

Christmas Story 2019

What Can One Person Do?

By Robert Ford

Sunday, July 14, 2019 -- 1 AM

Key members of the APF (American People's Front) were drinking in a bar on the outskirts of Tacoma, Washington. Karl had mapped out the entrances and exits of the bar a couple of days earlier. Closing time was approaching and there were only about a dozen people inside. The music was still playing loudly.

Karl wore his black and grey incursion suit that had as much body armour as he could handle. The elbow and knee joints were reinforced. He had a lightweight full helmet with built-in thermal imaging goggles. He approached from the side, away from the parking lot, and accessed the bar by way of the window in the women's washroom.

Two out of four of his preferred targets were sitting at the bar. The interior was not well lit. He took a moment to decide how to proceed. He was having trouble with his heartrate. He felt his pulse in his ears. He had prepared. He had an exit plan. He didn't care if this didn't work. *Settle down*, he told himself.

His targets all had a history of domestic violence and were suspects in multiple hate crimes. Their ages ranged from 25 to 57. He thought of Netty and Amanda; his pulse dropped to about 85 bpm and he proceeded.

Karl was armed with an air gun that was a replica of a Sig Sauer and fitted with a laser sight. He aimed and took a shot, striking the first target's neck. The man grabbed at his throat and started to choke. His friend, the second target, leaned forward and said, "What?" Karl took the next shot, piercing the friend's neck.

People sitting nearby became alarmed. Karl reckoned he had time for one more shot. The third target, the 57-seven-year-old, came into range. A good choice. Of the four, he was the one most likely to be armed. Karl took his third shot. As quietly as he came in, he retreated through the women's washroom and out the window. He glided into the darkness. He had practiced exiting his suit swiftly, and did so now with precision, placing it into a duffle bag. He walked a half mile to his car, which was parked on a side road. He drove east.

The police arrived to find three deceased males. As shootings go in America, this was odd. The eyewitness reports supported the evidence that this was an assault with an air rifle – hardly the weapon of choice for mass shooters. It took little effort to conclude it was a targeted shooting. The autopsy and the lab later confirmed that the ammunition had been tainted with toxins that included fentanyl and industrial cleaning agents.

June 25, 1993

Karl was a UBC commerce student. Classes were over and the weather was warming up. At that time, he was a wiry 5 ft. 10 in. young man. He was sporty, but preferred tennis or soccer. On this early summer's day, he had been convinced to come to Kits Beach for beach volleyball. Karl thought the game kind of stupid. He didn't mind two against two, but more seemed silly.

Karl and his buddies were sitting on logs, waiting for their turn at the nets, watching girls play four against four. The traditional sports-oriented bikinis kept their attention. One young woman in particular caught Karl's notice. She was South Asian looking, but her skin was more ... equatorial. It was the only word he could think of. She executed a two-arm block against a particularly powerful spike, jumping quite high for her height, and landing back in the sand like a cat. In that moment, Karl's entire framework for female beauty was forever re-written away from clichéd busty blonde to this woman.

"Who is *that*?" he asked his friends.

Karl eventually learned that his new crush was really a Toronto kid. She was the daughter of Sri Lankan refugees who had landed in Toronto and later moved to Vancouver when she was ten. Her name was Nethmi, but had been known as Netty since she was five. They married four years after that volleyball game. Their daughter Amanda was born two years into the marriage. Eventually her parents forgave Karl for being so white.

August 23, 2019

It was nearing noon; Karl had been hiding in the cornfields that grew to the edge of a farmhouse since 3am. The location was rural, near the Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area. The place name was a doozy; Karl wondered why Morley needed such a long name.

The weather-beaten farmhouse was owned by John Joseph, a leading figure for a white supremacist group called the Northwest Hammerskins, which operated out of nearby Boise. Mr. Joseph himself had a long track record of violent assault and, amazingly, was not currently in jail. Karl was

uphill from the farmhouse with a view of the front and back decks as well as the driveway and parking area.

His previous reconnaissance visits indicated they liked BBQs.

Karl was wearing green camouflage over his armour. It was starting to become warm. White supremacists were not, it seemed, early risers.

It was slightly after noon when John Joseph himself came onto the back deck to light a cigarette. Karl mused that it wasn't going to be cancer that killed him, and fired his air rifle. The shot pierced his neck. Joseph fell to the deck, writhing. Karl fired two more rounds into his torso; he wanted to be certain a corpulent man such as Mr. Joseph received his full dose. Two others from the farmhouse came onto the deck. One was a woman. Karl was disappointed; he only had time for one more. He shot the male, another white supremacist that Karl recognized from his research – two rounds into his neck. The woman started, understandably, to scream.

Now for his exit. Karl had left a pan of gasoline under one of the pickup trucks in the driveway. With his sidearm, a Shadow 2 handgun, Karl fired two rounds at the pan, setting it ablaze.

Remaining on his stomach, he inched back through the cornfield to where he'd hidden his duffle bag.

An hour later he was looking over Spider-man comics at a quaint Boise comic book show.

January 6, 2017

Karl had been on leave from work for three months. He did not like feeling helpless. The lack of sleep, nightmares.

Men scared him. Particularly white men, and more particularly, white trash white men. Fortunately, this wasn't a frequent sight in his Vancouver neighbourhood.

He left his apartment and went for a walk. In the nearby coffee shop, he saw a flyer for a new karate class. It was run by a woman who had been a national champion. As luck would have it, there was a class currently running at the nearby church gym.

He wandered over and dropped in. He watched the end of the class and approached the Sensei. She looked very Japanese, but spoke with a full Anglo Canadian accent. He explained he was looking for a new workout. There were a lot of kids in the class and he expressed concern.

"Our beginner classes," she said, "are all ages, all levels. Trust me; these kids will show you a thing or two. Why not do a free drop-in next class? Then we'll talk."

The next class was two nights later. He arrived in gym clothes. The kids and a couple of their parents looked very clean and proper in their gis. They took him through the warmups, which were much harder than he expected. Then he tried the first kata, a kind of routine that you had to master in order to get your first belt.

He was sore by the time he lay down to attempt to sleep. It felt good.

By February, he was practicing well, had his own gi, and worked diligently. But he wanted something more. He asked the Sensei if she would be willing to teach him private self defence lessons.

"The question I ask," she said, "when people ask me this is ... are you really wanting self defence or skills to exact vengeance?"

"Self-defence," Karl replied. "I had a traumatic experience last year and I want to feel like I could protect myself. And others, if needed. It may be an illusion, but I want to feel safer."

Sensei agreed. They set a date and time. When she got home, she Googled him.

September 9, 2019

Identity Evropa (Karl marvelled at the idiocy of white supremacist names) had a branch in Utah and had been responsible for terrorizing women at the University of Utah.

He had spent a couple of weeks observing them and determined they had a regular commute to Salt Lake City along the ironically named Emigration Canyon Road. Friday nights, the boys commonly drove into the city to drink and prowl. Karl had placed small spikes on three of the tires of their SUV.

He waited on the shoulder for their car to pass. When it did, he started his vehicle and began following. In a few minutes, two tires lost all air and they pulled over. Karl pulled on his night vision helmet and pulled over about ten car lengths behind them.

Only two men exited the SUV, which Karl thought strange, because if you plan to change a tire, you don't want extra weight in the car. Karl exited his own car and brought out his air rifle. He used the laser sight to target the men's necks and shot them with the poisoned air gun pellets. Karl waited a moment for the third man to come out and investigate. However, he came out of the vehicle, firing wildly, brandishing what sounded like a real Sig Sauer handgun. One round took out one of Karl's headlights and another clipped his body armour. It was a .45 and packed a punch. Karl crouched, pulled his Glock side arm – a 9mm semiauto – and unloaded ten rounds at his target, who went down.

Damn, Karl thought, massaging his shoulder. *That's going to leave a bruise.*

He quickly left the scene and found a side road and took a roundabout way back to his motel on the other side of Salt Lake City. He spent a few minutes kicking in the front of his car further so as to

hide the fact it had taken a gunshot. A body shop visit tomorrow was required. Inside, he disassembled the Glock and put it in an acid bath. Once damaged beyond repair, he wrapped it carefully in plastic and pitched it down a storm drain.

February 8, 2017

Sensei said, "I'll agree to do private self-defence lessons, but there's a catch."

"A catch?" Karl replied.

"You must promise these skills are for self defence only. I don't want to find out later you used what I'm showing you to hurt people. Even if they seem worth hurting," she said.

Karl looked at her. She clearly had done some research. "My intention is to feel stronger so that on the off chance another catastrophe befalls me, or anyone with me, I could fend off an immediate threat. In other words, I'm not looking for a fight."

February 22, 2017

Karl wondered if a firearm would make him feel better. He wanted to try a shooting range, but the nearest one in Langley did not allow drop-in unlicensed shooters without a friend. He looked up the costs of the courses and learned he could do the regular and restricted firearms course for about \$250, plus supplies. He signed up online and drove out to the suburbs for a two-day course. The course was easy. The safety instructions were incredibly obvious.

A week later he was back at the Langley shooting range. He felt uncomfortable in such a white place, despite Karl looking the part. They had a bumper sticker for sale that said, "Make Trudeau a Drama Teacher Again" in MAGA red. He ignored it and decided to set up a routine wherein he tested all forms of firearms. He became good quite quickly. Karl always went on Thursday evenings, after rush hour, to avoid traffic. The young man who served him said, "Hey, you're getting really good. Did you ever consider competing?"

"No," said Karl. "I just enjoy the challenge. I've only been at this a few weeks; why do you think I'm any good?"

"Oh, it's because you actually concentrate. Most people who aren't military or police are shooting all over the place."

September 10, 2019

In the Salt Lake City FBI office, an agent was reviewing updates to their domestic terrorism files and noted the demise (sorry-not-sorry) of three Identity Evropa members. The notation that two had died by poisoned air rifle ammunition made him pause. That rang a bell. He Googled "murders air rifles" and an article in a Tacoma publication appeared.

Damn peculiar, he thought.

October 30, 2019

What was depressing about Colorado was the sheer number of white supremacist groups. The Loyal White Knights, described by the anti-defamation league as "a Nazified Klan group," fit Karl's profile of not only being racist, anti-Semitic bastards, but also having a rather lengthy criminal record targeting women.

His research indicated they were going to do a cross burning to kick off Halloween celebrations. This was apparently to occur a few miles outside of the once again ironically named town of Rifle.

As the sun set, hidden beneath some distant foliage, he watched for his targets. After the close call with the Identity Evropa mission, he was careful not to give away his position. He was concerned the air rifle would not have enough range. He had a backup Ruger Hawkeye long range gun. It was a gun show deal he'd picked up a few weeks ago for under \$1000. He could afford to leave it behind if things went sideways. The air rifle was a lot quieter.

He'd had to estimate where they were going to put their cross. He observed from his hiding spot several men setting up the cross at about a 100 yards away. Karl wondered from what direction they were going to assemble. Through his scope, he was looking for faces from his research. Most he did not recognize. A bunch of people started arriving including, amazingly, a couple of families who were setting up a picnic.

Then a group of six Klansmen in full white robes and the stupid pointed hoods with their emblem started to approach the cross. Karl wondered if any of these idiots realized these outfits were the result of a movie and thus were unrelated to the original movement. He sighed. Following the extreme right was also following the path of extreme stupidity. Regardless, the Klan these days didn't wear the outfits that often. It was impractical; the robes were often for special occasions or the commission of a crime. Then Karl saw it. In the middle of their group, they had a black kid, maybe 14, with a rope around his neck.

Karl's pulse spiked. He knew they were all out of range of the air gun. He carefully packed it away so that he could make a quick getaway. He was going to need his incendiary diversions sooner

than he thought. He kept his radio-controlled switches at the ready. He moved the Ruger into place and quickly shot three of the robed figures – those furthest away from the boy. He set off one of his blasts, which was far down the field from the cross. (They were half gasoline-filled 2L pop bottles.) The boy had fallen to the ground, which allowed Karl to take down the other three robed figures. He set off his two other pop bottle bombs. The people who had gathered for the show were now in full scream mode. He removed the high-quality scope off the Ruger, abandoned the rifle, and started to crawl away from the scene. He hoped the boy had made a run for it.

October 31, 2019

Karl stayed put in the motel in Colorado Springs. "KKK Massacre" read the headlines. He was interested in who exactly he had shot. He was surfing a variety sites he monitored both on the regular and dark web via his VPN and Tor browser. He was fairly certain he had executed serious KKK members and not fools thinking they were cool being in the outfit.

He was going to have to be more careful. He did not like the idea of collateral damage.

March 27, 2018

Karl watched the news and wondered if it was him, or if, the second Trump was elected, the white supremacist crowd had jumped out of the woodwork. Having married a woman of colour taught him a lot about racism and white privilege, but how pervasive was it?

Karl was a data guy. He wanted to search for these bastards and draw his own conclusions. He wasn't so green as to go searching on the Internet for such terms without protection. He'd always wondered how to connect to the so-called Dark Net and in one Google search he found an article that talked about the Tor browser. The first thing Karl realized is to not use Google but rather DuckDuckGo. The second thing he realized was that a Virtual Private Network would further mask his data collecting.

In about an hour, Karl realized he should totally isolate his research on a separate laptop, link it to a VPN, install all the security software that went with it, and encrypt the drive.

The next day, he bought a fast machine with a large solid state drive. He registered Microsoft Windows as anonymously as possible and then tried a 3-month free VPN from Europe. It seemed the countries with the best privacy laws also hosted the best private networks.

A week later Karl answered his question; white supremacists were far more pervasive than the phrase "a small minority ruining it for the rest of us" could cover.

April 28, 2018

Karl had amassed a lot of data on white supremacists across North America and realized that it was making him feel sicker.

Who knew that researching racists, misogynists and anti-Semites would make the inherently sad task of cleaning out the family storage locker compelling?

At the locker, Karl boxed up garments for donation and moved them into the corridor. In the process, he discovered his plastic bins of comic books. When had he last touched these? Twenty years ago?

He lifted the boxes for donation and his four bins of comics onto a dolly, loaded the car, drove to the Salvation Army and dropped off the boxes. He took the comics to his apartment.

At home, he flipped through the first box. His interest as a child and adolescent was split between Batman and Spider-man. Some of the comics had been well packaged – bag-and-board – and some not.

He spent an hour sitting on the floor reading. He started to feel better.

A couple of weeks later, he found his older Spider-man comics. He'd spent allowance money as a kid to buy back issues including *The Amazing Spider-Man* #129, which first introduced The Punisher, a homicidal anti-hero, who was a departure for comics in 1974.

Karl realized that both Spider-man and The Punisher had been guest stars in other comic book titles and, especially in the case of Spider-man, had dozens of his own titles. Karl wondered what it would take to collect all the comics in which these characters appeared. At the comic book shop he bought a current edition of *The Overstreet Comic Book Price Guide*. 1231 pages. His vision was to review each page, find all comics with his two characters, record the guide's price and collect them all.

The next day he called into work to arrange to return from disability.

July 1, 2018

All of the karate work led Karl to realize his cardio wasn't good enough. His Sensei was lightning fast and trying to keep pace with her left him gasping. But he hated cardio for the sole purpose of it. Given the choices of indoor versus outdoor work, he chose running and did so around the Stanley Park Seawall. On busier days, like Canada Day, it wasn't a guarantee he could run fast due to all the pedestrians. But the scenery was always spectacular, regardless of the weather.

That was until he saw something ugly. As he approached Second Beach, he saw a couple of white guys in their thirties, clearly drunk or on something, bothering three women sunbathing at the far end of the beach. He stopped his jog, pretended to stretch and catch his breath. The women were trying to leave, but one of the men was blocking their way. Karl left the running path and walked onto the beach.

"Hey," said Karl, "are you OK?"

"I'm fine, sunshine," said one of the drunk men.

"You are bothering these people. Move on."

The other man moved to approach Karl.

"Are you gonna make us?" sneered the second drunk.

"I don't have to. You are going to go on your own because you know it's right and it will only take another minute for you to realize I am fucking crazy and not in the mood for your shit."

One of the men prepared to shove him, but Karl saw it coming and punched him hard in the solar plexus. The second man was shocked at how fast Karl had reacted and stepped back, suddenly looking much more sober.

"See earlier remark about fucking crazy and move along. And take this oaf with you."

The men stumbled away and Karl watched them walk away. He stared until they were out of sight.

He turned to see the three women looking at him. They were now as scared of him as they had been annoyed by the drunks. Karl nodded to them, gave what he thought was a friendly wave, and continued running.

Monday November 14, 2018

Karl was watching the news. The local news had a small spot relevant to him.

"Tomorrow, Justice Jude Spence is scheduled to sentence John Roland and David Paul Kingston in the double homicide of Nethmi and Amanda Simpson, who were abducted, sexually assaulted and brutally murdered in a secluded home in Yale, BC in 2016. The men were found guilty of first-degree murder. They had pleaded not guilty but opted for a trial by judge only. It's not known at this time if the family of the mother and daughter will enter victim impact statements."

I know the answer to that, thought Karl.

Tuesday, November 15, 2018

In the courtroom, it was time for the victim impact statement that Karl had prepared and submitted to the court in advance.

Karl looked straight ahead and tried to avoid looking at the bastards who had murdered his wife and daughter. His voice was unwavering.

My name is Karl Simpson. My wife Netty and daughter Amanda are gone. The loss is so intense, so devastating, that my wife's parents are unable to make a statement. For me, I live, but I am dead inside. No version I imagined for my family's life included the sexual assault, torture and murder of my wife and daughter. The impact of this horrible, racist, misogynistic act hurts more people than me. No one in our society should live in fear of every white face. *[It was at this point Karl deviated from his script and his lawyer raised an eyebrow.]* People who think such violence and hatred is OK, should be in fear ... of the poison they have in their souls. I ask the judge to levy as harsh a penalty as Canadian law allows. Thank you.

The judge handed down two life sentences for each defendant. No parole for 25 years.

Wednesday, November 16, 2018

The life insurance policy paid out. The timing was entirely a coincidence. Karl and Netty had put \$1 million on each of them in the case of their death. Had something horrible happened to either of them, they did not want Amanda to go without.

He now had two hobbies he could pursue.

His large database of desired Spider-man and Punisher comics was assembled and he had marked what he already had in his own collection. His database included the condition of his collection and the *Overstreet* price. This job took weeks to review all the pages, eyeball the comments and look for Spider-man and The Punisher. In the end, his goal was to obtain all 4,856 comics in his target collection by finding them personally at comic book shows and stores all over the United States. He would prefer to find all NM (near mint) copies, but in some cases, that could be challenging. But, it would be a fun way to spend time.

He also figured if he obtained better copies of the collection, he could sell his spares on eBay to help make the collection somewhat self-funding.

This would also give him cover. His plan was to book a sabbatical from work for a year, depending on the HR rules around this. Perhaps a medical leave would be needed. He could certainly parlay his chronic nightmares about Netty and Amanda being assaulted into a mental health argument.

He'd maintain his apartment so that his permanent residence wouldn't change. But he would need a secluded base of operations. He had a few ideas of people who might rent him a cabin in Washington State.

His database of white supremacist groups was large as well. He had profiles of hundreds of individuals in the US and Canada.

He started moving money offshore and then slowly back to accounts he had set up in the United States.

Christmas Day, 2018

Karl made a point to spend time with family. He explained that he needed time to heal. They laughed at his grand comic book collecting plan. Faux defensively, he explained in some detail the complexity around rating, collecting, packaging and reselling. It would keep him busy and on the move.

Karl's younger brother asked, "What are you going to do with this collection when you have it?"

"I may donate the whole collection in the end. If I can bear to part with it. But I'm deliberately unsure about the future. I want to give myself a year and not think about it. Waiting for that damn court case to finish was almost too much."

His visit with Netty's mother and father was difficult. They remained gutted. Despite his salt-and-pepper hair and serious professorial appearance, Karl's face looked like so many of the racist bastard white faces his in-laws had known. Their plan was to move back to Toronto to stay with extended family. They were nearing retirement age and wanted their family's help with their voyage through grief. Karl wished he could tell them what he planned, but they would not approve. They were better than him and, as far as Karl was concerned, always had been.

January 7, 2019

Karl crossed the US border in his old Toyota. A friend at the office had arranged for a private year long "loaner" of a cottage with a workshop and rural near Oak Harbor, Washington. A better rate and not on the books for either party. Karl was planning a longer stay in the US than the government would think was OK.

He had nothing but a week's worth of clothes to support his story of being a tourist. On his way to his cottage, he stopped in Blaine to pick up comics he had shipped to a mail box company slowly over many weeks. He made a similar stop in Bellingham. He then went to a local independent laptop repair store and bought a second-hand high-end laptop with cash.

With his car now filled with comics and a new (to him) laptop, he made the rest of the way to Oak Harbor. He accessed the cottage, started the heat and began the job of configuring his laptop with his VPN and other software.

January 15, 2019

In Seattle, Karl collected his fake American IDs that he had procured over the dark web. They were simply a couple of fake driver's licenses. He was fairly nervous about these transactions but they were all done without him ever seeing the seller. A simple password exchange at a Starbucks did the trick – one envelope for another and never a backwards glance.

Of course, he had to stop by Golden Age Collectibles in Pike Place Market. Their pricing for the comics he wanted would be way off his target, but it was always good to see what the retail market was doing.

Karl drove "home" to Oak Harbor and started planning his visits to comic book shows and gun shows. He also started looking at used vehicles. He could not be seen driving all over the USA with his British Columbia license plates. He figured he'd need a van he could modify and reinforce.

Also on his to-do list was finding body armour, night vision equipment, finding or creating a practice range and locating a karate dojo that he would enjoy. He was partial to a female sensei; Karl was wary of men.

November 14, 2019

A white supremacist group called National Alliance Reform and Restoration Group (NARRG) was operating in Nevada. Anti defamation groups had provided some information on many of these groups but it had taken months online to sort out that the claim of them being a Carson City, NV based group was a distraction from their remote headquarters outside Fallon, NV. This group was a collection of splinter groups, but Karl's research placed several people belonging to NARRG at the Fallon site. These people had side hobbies that included child pornography and arms dealing.

The proximity to a US military base inspired Karl to prepare a bit more. The terrain was also an issue. High altitude desert did not offer a lot of cover. At 3am he did a final surveillance of the ranch style house, dropping off some of his home-made low yield grenades; they were more of a smoke and noise weapon rather than a projectile device. He silently crept onto the front porch and put a couple of lines of home-made napalm on the porch and front door.

He lit a small bundle of kindling and dropped it on the porch. The fire started quickly. He moved quickly and quietly to the rear exit and positioned himself on the ground slightly less than 75 yards away.

The fire on the far side of the house was getting bigger and there was shouting from inside. The first escapees left by way of the back door and included two of the four targets Karl had on his list. He fired air rifle shots to the neck, but he saw a third figure hop out behind them, over a railing, holding an AR-15 or equivalent. He was bulky and fit-looking.

Karl assumed he was going to circle around him and attempt to come at him from behind. Karl ran toward the side of the house that was not on fire. He needed to be away from the flames so his night goggles would not be overwhelmed by the heat. He ran past the point where he had placed his grenades. He heard a burst of AR-15 fire tear up the ground near his foot. He hit the button to set off all the grenades and there was a series of bangs and lots of billowing smoke. He kept running with a zig zag pattern.

He wished he'd spent more time on his cardio training.

He heard the fire trucks wailing in the distance.

About 20 minutes later, he reached his rental car on a gravel road and fled. No sign of pursuit.

November 16, 2019

Karl attended the Great American Comic Convention in Las Vegas, which is about a seven-hour drive from Fallon. The news covered the attack on the house in Fallon. Words like domestic terrorism were being used for the first time. On the various alt-right sites on the dark web, people were connecting the dots between his attacks and speculating on what group was responsible. This had the helpful effect of creating hundreds of nonsense theories and muddying the waters.

This particular show in Vegas was not normally a big show, but the organizers were building toward a comic book show that would eventually compete with San Diego, which was difficult for many to afford and attend. Karl planned to fully enjoy the three-day event because he was rattled by his last action. His body armour was not up for multiple rounds from an AR-15.

With the bigger comic book shows there was usually a cosplay element, where people went all out to dress as their favourite superheroes or fantasy characters. The Vegas show had expanded recently and had worked to attract cosplay fans.

Karl was cutting through a room of slot machines when he observed two women dressed as Power Girl. This DC character is an alternative reality "Earth 2" version of Supergirl who was a little

older and much bustier than her "Earth 1" counterpart. The outfit really is not much more than a white bathing suit, a cape, blue gloves and a red belt. What made the two women so cool-looking was one was Caucasian and the other was African American. Their figures and costumes were sufficiently alike that they could trade clothes.

Unfortunately, a couple of overweight white men were hassling them with comments like "are you going to power do us?" They looked like they could handle themselves, particularly the blonde, but as always, they should not have to suffer this. Karl approached and decided to see if he could defuse this situation by saying, "Hey gentlemen, are these superheroes bothering you?"

The two men looked confused.

"They're bothering me," said Karl, "but in a good way." He smiled at the Power Girls. Their eyes indicated they understood what he was doing.

"Why don't you go fuck yourself?"

Well, thought Karl, *so much for the easy way*.

"I suggest you leave. And leave these ladies, and me, alone."

One man threw a punch, which was so obvious, Karl executed a simple block and punched him in the stomach. Then he heard the click of a switch blade. *Really?* Thought Karl. Fragile male egos. God help us.

Karl executed a twist to take the sharp end away from him and punched the man's wrist so the knife dropped. Then he punched him in the face rapidly twice. The first attacker was trying to rise so Karl kicked him in the groin.

"There are likely dozens of cameras on," he said to the Power Girls. "While we wait for hotel security to arrive, may I introduce myself? I'm Karl."

"Pamela," said white Power Girl.

"Alyssa," said black Power Girl.

They shook hands.

"You know," said Pamela, "we could have handled this." One of the men tried to rise. "Stay down asshole," she added.

"There's a contradiction in the world right now. Women should be able to take care of themselves. True. Men commit the majority of violent crime, full stop. I can no longer stand for it, regardless of at whom the violence is directed. I take a gender-neutral attitude when assisting people."

"Good God, you speak in full sentences with correct grammar," said Alyssa.

"Don't ya love comic book nerds?" said Pamela.

The hotel security guards arrived.

For his interview, due to the knife and punches being thrown, the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department had been called.

Karl was very careful to provide the minimum amount of information. What he really wanted to avoid was any police service connecting his visits to comic book shows with the various shootings of white supremacists. Taking a closer look at his van would be a bad idea too. The key point of the discussion was how he knew to defend himself. Karl was happy the assumption was that he was defending himself.

"I have a brown belt in Karate."

"You get into this kind of situation often?"

"No."

"But the video shows you are well trained in self-defence."

"Fitness. A couple of years back I started Karate for a less boring form of fitness. The whole running on treadmills stuff ... could not handle. My Sensei also taught self-defence. So, I took that too. Lesson 1 – dodge a punch. Lesson 2 – disarm someone. And so forth."

There were a few more questions. Karl signed a statement and was asked not to leave town immediately. He reassured them that he was here for the entire show.

November 17, 2019

Karl attended a few more events at the show. While he was taking a break in his hotel suite, the phone rang. It was the front desk advising there was a package for him and would he come down. *Most peculiar*, thought Karl.

He proceeded to the lobby and said to the guest services agent, "I'm Karl Simpson. I was told there was a package for me?"

"Right behind you."

"Surprise!" It was Pamela and Alyssa. They were looking less superhero-y but no less attractive.

"Wow. What a surprise," said Karl. "To what do I owe this visit?"

"We're here to take you to dinner. To celebrate that you aren't in the slammer," said Pamela.

"Unless you had other plans," said Alyssa.

"I had no dinner plans and would of course cancel them if I did."

At dinner they reviewed their respective experiences with LVMPD's finest. They discussed the comic book convention and what was good and what wasn't. Pamela and Alyssa had been friends for a about five years, having met at a convention in Houston. Pamela was a criminology student from Tulsa and Alyssa was a local nurse practitioner.

Karl kept to his story of being on a year's sabbatical for comic collecting, with his obsession to collect all Spider-man and The Punisher appearances. He said that he'd had a tragedy at home, but really did not want to go into it.

But Karl could not quite fathom the women's relationship. The vibe between them was caring but more than a sister relationship.

Karl asked if they were a couple and found out they were Bi. He managed to hide the fact that he had an old-fashioned idea that bisexuals were simply indecisive. In the end he learned that bisexuality, like other identifications in the LGBTQ+ rainbow, was a distinct way of being.

They were not, however, a couple. It was more of a friends-with-benefits arrangement. They laughed and said if they never found their true loves in time, they'd maybe bite the bullet and move in together as an old lesbian biracial couple – just to drive the racists and anti-gay folks nuts.

Karl had two sensations. One that they were being watched. He thought he saw a face from the hotel appear now in the restaurant. But he wasn't sure. Paranoia was not surprising. Second, he also wanted to spend more time with Pamela and Alyssa. He hadn't socialized in so long, he was surprised how much he was enjoying himself.

"This may sound odd, but I've got a suite full of comics and memorabilia. There's space for us to have room service or something and we can keep chatting more privately."

Once back at his hotel suite, the women started carefully looking at what comics he had with him.

"What's this?" said Alyssa. "I thought you were sticking with Spider-man and The Punisher."

"She-Hulk, yeah," said Karl. "I found a guy with a huge collection he was willing to part with at a reasonable price. I could not resist."

"Pamela," said Alyssa, "Girl, I am so aroused it's ridiculous."

Pamela started massaging Karl's very tight shoulders and kissed his ear.

Not too long after midnight, Alyssa touched Karl's shoulder as he lay in bed. "Karl," she said softly, "I have to go home." He was quickly alert and had not realized he had been fully asleep.

"Oh. Right," he said. "Uh, how are you getting home?"

"You are such a gentleman; you slay me. My momma's coming to get me."

"Seriously?"

"Sure, silly. Don't you worry. I'll be in touch. And make sure my Pamela there gets her beauty sleep. And make sure to feed that woman breakfast and coffee – she won't make a damn bit of sense until you do."

"OK."

Alyssa quietly closed the door. Karl carefully got up to put the security lock back on. He crawled back into bed. His mind was too groggy to review his abrupt change from monk-like sexual status to ardent participant in a threesome. He fell into a sleep that was a rare dreamless sleep, free of images of his wife and daughter being murdered.

Shortly after 6am there was a pounding on the door. "Officer Talbot from the Las Vegas police. I have a few questions."

Karl was groggy only for a moment. This was not expected. Even the very heavy sleeping Pamela stirred. "Just a moment, I have to grab some pants." Which was true but it gave him a moment to start thinking. He also grabbed a bag from his closet that looked a lot like an old doctor's bag. He put it beside the door and left it open.

Karl opened the door slightly and asked to see his badge.

"May I come in please?" said Talbot, showing a badge. Karl could tell that his hand was clearly on his firearm. And he was starting to look familiar.

"What does this pertain to?" asked Karl.

"Alyssa Robinson has been reported missing by her mother."

He opened the door and, as luck would have it, Pamela sat up in bed, in direct view, holding a sheet barely over her naked form. "What?" she said.

With that moment's distraction, Karl punched Talbot in the throat. He wore a vest, so a stomach shot would not have worked. He then yanked the officer's arm around into an awkward position and then kicked him in the groin. While doubled over, Karl removed the two guns (holster and ankle). He reached into his doctor's bag for zip ties and bound Talbot's hands and feet behind him. He tore off a piece of duct tape and placed it over his mouth.

"What the fuck are doing?" yelled Pamela.

Karl said with distressing calm, "His radio is off. He's not actually on duty. His shoes don't match the standard that the other officer had. He's alone. He could have called from the desk. His holster gun

was unstrapped and – best of all – he's a known white supremacist police sympathizer as identified on several dark web anti-defamation sites. They really hate it when cops get in on the whole white power shit."

Pamela realized she'd never heard Karl swear prior to this.

Karl grabbed Talbot's phone. It was locked, but he could unlock it with the man's thumb. He started going through texts. He sat beside Pamela and they rolled through a few hours of messages from which they pieced together that both Alyssa and her mother were being held somewhere. It was some kind of twisted payback on Karl for humiliating their friends two days earlier.

The breathtaking stupidity of it all was overwhelming. Playground retribution by racist bullies, but with guns and hostages. They had no clue that Karl was the guy shooting white supremacists for the last few months.

"Can I have a moment with you?" said Pamela. "Away from this guy?"

Pamela took her clothes with her and changed, saying, "I have to tell you something. I'm a Tulsa Oklahoma police detective. Detective Pamela Byrne."

"Wow," said Karl. "Your impulse to arrest both of us must be huge. However, I can't recommend calling 911, for obvious reasons."

"I don't have jurisdiction but I am *very* concerned."

"Let's get Alyssa and her mom back and then figure out the legal issues later," said Karl.

"You are looking seriously, frankly ... dangerous. Is there something you aren't telling me?"

A whole lot, thought Karl, but he said, "What I didn't tell you and Alyssa is that my wife and daughter were people of colour – South Asian – and they were held hostage, sexually assaulted, tortured and murdered. By wannabe white supremacists. The parallel with this situation is not lost on me and, *yes*, I'm having some trouble managing my temper."

"Holy Jesus."

"Indeed."

Karl turned his attention to Talbot. "Officer Talbot," said Karl. "I'm assuming your job was to retrieve me, bring me somewhere where the women are, and show me just how you proper white boys give a black-loving douchebag like me a beat down in front of, or along with, the nasty black women. Having said that, please nod or shake your head to the following question. Given this turn of events, would you participate in a simple prisoner exchange in which all parties simply walk away and call it a day?"

Talbot nodded.

Karl took a photo of Talbot in his bound position and texted it to his buddies.

It took several exchanges, a photo of Karl holding the officer's own Taurus G2S Slim to his head to set a time and a place. There was no value in calling the police given the number of crimes in play. Karl offered to call the FBI as they were always interested in kidnappings.

A deal was struck to meet at a nearby mall shipping and receiving area.

Away from Talbot, Karl spoke to Pamela. "If you want to leave at this point, that's fine with me."

"I want to help."

"I figured you'd say that. Since they don't seem to have a clue that you might be in the picture, do you want to do the rooftop sniper thing?"

"I'm trained, but not really a markswoman. You have that kind of weapon?"

"In my van. I have a Bushmaster you'd probably like. Do you have a handgun with you?"

"No," said Pamela. "Vacation."

"Sig Sauer or Glock?" He opened a secret compartment in a locking case that was holding comic books.

She picked the Glock. Karl took the Sig Sauer. He emptied the service pistol and put it back into the officer's holster. He pocketed the Taurus G2S.

Karl quickly packed up all his stuff. He figured he'd be checking out regardless.

When it was time to go, he said to Talbot, "I'm going to release you. We are all going to walk to my van. You and Pamela are going to pretend I'm drunk and you're helping me. If anything goes wrong, I'll blast your kidneys out with your own gun."

Talbot nodded.

It was surprisingly uneventful getting to the van. Karl re-ziptied Talbot's hands behind him and taped his mouth shut. Out of a compartment in the van, he pulled out his custom body armour and put it on.

Holy shit, thought Pamela.

He drove while Pamela guarded the prisoner.

Before they reached the loading dock area of the chosen mall, Karl stopped the car. He put on his armour, but without the helmet. They used Talbot's phone and a phone built into Karl's suit to let them communicate. They were going to leave the line open the entire time.

"That's a hell of a suit," she said.

"Custom built."

"This rifle and scope are pretty upscale too."

"I never compromise on personal defence."

Pamela left the van with the rifle in its case. "I'll let you know when I'm in position."

Karl gave her a head start and drove the rest of the way.

They pulled up to the loading dock as arranged. Karl led Talbot out of the van. "You have a good view?" he said to his microphone.

"Affirmative," she said.

"Let's get this over with!" yelled Karl.

Two men came out of the loading dock. One of them Karl recognized from the images he'd looked at, another LVMPD officer. The second was the moron he'd punched in the stomach in the casino. They were a little confused by his body armour.

"Where are they?" asked Karl. He was not surprised to see that the men were both armed. But when they motioned for a third man to bring out Alyssa and her mother, Karl figured the odds of them doing something stupid were high. From their perspective, this was four against one. The third man was the idiot with the switchblade. Obviously, they had whined to their cop buddies and cooked up this stupid plan.

Karl noticed that Alyssa's mother did not appear much older than Alyssa and was just as beautiful. Dread and anger surged in the back of his head.

"You're a damn traitor," said Talbot's fellow LVMPD officer.

"What?" said Karl. He realized he shouldn't have said anything. This was a distraction.

"You love these niggers and then before you know it, they're fucking replacing us. Us. God's chosen people."

"Oh, shut the fuck up, you dumb cracker. This is a prisoner exchange, not a fucking confab about racial superiority. Release them and they walk to me. Then I let Officer Talbot walk to you. We then retreat to our respective departure points and never see each other again."

"They both walk at the same time."

"Not when I'm outnumbered," said Karl. "Could we hurry this up? I'm not keen on being arrested."

Karl was assessing the players. Talbot was obviously wanting to do something to warn them about Pamela – maybe run for it. The fellow nearest Alyssa and her mother was looking the craziest. The other two were cold.

They released the women. "Walk slowly to him," they said. They moved, hugging each other. Alyssa was crying and her mother was looking, as the Americans say, some pissed.

Karl positioned Talbot in front of him and pushed him slightly forward.

"The guy nearest Alyssa is going to go for his gun," he said into his microphone. "He's twitchy."

"Affirmative."

In another ten paces, switchblade man went for his sidearm.

Pamela shot him in the leg. *Not really a markswoman, eh?* thought Karl. Predictably, the other two drew their guns. Alyssa and her mother had dropped to the ground at the first shot. Karl drew his Sig Sauer but Pamela had shot both of them – matching thigh wounds – before he could fire. He put the gun to the back of Talbot's head.

"No," said Pamela in his ear.

Karl pushed him to the ground instead. With his hands tied behind him, he wasn't going to be much of a threat.

"Into the van! Now!" yelled Karl.

"You know him?" said Alyssa's mother.

"He's that nice Canadian comic book collector I told you about."

Once in the van, Karl started driving and asked them where their car was. He relayed the information to Pamela, who said she was running there now. It wasn't far.

Karl dropped them in front of Alyssa's mother's car. His final words to them were, "I'm sorry."

Christmas Eve, 2019

Oak Harbor had received two inches of snow and was looking wonderful. Karl was putting final touches on the cabin to leave it spotless. It had taken full time work since Las Vegas to destroy his weapons, de-customize his van, sell it, and prepare to ship his comics home. He had to do this in small bundles to avoid taxes. He had come close to meeting his goal with Spider-man and The Punisher. *Amazing Fantasy* #15 – Spider-man's first appearance – was just too much money for something in decent condition.

His phone beeped. His camera system was showing someone coming to the door.

There was a knock and Karl opened it to see Pamela. "Detective Byrne, what a lovely surprise."

"May I come in?"

"Of course. Merry Christmas."

"Gosh this part of the country is gorgeous."

"It is. I'm really surprised to see you. On Christmas Eve. Are you well? I hope everything went OK. I checked the news and other sources. How's Alyssa?"

"She and her mother were pretty terrified and angry. They're working through it. I certainly wasn't asked to Thanksgiving by them this year."

"No doubt."

"You are not easy to find, you know?" said Pamela.

"Given the circumstances I thought it best to be low key ..." said Karl. "Um, shouldn't you be in Oklahoma with family?"

"I saw them at Thanksgiving. Besides, my Irish Catholic family still struggles with having a childless 30-year-old bisexual police detective in the family. Irish cops are a cliché mind you."

She had a knapsack with her and pulled out three sets of crime scene photos. They were of his work in Idaho, Washington State and Nevada. He didn't flinch. "I should put on coffee if we're going to talk shop," he said.

She laughed.

They sat at his kitchen table and she reviewed why she felt he was the perpetrator. It was the proximity to comic book shows that guided her to these three.

"This is an informal investigation, right? It crosses multiple jurisdictions."

"Yes. Even if I had hard evidence, I would not be able to arrest you. I'd refer my findings to the FBI and they'd have to decide. And I know, unofficially, they are not particularly disturbed by these killings."

"I'm thinking your investigation is more about trying to figure out how screwed up I am," said Karl.

"Yes."

"I have to go home to Vancouver soon. The insurance on my car will run out for one thing. More importantly, I have to sit in front of my wife and daughter's graves and apologize for a lot." Karl started to tear up; he'd been crying more in the last month or so than he had in the previous two years.

"None of what you saw in the van is left."

"What's your plan when you are home?"

"I'm going to go back to school and take Criminology and Psych. I'm going to try to help find a way for men to defeat this idea that violence is acceptable. I'm also going to work on climate crisis issues. Another giant ass problem mostly created by men."

"If that all turns out to be true, I wouldn't mind seeing you again," she said.

"It would be my privilege. I never had a chance to tell you how – what's the right word? – Impressed? Daunted? Captivated? I was by you in Las Vegas. The whole time. If you give me your preferred contact info, I'll keep you posted. I'm going to Comic Con in Toronto on March 20 if you're interested."

Pamela stood. "I'll think about it." She put her coat on and headed to the door, handing him her Tulsa police business card. It had her personal Gmail address on the back. "Merry Christmas, Karl." And she left.