't know anything, certainly not what I was doing there. And I didn't have any idea that she would be my new mother. I had a mother, and it didn't occur to me there'd be another one, she

says, her voice rising in indignation as she recalls the bewilderment of that seven-year-old child.

For Kaarina, the journey to the small midwestern town, where Vivian Thompson had a successful law practice and was a powerful force in the community, was a continuation of the nightmare she had been living since the ship she sailed on left port. Dick Thompson tried to be kind, but Vivian, the only one to whom she could make herself understood, had little patience with the child's pain. **A**I could tell right away I was a bother to her. **@**

When they arrived in what would be her home, Kaarina, by then renamed Karen, was introduced to her new family--the Thompson's biological son, Ezra, who was three years younger than she, Vivian's eight siblings and their children, and her mother. **A**They seemed nice enough, but I felt like I was in a circus or something, **@** recalls Karen.

Like Petar Peprovic, who also suffered a name change, Karen loathed her new name. **A***Karen!* **@** she says, the word exploding off her tongue like an expletive. **A**It wasn't my name. I didn't know the person that name belonged to. I hated the sound of it then, and I still don't like it. Kaarina has nice soft sounds, not like Karen; it sounds hard, **@** she says, as she sounds out the Finnish and English versions of her name to demonstrate the difference.

But it wasn't just the sound of her new name from which Kaarina/ Karen recoiled, it was from the new identity that went with it, an identity that signaled the

obliteration of her old life for which she longed so intensely. For her, too, accepting the new name was made more difficult because, she says, **A**It was given to me by a person I grew to hate and fear, yet who I was dependent on. For as long as I can remember, I dreaded knowing that my name might be called because when she noticed me, it meant trouble. I used to walk very quietly; I closed doors quietly; I didn't want to breathe so as not to call attention to myself. **@**

Distressed and disoriented as she was when she arrived Karen didn't lose the capacity to capture someone's heart and to seek comfort in a relationship--in this case, Vivian Thompson's mother, a Finnish immigrant who was a reminder of the grandmother she left behind. **A**She was kind to me from the beginning, so I glommed onto her. Later on, I'd go there after school, and she'd feed me. She read Finnish newspapers like my grandmother did, and I'd sit there with her and we'd read the newspapers like I used to do with my grandmother. Sometimes I stayed at her house, and then she'd let me sleep in her bed, right next to her. **@**

In the Thompson household, however, there was no such comfort. There, Karen's life was driven by Vivian's cruelty almost from the day she arrived. I listen to the details with wonder, trying to figure out why Vivian Thompson would have adopted the child when she had so little tolerance for her. Although the answer eludes me, one thing is clear: Despite her capacity to function well in her social and professional world, Vivian was capable of behavior that can only be described as psychotic--a psychosis that became nucleated around Karen. It was as if the child's

presence threw her into a psychotic rage that could be satisfied only by perpetrating sometimes unimaginable horrors upon her. **A**Everybody knew--her husband, my teachers, my aunts and uncles, the doctors, even the pastor of the church. But nobody ever intervened to stop her. She was prominent in the community, had political clout in Washington, and was the most powerful person in the family. Who was I going to complain to? **@** Karen asks bitterly. **A**The few times I did, I was met with deaf ears.

ADick Thompson tried to be nice to me, but he couldn't stop her. Nobody could; they were all too afraid of her. They felt sorry for me, but I hated the pity I saw in their eyes and the way they looked away so their eyes wouldn't have to meet mine.

AShe was my own personal torturer, my own personal trainer into the terrors of a relationship, **@** Karen observes, as she describes the savagery of the humiliations and the beatings she endured. **A**She'd do things like drag me to school and make me stand in front of the class and declare that I was a worthless guttersnipe. *Guttersnipe*, that was one of her favorite words for me. **@**

And pain. For Karen, the word is synonymous with her adoptive mother. **A**The earliest physical pain I remember came from Vivian Thompson--the beatings, the kicks in the ribs, the whacks on the legs, the hair pullings, the belt, the Ping-Pong paddle. **@** Those were the constants, the stuff of Karen's daily life.

Then there were the special events: **A**There are so many things, so much cruelty and pain, day and night. It got so I was afraid to be awake and afraid to go to sleep. That was maybe the worst of all; I had to be vigilant all the time, always prepared for the attack. **@**

Normally, Karen Richards speaks spontaneously in a voice that registers a wide range of emotions. But as she recounts her suffering at the hands of her adoptive mother, she becomes unnaturally contained, her voice flat, the play of expression usually visible on her face blanked out. As I watch the change come over her, I=**m** puzzled at first. I had, after all, heard some of these stories before in my role as therapist and was always impressed with the appropriateness of the affect she brought to the room. *Why now does she suddenly seem wooden?* I wonder.

It=**s** only after I=**ve** listened for awhile that I begin to understand. It was one thing to tell her tale piecemeal, part of it in one session, another perhaps weeks later when the emotional fallout from the first had been dealt with. It raises quite another set of feelings to tell it all at once, one terrible experience following another, as an interview requires. Then, the only way to avoid being overwhelmed by the memory of her suffering is to numb herself during the telling.

She sits very quietly, therefore, her voice calm as she tells about the pots of boiling water Vivian threw at her when her rage went out of control; about the many times she pushed her into a closet and locked her into the cramped darkness for hours; about the wooden hoe that would come crashing down on her back when she was weeding and that once hit so hard that it cracked a vertebrae; about being

dragged out of bed in the middle of the night and made to scrub the kitchen floor; about the hours when she was forced to sit upright in a chair while she was abused both verbally and physically; about the day Vivian came after her with a scissors as she cowered on the floor, pulled her upright by her ponytail, and furiously chopped her hair off so close to the scalp that she bled; about the time she dumped her head into a toilet full of vomit.

AThat may have been the worst, **@** says Karen, **A**because it happened right after I came, before I had any idea what to expect. I was only here a week or so and had just started school, and I couldn't understand a word of what was going on. That morning I was so upset and scared about having to go there that I couldn't keep my breakfast down. So I ran to the toilet and vomited. She followed me screaming about what a mess and a sad sack I was. That was another one of her favorite words for me *sad sack*, **@** she adds parenthetically. **A**Then, before I could get up off my knees, she grabbed me by my ponytail and pushed my whole head, hair and all, down into the toilet. She kept doing that over and over again, pulling my head up by my pony tail then pushing it down into the toilet. My head kept banging into the bowl until I thought I'd pass out. To this day, I don't know how I didn't.

AWhen she finally stopped, I was soaked from head to foot. She stripped off my clothes, which were full of vomit, and threw me into the shower to rinse off. She let me put on dry clothes, but she wouldn't let me wash the vomit out of my hair or off my shoes. That's the way she made me go to school, stinking from vomit. **@**

As she tells this story, her reserve finally breaks down, her eyes flash with fury, her face twists into a mask of pain. **A**It=s hard to believe, isn=t it? But believe me when I tell you it=s only the tip of the iceberg. ©

In this atmosphere, it=s no surprise that all Karen could think of was her mother and her home in Finland. Vivian, however, was determined to wipe all memory from the child=s mind. When she cried for her mother, Vivian warned that if she didn=t stop, she=d give her **A**something to cry about. © When she asked when she=d be going home, Vivian snarled, **A**Never. Nobody there wants you anymore; that=s why they sent you away. © When she spoke Finnish, Vivian mocked and slapped her.

But even then, even when she was at her most vulnerable, Karen refused to surrender total control to her tormentor. Instead, in what was soon to become her characteristic way of dealing with the abuse that was visited upon her, she retreated inside, to her own secret place in her mind where she kept the memories that sustained her. **A**When I first came, she took away everything I brought with me, even the little wooden airplane my brother had given me. There was no safe place for anything that was mine in that house, not even my memories. So I made a little black box in my mind. It was my memory box, and I kept my things in it--my grandmother=s room, the geraniums on her windowsill, my brother Lars, and my mother, mostly my mother. I remember literally putting my mother=s image in the box for

safekeeping, and every night, when Vivian Thompson couldn't see me, I'd pick up the lid and look at it.☹

Despite Vivian's insistence that she had been thrown away by her family, Karen clung to the belief that someone would come for her some day. **AI** was devastated when she'd say those things, but in an odd way, I also never really believed it. I kept thinking that someone from my family would come and get me and show her she was wrong and that they did care about me.☹ She pauses as the memory brings tears to her eyes, and adds ruefully, **AI** guess I had to believe that to survive what she did to me.☹

Still, the degradation and brutality she suffered at her Vivian's hands--the contemptuous reminders that she was worthless, the endlessly inventive ways of humiliating her, the merciless physical cruelty--took their toll. **AI** felt like a geek and a freak, like I was a disgusting nonentity, especially during my teenage years. The loneliness was unbearable, and so was the sense of being so different.

AI spent a lot of time trying to figure out what was wrong with me, but I couldn't ever figure it out. The closest I came was thinking it had something to do with some shameful thing about me and my family back in Finland that Vivian Thompson knew about.☹

But while her adoptive mother's hatred obviously affected her sense of herself, there was also a side of Karen that stood in powerful opposition to her--the side that refused to accept wholly the degraded image Vivian pressed upon her so

insistently, the side that never fully surrendered herself, the side that found ways to fight back. **A**If there=s one word to describe how I got by, it would be *defiance*. She wanted to break me, and I wouldn=t let her, **@** Karen says, her expression a mixture of revulsion and triumph. **@**

Sometimes the defiance was covert, a hidden act that she could hold to herself in secret retaliation. **A**For most of the years I lived in that house, I wasn=t allowed to eat with the family because she said I didn=t deserve to sit at the table with decent people. So I=d be eating in the kitchen and she=d be ordering me around in her nasty, angry voice, **>**Bring this to the table, Madam; bring that to the table, and hurry up about it.= Nobody else said anything. Dick Thompson would sit there with a face like a stone mask, and my brothers just looked confused. So sometimes I=d get so mad that I=d spit in the food before I carried it out to them. **@**

Sometimes her defiance was more overt, as when she refused to cry no matter how much physical pain and humiliation she had to bear. It wasn=t unusual for Vivian to pull her out of bed by her hair at two or three o=clock in the morning and drag her down to the kitchen, where she forced her to her knees and made her scrub the floor, all the while hitting and kicking her because she wasn=t doing it well enough or fast enough. **A**No matter what she did, I just kept washing the floor; I wouldn=t let her see me cry. **@**

Or Vivian would push Karen into a chair and refuse to allow her to move until she recited some prescribed words. Sometimes it was an apology for a crime

the child knew she hadn't committed; sometimes it was a demand that she agree to her unworthiness. But no matter how long Vivian made her sit there, no matter how hard the blows that rained down on her, Karen refused to acquiesce and speak the required words.

Undoubtedly, such resistance made things worse for her, since it enraged her adoptive mother further and was evidence, in Vivian's warped mind, that the child was incorrigible. But in refusing to bend totally to the demands of her oppressor, Karen preserved her integrity and with it, her sanity.

As the torture persisted, Karen developed the capacity to remove herself psychologically even while her body remained in place. **A**I was about nine years old the first time it happened. It was one of those times when she made me sit in a chair until I said whatever it was she wanted me to say. But I was damned if I would say it. She'd come by and hit me or pull my hair or spit on me, and I remember my body sitting in the chair but my mind left. I just tuned out everything she said and did. At first, it was like I was floating above it all, watching everything going on around me. I could see them all, but I wasn't there. But then it changed. It was like I went into this very long, dark tunnel where I could look out if I wanted to, but nothing could reach me.

AAfter awhile, I found I could recapture that experience almost at will, and I started to do it more and more when I was around her. Terrible things might be going on in the outside world, but I was safe, even though I was sitting right in the

middle of it. Someone could have beaten me to a pulp when I was in there, and I don't think I would have felt it. ©

This kind of split between mind and body--what psychologists call *depersonalization*--is not an uncommon defense in the face of torture. But it can be a dangerous one, since it's often hard to come out of the tunnel--to bring the body and mind back together again--when there's no longer any reason to sustain the division. Indeed, torture victims who once escaped into their version of Karen's tunnel often can't be convinced to give it up, since it's the place that represents safety and freedom from pain.

Remarkably, when, even as a still defenseless child, Karen began to understand the seduction of her tunnel and its potential danger, she walked away from it and never went back. **AI** escaped into that tunnel for years. After a while, though, I became afraid of it. I was being sucked into it more and more, and I sensed it was dangerous. I began to be afraid that I wouldn't be able to come out when I wanted to, so I stopped letting myself do it. ©

When Karen was nearly twelve years old, the family adopted another Finnish child, this time a one-and-a-half-year-old boy. Whereas others who have been abused often become abusers, Karen moved quickly to the child's side, becoming his caretaker and protector and often taking upon herself the blows that might otherwise have gone to him. **AI** couldn't stand the idea that she might hurt him like she hurt me, © is all she can say to explain her behavior. In fact, although Vivian apparently

was incapable of real kindness to a child, and Benjamin got his share of punishments and beatings, she never abused him as viciously as she did Karen.

It wasn't just Karen's abhorrence of the violence she anticipated--although that undoubtedly was deeply felt--that moved her to champion Benjamin. It was also as if she understood intuitively--just as a parent who was abused in childhood often does--that in protecting Benjamin, in helping him to have a different experience, she could take a step toward healing the damaged child inside her.

In my own life, I remember the many times I felt as if I were holding myself when I held and comforted my daughter, giving to her what my mother could never give to me. It wasn't always easy to be the giving parent; I sometimes even envied my child her mother, wishing just once that I had felt the kind of safety I was able to provide for her. But most of the time I could be what she needed, not just because I loved her but also because I understood in some deep but, at the time, inarticulate way that I could heal the pain of the past only if I succeeded in changing the present.

For Karen it was somewhat different; she wasn't Benjamin's mother. But her relationship with him was, nevertheless, important both in her developing definition of herself and in helping her to withstand Vivian's assaults. Caring for Benjamin gave Karen's life a purpose that had been missing before he became part of the family. Until then, she was often despairing, wondering whether she could survive, sometimes whether she wanted to. After he arrived, when Vivian struck, she

could remind herself that she couldn't give way to despair because Benjamin needed her. At the same time, with him she found the only love and warmth she knew in that icy household, an experience that not only nourished her spirit but affirmed for her that, despite Vivian's often-voiced judgment to the contrary, she was capable of sustaining a loving relationship.

When Karen was fifteen, Vivian finally did the unthinkable: She tried to push Karen out of a second-story window. **A**She actually tried to kill me. I always knew it was possible; so did other people. One of my uncles even once told me he was afraid she'd kill me if I didn't get away from her. Not that he ever offered to help, **C** Karen says bitterly.

She stops talking and sits straighter in her chair, as if to brace herself for the story she has to tell. After a long silence, she speaks again. **A**I was cleaning the windows, sitting on the sill with my body half out, and she came along and began to holler that I had missed some spots. Then all of a sudden, she lunged at me and tried to push me out. I saw her coming and braced myself and caught the edge of the window and pushed back with all my strength. Finally, I was able to push her away so I could crawl out. There was a broom standing nearby, and I grabbed it and held it out in front of me and screamed at her, **B**Don't you ever touch me again.= I meant it; I wanted to kill her, and she knew it. She never hit me again. I couldn't believe it; for the first time, I actually felt powerful, **C** she concludes, the combination of rage and triumph she felt then palpable in the room.

Although the beatings stopped, the humiliations continued unabated, and Karen=s inner life was dominated by dreams of escape. Her hatred of Karen notwithstanding, Vivian would not make it easy for her to leave. Thus, while the Thompsons were an upper middle-class family with plenty of money to support a child through college, Vivian was unwilling to offer her daughter any financial help at all. After graduating from high school, therefore, Karen continued to live at home, working at a clerical job all day, taking classes at a local college at night, and looking for a way out of the house.

It wasn=t long after she started college that her opportunity came when she was befriended by Joan Gilman, a divorcee with two children who spoke of her problems in getting child care. **AI** thought I saw a way to break out, **@** Karen recalls. **AS**he knew Vivian Thompson; everybody in town did. But I knew she liked me, so I took a chance and told her very briefly what it was like for me in that house, and she asked me to come and live with her in exchange for some baby-sitting.

AI knew there would be a terrible scene when I told Vivian I was going to move out. So it took six months and every bit of courage I had to tell her. As I expected, she was incredibly violently angry. She told me never to darken her door again. But by then she couldn't get to me anymore. **@**

Karen lived with her friend for several years in an arrangement that seems clearly to have come into being as much out of Joan=s liking and concern for Karen as her usefulness as a baby-sitter, although she did her share of that. Meanwhile, she

continued to work at her office job and finished college. Soon after her graduation, she moved to a nearby large city, where she got a job as a teacher.

In contrast to the terrible loneliness of her adolescent years, once Karen was out from under Vivian=s domination, she found she could make friends easily and relax with them into the large and small pleasures of daily life. **A**When I left Vivian Thompson=s house, I actually reinvented myself. I felt like I=d been released from hell, and I made up my mind to put all that behind me and enjoy my life. And I did. I made lots of friends, and they even called me by a different name: *Karey*.

AThe years with my friend Joan were wonderful. Then when I left that town, things took another big step forward. I had a job I liked; I found good friends, and I was having lots of fun. It was a great time. **@**

Soon, however, she grew restless, wanting to explore more of the world than her life allowed. At twenty-four, therefore, she joined the Peace Corps and was sent to Venezuela. When her tour of duty was over two years later, she decided to visit a friend in California. **A**I never went back to the Midwest to live again, **@** Karen says.

Since she didn=t have a California teaching credential, she was faced with going back to school for a year to get one or taking an office job. She chose the latter. **A**I didn=t have the money to get my credential, and besides, I was tired of working all day and going to school all night, **@** she says.

Within a year after she moved West, she met and married her first husband-- an artist who she describes as **A**very brilliant, very handsome, and very crazy. **@** Six months later they separated.

Not long after her divorce, she became involved with Craig Marshall, the man who would become her daughter=s father. **AI** never intended to marry him, **@** she says, **A**but I got pregnant. It was a pregnancy that shouldn=t have happened because he=d had a vasectomy. But it did, and then I had a big decision to make. **@**

Given her past, it=s not surprising that Karen had decided that she=d never have any children. **AI** was afraid I had bad blood, like I was genetically damaged, **@** she explains, **A**and that I might become a mother like my own mother. Then, too, one of my worst fears was that I might die if I had a child. I couldn=t bear the thought of leaving a child motherless like I was. **@**

What we decide in the abstract, however, and what we do when faced with the reality often are different. After a trying period of indecision, she decided against an abortion and married Craig. Three years later they, too, separated. Only this time, when Karen went her own way, she took her daughter, Jennifer, with her. **AI** liked and admired him tremendously, but I was never in love with him, **@** she explains now.

AThe end came when I knew he was seeing other women and faced him with that. He became very angry and put his hands around my throat. He didn=t really hurt me, and I was able to get away from him immediately. But I abhor physical

violence, and that one violent act was enough. I packed up and took Jennifer and went to a friend=s house.☺ She pauses for a moment, then says thoughtfully, **A**I don=t know. Maybe it was the excuse I needed, but I=d had enough violence in my life.☺

For the next several years, her life centered around Jennifer, with whom she had a close and loving relationship. As time passed, however, she grew increasingly bored and restless with her office job. She knew she=d eventually go back to school. But to do what? **A**The question was, was I going to get my California teaching credential, would I become a gardener in the city=s parks, or would I go to law school.☺

Law school won--an interesting example, perhaps, of the way both identification and *disidentification* can coexist. On the one hand, Karen disidentified with her adoptive mother, even refusing ever to address her as *mother*. But at the same time, Vivian Thompson was, as Karen now acknowledges, **A**the only mother I ever really knew.☺ It=s no surprise, therefore, that the child would have unconsciously internalized some measure of identification with Vivian--even while she also disidentified with her--and that this would make itself felt in Karen=s career choice, the one aspect of Vivian=s life she could admire. Thus, not only did Karen Richards become an attorney, but she practiced the same kind of public interest law that had engaged her adoptive mother all her life.

Was this also a daughter=s way of making a last-ditch attempt to wrest some approval from this mother who treated her so harshly? Perhaps. But whatever Karen=s accomplishments in the law, getting her mother=s approval was not among them--a reality that was brought forcefully home when Vivian died and specifically excluded Karen from her will.

By the time she entered law school, Karen was dating Philip Richards, the man who would become her third and last husband. **A**He asked me to marry him, but I said, **>**I don=t do marriage well, but I=ll live with you.=**@** Two years later, they did marry and have been together ever since. Soon afterward, Karen finished law school and began a successful career as a litigator in a public interest law firm.

For the first time in her life, she had everything she wanted--a man she loved, a daughter who was flourishing, and a satisfying career. True, she was working too hard, was spending too many hours at the office, was guilty about not being more available for Jennifer and Philip. But she consoled herself with the knowledge that that=s what lawyers do.

Then the roof fell in. While Jennifer, then about twelve, was away at camp, she took too many Excedrin tablets. It wasn=t a serious suicide attempt; she took only six or seven pills. But it was a clear call for help from a child entering the bewildering maze of adolescence, a cry that was frighteningly and eerily reminiscent of Karen=s own experience when, at about the same age, she took an overdose of

aspirin. **A**It was this horrible *deja vu*. The idea that *my daughter* would do that was nearly intolerable. **@**

Karen and Philip took Jennifer to a therapist with whom she was able to examine her fears and feelings and to reestablish her equilibrium. But it was the last straw for her mother, who spiraled down into a depression from which she didn't recover for about a year. **A**The thing with Jennifer made me feel very vulnerable. I felt totally out of control. I could actually feel things slipping away from me, and I couldn't stop them. I was having more and more trouble making decisions. I couldn't really talk to people; it seemed like my face was paralyzed and my thinking was all fuzzy. I was losing weight, had no interest in sex, and was very guilty because Jennifer was getting short shrift from me, and I knew she needed me. But I was powerless.

AFinally, I went to see a therapist. I can remember my question to him: **>**Why do I feel like I want to drive off a bridge? I have a good marriage, a good job, a good child. What's the matter with me? Can't I ever be satisfied? He said something--asked a question, I think--and I began to cry. To my shock, when I could finally speak, I started to talk about my head being dumped in the toilet full of vomit. It was the first time I'd ever told that to anyone, and I was absolutely shocked that what was coming out of my mouth was something so ancient. **@**

Ancient, and all but forgotten. It's not that until then she had no memory of her sufferings at Vivian Thompson's hands but that she didn't *want* to remember,

that she had consciously refused to dwell on them when they arose unbidden to her mind. **A**I thought, what was the point? I couldn't change it. All I wanted was to get away from all that and get on with my life, **@** she says by way of explanation.

It's just this determination to leave the past behind, her obstinate refusal to allow it to dominate the present, that enabled Karen to live a productive adulthood. Paradoxically, however, the very quality that was her strength also contained within it the seeds of her weakness because, as she found out when she succumbed to depression, the past will not be denied.

The one thing Karen never tried to forget was her Finnish family, who, although her memories were hazy at best, remained a presence in her inner life. While she lived with the fantasy that someone would one day find and reclaim her, she didn't make any serious efforts to try to find them. As a child, of course, there was nothing she could do. But even in adulthood, her efforts were sporadic and relatively undirected.

Partly this was because she didn't know where to start, since her adoptive mother refused all her requests for information about her family--who they were, where they might be, how she might contact them. And by then, Karen didn't even remember her Finnish name. But she also accepted Vivian's refusal to cooperate because she was afraid of what she might find. Would they want to see her? Was it true, as Vivian kept telling her, that they wanted nothing to do with her? That her mother was a common street whore? Moreover, at the same time that Karen yearned

for this family she didn't know, she was very angry at the mother who sold her to strangers in a far-off land. So she had questions: Did she, Karen, want to know this woman? What could her mother possibly say that would explain her behavior, that would make it understandable, if not acceptable?

As she began to emerge from her depression, however, she knew she had to act more forcefully to reclaim that part of her past. So when she heard that Vivian's cousin was coming from Finland for a family reunion, she decided to attend. **A**I met this woman and asked her if she could help me find my family. She looked at me kind of puzzled and said she didn't understand why I was asking, since she had given that information to Vivian about five years before. At that time, she said, my mother and my two brothers were all alive. **@**

She interrupts her narrative and, her eyes narrowing in anger, her words acrid, says, **A**Of course, Vivian never told me. I found out later that my older brother, Lars, had been trying to find me for years. He even came to the United States to look for me and contacted her. She told him she didn't know where I was, which was a lie. But he didn't go away; he kept calling, so she finally told him that she'd made contact with me and that I didn't remember anyone from Finland, that I didn't want anything to do with any of them, and that I had sworn her to secrecy so she couldn't tell him where I was. She was so convincing, so sympathetic, and so sad that I was responding that way, that he believed her. **@**

She stops speaking as she experiences again the rage she felt then. Then, shaking herself back to the present, she continues, **A**This cousin told me my family name, which I had completely forgotten, and she promised to make inquiries again when she got back to Finland. A couple of months later, I got a letter telling me that my mother was dead and that she was trying to reach my brothers. **@**

Karen waited impatiently for news. But it took a few more months before her prayers were answered. As she relives the moment, she=s overcome with emotion once again. **A**I don=t think there are words to describe it, **@** she says when she can finally speak. **A**It was a Sunday night, midnight, about a week before Christmas. The phone rang and Philip picked it up, and I heard him saying, **>**No, there=s no one here by that name.=

A I knew immediately that this was someone from my family. I don=t know how; I just knew. My heart literally leaped into my chest, and I grabbed the phone from him. I could hear the hum of the long-distance lines, then this man=s deep voice came on saying his name, which I didn=t understand, then saying my name--my old Finnish name--which I also didn=t understand. Then, I couldn=t believe it, he spoke in halting English and said, **>**This is your brother Lars. I have never forgotten you, and I have loved you always.=**@**

Five days later, Karen was on a plane to Finland to be reunited with a family she hadn=t seen for nearly forty years. **A**Everyone kept telling me to wait, that I

didn't know anything about who they were or what I'd find. But I knew I had to go. ©

Today, she maintains an apartment in Finland, where she goes for a month or so each year to be received warmly and eagerly by a large family consisting of her two brothers, their children and grandchildren, and assorted aunts and uncles. When she's at home, she remains in regular mail and telephone contact with them. Her brother, Lars, spends every winter in California with Karen and her husband, where he's not just a welcome guest but a beloved member of the family with a room of his own. Another brother, Martti, and his wife have visited her there. She has a very close relationship with one of her nieces, an artist with whom she felt an immediate affinity.

But it is with Lars, the brother who never gave up hope of finding her, that she has the most intense bond--a bond, she says, that was instantaneous and that has never wavered from the moment they walked into each other's arms at the Helsinki airport. **I**'ve never felt so comfortable with anyone. With Lars, I can just exist. I don't need to justify myself to him. I trust him not to judge me, not to pull away from me, and not to make me feel guilty if I don't do or act or produce. ©

For a few years after her reunion with her family, Karen's life was relatively serene. Soon after her return from her first visit to Finland, she gave up the practice of law. It was a difficult decision at the time because it meant relinquishing what had become an important part of her identity. But after recovering from her depression,

she no longer was willing to give so much of herself over to it. She wanted time to watch the flowers grow; to mend her relationship with her husband, which, between her high-pressure job and her depression, had grown distant; to enjoy her brother's winter visits; to spend more time with her daughter, who was growing so quickly into womanhood.

Problems remained, of course--not least of them, if not law, what would she do with the rest of her life? With time to reflect and explore, the question began to answer itself. As she started to chronicle her daily life in her journal, she discovered that she was a potentially talented writer, and soon was directing her energies to developing that part of herself.

Whatever the uncertainties in her professional life, her family and personal life flourished. She and Philip were moving toward each other again. Jennifer had emerged from an early adolescent crisis into a warm and loving companion. Her beloved Lars was a constant in her life.

But her trials were not yet over.

On a bright spring day, about three years after Karen found her birth family, Jennifer, then nineteen years old, was about to set out on a journey with a friend. The morning was filled with the usual last-minute departure rituals. Finally, the car was packed, the farewells said, and they were off. Several hours later, Karen looked up from her dinner preparations in the kitchen to see two police officers coming up the front walk. **A**The doorbell rang. The dog barked. All time stopped. I just knew.

I knew Jennifer was dead. I didn't want to open the door; all I could think was, >No, please, go away; let's start this day over again.=

How does one speak about the death of a child? It's every parent's worst nightmare, the unimaginable come true. **A**After my daughter's death, what is pain? It doesn't exist because nothing can ever compare with that pain, says Karen.

The months that followed that terrible day sorely tested Karen's commitment to life and sanity. For week after agonizing week, she wanted to see no one, to speak with no one. It was as if she had a No Entry sign posted on her soul. With her husband, her brother, and a few close friends standing by, she sat silently in her room, wrapped in a haze of memory and pain, communicating only with her computer as she wrote about her beloved daughter--about her inner beauty and her love of life, about her senseless death and her own despair.

Some months later, Karen Richards found her way to my office and began a course of psychotherapy that would, in some ways, affect both our lives. For me, listening to her story, watching her remarkable capacity to examine her life and herself, witnessing her resilience in the face of tragedy focused me once again on the questions I have asked for years about the sources of such transcendence--questions that ultimately led me to write this book. For her, these have been years of mourning and recovery.

Today, several years after Jennifer's death, she holds her head high once again. She has good friends and work she loves, although, like all writers, there are

moments when she wonders whether the pleasure in writing, the joy in crafting that perfect sentence, is worth the pain of getting there. Her marriage is stronger than ever; her relationship with her brother, Lars, an unfailing source of comfort and pleasure. In endless talks about her early life in Finland, he fills in the blanks of her forgotten past and helps her to learn again her first language, of which she still remembers nothing. **A**It=s amazing, isn=t it? she asks. **A**I was seven years old and perfectly fluent in Finnish, and I have no recollection of ever speaking it. Nothing comes back, even when I hear it.

Her connections with the surviving Thompsons are limited. Vivian and Dick are both dead. Their biological son, Ezra, who, until he ended his misery with a bullet to his brain, lived in total isolation in the family house and was incapable of sustaining any kind of human relationship. **A**I felt sorry for him when he was alive; he was so all alone, so I used to call once in a while, she says Karen. And Benjamin, the brother she loved, is equally psychologically impaired, the barrier he built to protect himself from Vivian=s anger having become nearly impenetrable. **A**I=m in touch with Benjamin, but it=s hard to have a relationship with him because he=s so cut off. It=s like there=s a wall that nobody can get through, she says regretfully.

Her legitimate anger at the treatment she received at Vivian Thompson=s hands notwithstanding, she=s able also to appreciate what was positive in that environment. **A**My brother, Martti, says, >No matter how bad it was, you were still

in America. Here, you would have been pregnant by the time you were sixteen, and that would have been your life.=

ASometimes when he says things like that, it makes me angry. **A**But, **@** she grants, in her typical ability to see the glass as half full, **A**I also know that he=s right. I went from the most terrible poverty to a family that had an apartment in the city and a house in the country. So I was exposed to a life I couldn=t even have dreamed of in my family in Finland.

AVivian Thompson was an educated, cultured woman. We heard good music in that house, and there were books, lots of them. I spent a lot of time listening to music and living in those books. She liked the theater, too, and since no one else in the family was interested, she=d sometimes take me with her to see a play or hear a concert. All of those are things that have given me great pleasure in my life. So even though she was so cruel and hateful to me, living there taught me things and opened up opportunities I wouldn=t have had if I had stayed in Finland. **@**

There are scars, of course. And from time to time, they bleed. Karen gives the gift of trust warily, biding her time, testing to be sure it will not be betrayed. Since no parent ever fully recovers from the loss of a child, it=s not surprising that the pain of Jennifer=s death still catches her up unexpectedly. She sees a healthy, bursting-with-life nineteen-year-old, and her heart weeps. Her husband=s daughter has a baby, and she suffers the knowledge that Jennifer, who adored children, will never have one; that she, Karen, will never know a grandchild of her own.

With all that, however, Karen Richards looks at her life now and says, **A**fter Jennifer died, I was afraid I=d never find joy again in the things I used to find joyful, for example, music. I wondered if that feeling would ever come back, but remarkably, it has.

AI know I'm not a Pollyannaish kind of person, and it always seems amazing to me, given my life, that I have always been able to find joy and happiness at times, even in Vivian Thompson=s house. I can find it in a book, in the outdoors, in music, in lots of things, even in beating Lars at dominoes. That=s delayed sibling rivalry, I suppose, @ she adds with a mischievous smile.