

# Karen, MY SISTER WHO SHOWS UP

*Reflections on Family, Loyalty,  
and the Quiet Strength  
of Showing Up*



*Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.*

## **Trinidad Avenue**

Some people talk a great deal about love, loyalty, commitment, and family. Others simply show up.

My sister Karen is one of those people.

Our relationship is not necessarily ordinary, but in many ways, it has been extraordinary. And to really explain Karen, I suppose I need to go back in time a little bit and explain something about our history.

You see, Karen, although I call her my sister in every meaningful sense of the word, is technically my stepsister. But labels like that seem increasingly unimportant when measured against the span of a lifetime.

Our story goes all the way back to the 1960s when my family, the Hansen family, and her family, the Lovelace family, had nearly identical homes built by the same builder on Trinidad Avenue. Massive homes for that era, with only slight differences between them. Two families living side by side, long before any of us could have imagined how intertwined our lives would eventually become.

There is something almost poetic about that now when I look back on it. Two houses standing side by side on the same street. Two families with joys, struggles, wounds, celebrations, and complications that none of us yet understood. Life was quietly weaving something together long before we could recognize it.

Our families soon became close.

And as families often are, both of our families were complicated.

One of the things Karen and I share is that both of our parents went through divorce, and for both of us, those divorces were painful and destabilizing. Divorce has a way of shaking the ground beneath a child's feet, even when people do their best to soften the blow. It changes the emotional architecture of a family. Suddenly, things that once felt permanent no longer feel permanent.

Then, as life sometimes unfolds in unexpected ways, her father, Stu, and my mother, Madeline, came to know each other on a far more personal level.

Eventually, our families blended.

## **Stu**

The divorce years were difficult for me. Confusing. Painful. Unsteady at times. But Stu became a stabilizing force in my life during seasons when certain parts of my world felt far less stable.

He was not always easy to get to know initially. There was a reserve to him, a quietness. But once you got to know him, it became readily apparent that he was an extraordinary man with remarkable emotional depth, kindness, generosity, and integrity.

Stu became a rock for me.

He was the kind of man who did not waste words. In some ways, he was a man of few words, but when he spoke, he spoke from the heart. Always. He said what he meant, and he meant what he said. There was no duplicity in him. No games. No shifting sands beneath his feet.

When certain elements of my life were less stable, Stu was there. You could count on him. Every single time. He did not need grand speeches or dramatic displays to communicate love. His love was communicated through presence, through constancy, through simply being there again and again and again.

Over the years, I grew to love him deeply. And when my father eventually passed away, Stu became, in every meaningful way, my father.

## **Karen**

Karen inherited many of the same traits from him.

Like her dad, if Karen says north, it is north. If she says south, it is south. There is something profoundly grounding about people like that in a world that often feels increasingly unstable and slippery. You never have to wonder where you stand with Karen. There is no manipulation. No unnecessary drama. No performative emotional theater. What you see is what you get, and what you get is genuine.

Karen does not complain much. She understands something many people today seem to have forgotten: relationships require sacrifice, commitment, patience, and perseverance. Love is not merely a feeling. It is an act of consistency over time.

And Karen shows up.

She married Chris, and together they became true partners in every sense of the word. They were deeply compatible, remarkably stable, and profoundly devoted to one another.

Honestly, in all the years I knew them together, I suppose they must have had arguments from time to time, but I rarely, if ever, witnessed it. I am sure they occasionally annoyed one another like every couple does, but what always stood out to me was the quiet stability of their relationship. There was a calmness to the two of them together, a sense that they genuinely respected each other and genuinely enjoyed being together.

Chris was much like Karen. Steady, loving, compassionate, and dependable. The older I get, the more I realize how rare dependable people truly are. There are many people who speak eloquently about loyalty, family, compassion, and commitment. Far fewer actually live it consistently over decades of life.

Chris lived it.

And Karen lives it still.

I suppose that is really the theme here. Showing up.

## **Loss, Strength, and Presence**

Then life, as it inevitably does, brought loss.

Stu passed away, and his death was a profound loss for all of us. Even now, I still miss him deeply. Some people leave impressions on your life that time never fully erases. Their voice, their steadiness, the emotional safety they provided somehow remains with you long after they are gone.

And then, heartbreakingly, Chris passed away a few years after Stu.

Chris's death was devastating for Karen because they were extraordinarily close. They had built a life together rooted not in drama or appearances, but in loyalty, companionship, sacrifice, and genuine friendship. Watching someone lose that kind of love is heartbreaking because you realize they were not simply husband and wife. They were true companions.

But Karen did not fall apart.

She grieved deeply, of course, because deep love always produces deep grief. But she carried herself with the same quiet strength I had seen in her father all those years before. There was a resilience in her. A steadiness. An ability to endure hardship without becoming bitter or self-absorbed.

And Karen has endured hardship.

Her brother suffered paralysis, another heartbreak woven into the fabric of their family story. Life has not spared Karen pain. She has experienced loss, grief, fear, uncertainty, caregiving burdens, and the thousand emotional cuts that come with loving people deeply over the course of many decades.

Yet through all of it, Karen continued doing what she has always done.

She showed up.

## **The Gate Between the Yards**

Recently, my brother Ken, Karen, and I all agreed that it was no longer safe or wise for my mother, now 93 years old, to continue living alone in Walnut Creek, California. The years eventually catch all of us, and even the strongest among us eventually need help, support, and proximity to family.

And wouldn't you know it; Karen found a house for sale right next door to her home.

Almost unbelievably close. Close enough that the two properties could literally be connected.

And then Ken and Karen did something remarkable.

They took it upon themselves to transform that house into exactly what my mother needed. Ken, acting as the lead contractor with his remarkable competence and dedication, and Karen serving as consultant, caretaker, organizer, and encourager all at once, worked tirelessly to make the home beautiful, safe, warm, and welcoming for my mother.

They even installed a gate connecting the two yards.

There is something profoundly symbolic about that gate when I think about it now. Not separation. Connection. Nearness. Family. Accessibility. Quiet protection.

Karen now shows up for my mother constantly, and not merely for the large things, but perhaps even more importantly, for the small things. At 93 years old, questions and situations that once would have been simple can now become confusing or overwhelming for my mother. The little details of life sometimes become very big things at that age.

But nothing is too small for Karen.

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If my mother needs something fixed, Karen is there. If paperwork becomes confusing, Karen is there. If finances need organizing, Karen is there. If reassurance is needed, Karen is there.

And she does all of it with warmth, patience, tenderness, and remarkably little complaint.

That matters more than people realize.

Because what may appear small to younger people often feels enormous to someone in their nineties. Karen instinctively understands that. She does not minimize my mother's concerns or frustrations. She takes them seriously because she takes her seriously.

And yes, at this point, my mother is Karen's mother.

There is no "step" in our family.

It is interesting how in some families the word step almost functions as a subtle divider, as though it keeps people emotionally one step apart from one another. Stepmother. Stepfather. Stepsister.

But that word never really belonged in our family.

There is simply love.

Karen loves deeply.

And my mother's life is unquestionably richer, safer, warmer, and more peaceful because Karen has poured herself into caring for her in so many ways. Yes, through practical things like finances, repairs, details, appointments, organization, and endless acts of service. But even more importantly, through presence.

Through steadiness, warmth, tenderness, and simply being there over and over again without needing recognition or praise.

That is one of the rarest qualities a human being can possess.

And when I think about Karen, when I think about Stu, when I think about Chris, and even now as I watch her care for our mother with tenderness and devotion, I come back to the same simple truth:

My sister shows up.