

Endless Loop

by

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Endless Loop

To be different from your fellows, to be abnormal in any way in your appearance, is to face a challenge. Not a challenge to be conquered by skill, or by physical prowess, but a challenge to be overcome by courage and by learning the value of your own self before God.

Some people face that challenge and pass the test; they win honour and the respect of their friends and colleagues. Others fail that test, and the price of failure can be terrible.

When Karen was six months old, she developed a high temperature. The doctor came quickly, because there was a severe outbreak of polio that first year after the War. But Karen recovered, and showed no sign of any problems. She grew into a beautiful child and, unfortunately, well aware of it.

By her fourteenth birthday the illness was forgotten. Her parents had moved up in the world, as her father gained promotion. Her mother was equally determined to gain promotion socially, and spared no effort to establish herself and her family in their new upwardly mobile social class. For Karen it was easy to follow her mother's way. She was bright, attractive, good at sports, and popular with almost everybody. She was popular with the teachers, with the boys and with the other girls' parents, at least with the ones she thought counted.

It was while getting her new dress for the Christmas party that her mother found the deformity starting in Karen's ribcage. Her old doctor had died by now, and her new doctor referred her to a consultant, who explained to Karen and her mother that some intercostal muscles were abnormally weak, and were not holding the spine and ribs in the correct position. He used the word "scoliosis", but did not explain it or "intercostal", so instead of going back to school, as she had told her mother she would do, Karen went to the library and looked the strange words up.

"Scoliosis", she read, "is a lateral curvature of the spine, associated with a rotation of the ribcage about a vertical axis. It is caused by an imbalance of the intercostal muscles which hold the ribs and spine in the correct posture."

The dry words were like iced water sluicing through her. She closed the book, and laid it down carefully, her eyes filled with tears and rage at the whole world.

It was the first time she had faced any imperfection or failure in herself. With all the best motives, her parents had protected her against every hurt or grief. Now she had no experience of past hurts that she had overcome to draw on to sustain her. She had never learnt how to turn to others for help. In her grief she turned instead on herself, and let the anguish in her heart become acid to corrode her soul.

She cried all the way home, and refused to have anything more to do with the new dress or the party. That was the first step in the destruction of Karen Shuler.

Karen demanded surgery to correct her back, but the consultant explained that surgery was not "appropriate". He didn't, unfortunately, explain the reasons why, or what the risks of surgery were. He merely recommended physiotherapy.

Perhaps it was Karen's fault for demanding too much of herself, perhaps her mother's fault for placing too much value on external appearance, and not on the person inside, but, whatever the reason, from that day Karen began to hate her own body, and to believe against all the evidence that others must hate it too. She could never again accept that she was still attractive. In her mirror she saw only ugliness.

She dropped most of her friends, maintaining just a few girl friends. She gave up sport, convinced that the growing hump would be noticed, and took to wearing thick cardigans to disguise the shape of her back. In her heart she knew that to reject the whole world would surely lead to ultimate destruction, so as she shut herself away from any social life, at the same time she tried to compensate by flinging herself into academic work with an intensity which baffled her family. Her commitment was total, and her success remarkable, but no

woman or man can grow properly without the friendship of others, and the knot of grief and self-hatred still burnt in her soul. She went through her O and A level examinations like a hot knife goes through butter, and no one was surprised when she got First Class Honours in the new Computer Science course at her University. One of the new software houses snapped her up and her career began.

Her work was purely mental, writing system software in obscure computer languages. She quickly earned respect for her skill, and lost it just as fast for her attitude to her colleagues.

Her co-worker on her first project tried to warn her that her attitude was wrong. If Karen had listened, then perhaps things would have been different, but she was afraid to admit that faults could lie anywhere other than in her twisted spine.

She had met a few people who had thought it fun to look down on cripples and make entertainment with jokes about Quasimodo. Now she projected their attitude onto all the rest of the world. All men, she assumed, must find her repulsive, all women must find her an object of scorn or, even worse, of pity.

If she had asked, she would have found that most people did not even notice her deformity. Had she known it, several of the men would have gladly sought her friendship, if she had let them; but she could not believe that others might not care about her back, might not even notice it.

Karen turned on her co-worker with fury and scorn, demanding that the man be transferred away. Shaken and hurt, he agreed to the transfer to escape her wrath. The news spread round the department. To a man and to a woman all the other staff supported him and cold-shouldered her.

Utterly alone now, there was no one to whom she could have turned, even if she had wanted to. She made her work her life, and her promotion was swift, until, late in her twenties, the pain started. If she had asked, she would have found others who are in pain, and she could have learned that even pain can be lived with and overcome, but she was too proud to admit a need. Instead of seeking help she tried to pretend that the pain did not exist, denying it. She fought it for several years, her temper gradually getting shorter, until her departmental manager, concerned as much for the peace of his department as for Karen, more or less ordered her to see a physiotherapist again.

The back exercises helped, and her career grew again. Her reputation grew with it, and one day she handed in her notice and started her own research group. Her life was still her work, and she dominated her staff ruthlessly. They all feared her, but only a few of them noticed the two significant factors. She would never take on anybody with any physical defect, and yet the more attractive the young women on her staff were, the more she bullied them. In working with software she was ruthlessly honest about analysing her work looking for faults, but she could not apply the same analysis to herself. Jealousy was the next step in her destruction, but her technical brilliance protected her for the time being.

In her early forties her physiotherapist recommended her to a support group for scoliosis patients. She went a few times. She had just won a contract to research virtual reality systems, and she dominated the whole evening talking about it to the group. Most of them thought she was a bore, but one couple, a younger girl and her husband, tried to befriend her.

The girl had a similar deformity and she tried to reason with Karen, to tell her that she had been through the same heartache, and overcome it, by courage and with the help of friends who cared.

“Why shouldn’t I wear any dress I like?” she asked Karen once when inviting her to a party, “My husband and my friends want me to look good, and if they don’t care about my back, why should I care? And if anyone doesn’t like my back, well I don’t like them, so why should I care about their opinions?”

It almost struck a chord in Karen. For a moment she saw what she could have been. A woman, not merely respected for her technical skills but also valued as a friend and as a lover. For an instant she was tempted to turn to her salvation and to joy, but her pride was too great. If this was true for others, then it could not be true for her. She was already too old. She had no husband foolish enough not to care about her back. She declined the invitation to the party and instead stayed at home, alone.

A few weeks later the friendship finished with an exchange of letters.

Karen's letter said, at length, that she didn't want to be associated with a bunch of useless cripples, and she had more important things to do.

The answer was a week in coming, and came as two letters. The husband simply wrote that he had married his wife because she was the most worthwhile girl he had met. He was proud of her. The girl was more blunt. "I hold down a job by my own competence, not by charity. I've got colleagues and friends, men and women, who respect me for what I am. I've got a husband who wanted me, instead of any one of a dozen 'normal' women. Don't call me a cripple. You are the cripple for what you've done to yourself, and you'll stay a cripple until you sort yourself out."

Perhaps the wife should have been less blunt in her choice of words, but it would have made no difference now. It was another step in Karen's destruction, and she would have taken it no matter what the letters had said.

Karen continued with her work for four more years, completing her project for a total environment simulator. It won rave reviews in the trade press. Two months later she suddenly sold her company, bought an estate on a Scottish island, and retired.

On the first day of her retirement she locked herself in the cellar of her new home and unpacked the equipment she had developed over so many months. She loaded the software, and began to customise it. She was tense with anticipation, and so did not spot the small logical error that she made as she set up the internal controls she would need to use in her virtual world. It was almost the last step on her road to destruction.

She checked the couch, it was soft and well made, it would suffice. In the next room she had stored the supplies of food, crates full of tins and bottles laid ready, for when she would need to return to the real world to eat and drink every few hours.

Everything was complete. Ready at last to turn her back on a world she hated, she attached the neuro sensors to her neck, placed the contacts over her ears and eyes, and lay down on the couch. She touched the control and the world faded.

She stood now in an expensively furnished room. In front of her was the red panel she had programmed to exist, with the "WITHDRAW" button on it. Only her eyes could see it. One touch of the button would end the session and return her to the real world. Around her neck were two similar small buttons on a pendant, one with "WITHDRAW" the other with the word "REPEAT" on it. A touch of the second button would replay the last few minutes of the virtual world for her. It wasn't the red panel or the pendant that she looked for now though. She looked down at herself, at her slim upright figure. She felt her back, and found no hump. She stretched, and there was no pain. She knew she was beautiful.

The front door beckoned, and she walked out smiling onto the street. As she walked down the pavement she could feel the sun on her bare shoulders and the low-cut neckline of her dress; she could sense the men turning to watch. As she came to the end of the street she saw her reflection in a shop window, a slim, shapely, and perfectly formed girl in her early twenties. Her dream was complete; she thrilled with pleasure, and, in her last folly, doomed herself. Around her neck was the "REPEAT" button. She pressed it.

. . . The door beckoned again, and she walked out smiling onto the street. Again she felt the sun, again the men turned to watch, and again she saw herself in the shop window. Only

when her fingers reached unbidden for the "REPEAT" button did she realise her error. She tried to stop them, but it made no difference.

. . . The door beckoned again, and she tried to scream, but she could not, instead she walked out smiling onto the street . . .