

# Fiction Warehouse

## feature story



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Fiction Warehouse presents the short story

### charity

by stephen f. anderson



Marshall's wife Karin drove them far north of the city, where the telephone poles stood crooked and hulking airport freight jets passed low under the clouds. Karin had a map on her lap. Marshall offered to read it but she reminded him, with a huff, that he got carsick that way. Once he'd thrown up on her right thigh - on a brand-new pleated skirt.

"Say you do find these people," Marshall said. "You can't ask for it back."

"Can't I?"

Glaring at him, Karin accelerated through a yellow light. They passed corner markets with bars on the doors. Taverns had no windows. On any other day Karin, in her crisp blue pantsuit, might have been driving to the Park Village Mall, the Scandinavian Society, Tomorrow Lutheran Church, or the Children's Hospital where she volunteered leaving voice mails for local society columnists. And there he was - a short and graying fifty year-old in tight damp cycling clothes, riding in the passenger seat of an aging Mercury sedan. His silver helmet rested on his lap.

"You'd left before the sun came up," she said after a long silence. "I rolled over; you weren't there."

"I did twenty miles." He had been getting up earlier, and almost every day, aching for the freedom of his rides. He couldn't explain why. It surely wasn't the weight he was losing, since he'd only dropped five pounds in the last six months.

The streets were oily, the few sidewalks cracking and rutted. Overhead, power lines drooped. Glancing at her map Karin turned onto a street called Violin, and her lips locked tight. This happened when she was about to reprimand a waitress, a grocery checker, the teens who never wiped the window right at the car wash.

They passed one-bedroom houses with asbestos siding and chain-link fences, some with gravel driveways. The fiberglass

shell of a fishing boat here, there a 20-year-old Camaro on blocks, its engine gone. Out in a yard, a faded plastic baby buggy lay on its side. Karin shook her head.

Their own driveway was spotless - pressure-washed every couple months. Marshall had felt lucky he'd caught Karin just as she was accelerating out of their garage. Now he wasn't so sure. He could imagine the brief conversation that had sent her on this, her mission. Karin had given their old dining set to a local charity. But Karin, being Karin, had to call the charity and see who got their dining set. The charity had resisted, citing confidentiality, but Karin had demanded, and, after adding a kind joke, had got her way. Forced one last chuckle, most likely, as she wrote down the address.

They passed a block-sized park of brown grass, and the houses got better. Karin slowed before a mauve bungalow that had trimmed bushes and a brown picket fence. I could live here, Marshall thought. We could. Life would be simpler. He would travel, write a book, climb a fucking mountain. Something.

Karin pulled in the driveway. "I prefer you stay in the car," she said, not looking at him.

"Fair enough," Marshall said. He watched her march up the driveway. By the time she reached the front door her gait had changed to a confident, casual sashay. Like this she could have been a real estate agent, one of those million-dollar producers. The door opened. A woman's head appeared, then her stout body. Her hair was short, almost shaved. She was black. Marshall leaned forward for a better look. Karin was talking. In introducing herself she was sure to have stressed, as always, that her name was pronounced 'Car-in,' and not 'Care-in.'

As Karin spoke the woman fingered the collar of her blouse, her eyes peering, as if she couldn't hear - as if to say, just what is this really all about?

Drapes parted in a window at the far end of the house. Marshall watched them close and then part barely, just a sliver. He wondered if Karin had noticed it. Doubtful.

The woman led Karin inside.

As Marshall waited the sun broke through the clouds, heating up the car. He began to sweat in his riding clothes, but not like on a ride. The folds of his waist and the back of his knees grew hot and wet. His thighs and arms stuck to the leather. And he was thirsty, and hungry. He should have grabbed a banana, candy bar, something.

A door slammed - the front door. Karin charged down the driveway lugging a chair. The black woman followed tugging at the chair, crying so hard it looked as if she was laughing. Karin's face had gone hard and pale, as if she had been wronged in some profound yet senseless way. She yanked at the chair, freed it, and continued on down the driveway.

Marshall fumbled with the door handle and hurtled out of the car.

The woman shook her head at his strange and colorful uniform, stepping back. . . .

"No, wait," Marshall said, "we're not here to harm you." Karin was unlocking the trunk and shoving in the chair. "Are we, honey? Karin? What the hell you doing?"

The chair was made of a dark carved wood, like something in a cozy pub. One of four, it belonged to the kitchen dining set they had bought for their first year anniversary. For two years it stood in the kitchen. Karin polished it weekly, at first. Then, for years, it sat under boxes in a far dark corner of the basement.

Karin slammed the trunk shut and started back for the house. Marshall made his way around the hood, his hands out to calm the woman who stepped back, stammering, "Please don't, it was given to us."

"I know. And no one's going to take it back," Marshall said.

Hearing this, Karin stopped and eyed Marshall as if he was a questionable stranger just showed up - a wild-eyed transient, or some gloomy fill-in mail carrier. Good, at least she's reasoning this out, Marshall thought. Snapping out of it.

"Karin," he said. "We're not going to take the woman's chair. It's hers now."

"No." Karin pushed by the woman for the front door.

The woman retreated to the porch, tears rolling off her cheeks. Marshall took small steps toward her, his cycling shoes clicking on the concrete. "I'll sort this out. Okay? I promise."

Karin was back outside, holding another chair above her head as if she was going to heave it out into the street.

They heard a roar and a squeal.

A weathered old minivan missing half its grill screeched to a halt at the end of the driveway - blocking it. Blocking their Mercury.

A white woman with long black hair barreled out of the minivan. "What the fuck," she shouted, "I get a call at work and. . . ."

"And who are you?" Karin held up the chair like a shield.

The woman planted herself between Karin and the house, looking down on Karin. "Judith. Judith Page. Wanda's partner. Who the fuck you?"

Karin gasped. She retreated a step and staggered, as if losing her heel in a driveway crack. Judith stepped forward. Karin retreated another step, feeling for the Mercury's hood. Judith puckered her lips, and she grinned. "What's a matter, all this too much for ya honey?" she said in a lower, silkier voice. "That what this is about?"

Karin opened her mouth. Nothing came out. She shook her head.

Judith stomped into the house and slammed the door behind her.

A jet boomed overhead, killing all sound. Marshall glanced one way down the street, then the other. Neighbors stood in their front yards, watching them and smoking. Back at the house, he saw the drapes open and close again.

He clapped his hands together. "Okay, time to go. Honey. Now."

The front door flew open. Judith tramped down the driveway to Karin with fists balled. "Listen bitch, I see right through your bullshit. Wanda doesn't, but I do. That dining set was donated."

Karin backed up, feeling for the driver's side door handle. "I'm not leaving," she said, "I'm not leaving till I get it back." She dropped into the driver seat, locking the door.

"Look, both of you," Marshall began to say. . . .

"Shut up." Judith started around the hood for him. He got in on his side and locked his door. Judith stared them down from the front of the hood, her hands clamped to her waist. She spat on the hood and turned back for the house.

A minute passed, then another. Another jet passed overhead.

Karin and Marshall sat rigid, staring straight ahead. "There's only one way out of this driveway," Marshall said.

"I'm not leaving," Karin said, her voice cracking. "They .. they don't deserve it."

Ten minutes later. More clouds moved across the sun, painting shadows and light on the hood, filling the sky with gray and dark. Marshall and Karin sat in the car. Karin had gone silent. She grasped at the steering wheel with white knuckles. Fifteen minutes. Neighbors had moved nearer, trolling around on the other side of the street, talking and smoking, hands in the air. Down a few houses sat a white van with a satellite dish on top. Every couple minutes it rolled forward a few feet.

"TV van," Marshall said. "Oh boy." Then he caught the glint of blue and red lights. His heart stopped and started in again, thumping. "Please, tell me that's not what I think it is."

A police car pulled up and stopped on the other side of the minivan, where they couldn't see it. Marshall imagined cops in riot gear, he and Karin on TV in orange prison jumpsuits, expensive criminal lawyers. A headline: Arrest Blows Local Postmaster's Retirement. He put on his cycling helmet.

Karen made a snorting sound.

On the other side of the minivan, though, nothing happened. No one appeared.

Marshall put a hand on Karin's knee. She let him. This was

something. He was going to end this right here. All she had to do was give it up. He could talk to them.

"Charity isn't negotiable. Conditional," he said. "You gave it to these people, and they deserve it. . . ."

"No," she said. "No."

He removed his hand. He looked away, sighing. He was nearing the truth of it all, and it squeezed his chest tight. He got the same tightness when anyone asked Karin if they had children. Karin always gave a hearty chuckle. "Oh, no. Oh, please. We have our little terrier," she would say. Never looking to him. "Seriously, who has time? I have so much going on, and we travel so much." Even though their only trip in the last three years was a weekend at the beach. He put his hand back, on top of her fingers. "This isn't about this Judith and the other woman being partners, is it? Not really. Not down deep."

Karin's eyes had closed. Her hand was neither cold nor hot. It was a wax, unmoving.

They heard a car door open, shut. He couldn't see it. He strained to look, the helmet knocking at the headliner.

Karin bolted out the car and up the driveway and into the house.

A cop rushed up the driveway. Marshall got out and followed around the hood.

The cop turned and straight-armed him, pinning the back of his knees to the bumper.

"Ow."

"Sir," said the cop, "I'm going to have to ask you to wait out here."

"Okay, yes, sir, but - you don't understand."

The cop's features were lean and spartan, like those of the young cyclists who regularly passed Marshall climbing Iron Mountain Road. The cop gave Marshall a once-over, which apparently replaced any need for a frisking. He said:

"Are you the woman's wife? - I mean husband."

"Yes." Marshall waved a hi.

"You'll still have to stay out here."

"But, I could help."

The cop considered this a moment. His mouth shifted one way. Then he spun Marshall around and planted his palms to the hood. Another police car showed. A second cop came up the driveway, the first cop said, "Stay here, sir," and together the two cops approached the front door taking long, careful strides. Marshall watched them over his shoulder. They knocked. The door opened. They went in.

The TV van had moved up two houses. A man in a fleece

vest was lifting a camera to his shoulder. Marshall didn't want to face the street but his hands were glued to the hood, since the cop had put them there, and so he stared at the hood, panting, trying not to panic. His heart seemed to swell and rise up his throat. The air was thick and then thin, the street scenes spun around him, he could hear a child two houses down saying "look at the funny man, look at the funny man" and then he heard nothing and his head was heavy and it rushed and whirled and he couldn't breathe.

He looked up. The world seemed somehow ... reset. A kid who had been circling on his bicycle was now far down the street. The cameraman was leaning against the minivan, waiting. Marshall had blacked out, he must have. Oddly, though, he could breathe deep and easy now. He felt light, and strong, like all those young cyclists put together. His hands were not glued after all, he found. He detached them from the hood. He removed his helmet, tossed it in the grass and strode up to the front door.

He turned the door handle and walked in.

It was dark. His eyes adjusted. In the living room he passed Judith and Wanda. Wanda sat on a sofa hugging herself, as if shivering. Judith stood next to Wanda, dwarfing her. Judith shook her head at him.

He kept going. He found the kitchen. The cops started for him, but then let him come.

Light filled the room, from the kitchen nook's three windows. His and Karin's anniversary dining set occupied the nook, two chairs left. Karin sat in one chair, her back to the windows and her face dark. She slumped and stared into the table, as if able to see her reflection in it.

The second cop left for the living room. The first cop placed both hands on his belt and said to Karin: "Ma'am, you will be arrested and tried for theft, do you understand? These two nice women are giving you a break. All you have to do, is leave it." He was repeating this for Marshall's benefit.

Karin said nothing.

"Make no mistake, ma'am - you will be arrested."

Nothing. Marshall made eye contact with the cop. The cop nodded - go ahead. Marshall sat, at the opposite end of the table. He could feel the windows' warmth; his face had to be glowing in the light, and this lent him even more new power. He sat up straight. He cleared his throat.

"I should have done something about this a long time ago, but I didn't want to lose you. We both pretended it wasn't there. That we were fine with it." The words flowed out, effortlessly, as if someone were speaking them and he only moved his mouth. He said: "If you don't let this go, I will leave you. Right here and now. Today."

Karin looked up, her eyes still hard.

Marshall banged on the table. The cop straightened; the

second one rushed back in. "I'll give you five minutes," Marshall added, and he stood again.

Minutes passed. The second cop went in and out, talking into his shoulder microphone. Karin stared into the table.

"Officer, do what you gotta do," Marshall said to the first cop.

Karin stared on. One tear dropped to the dark wood, glistening.

They heard a voice, faint but growing louder. A small voice. It came from that corner of the house where the drapes had parted.

The cop looked into the living room and turned back smiling. The small voice said, "I just want to see them, mommy." A small, dark-haired head appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"It's okay, Max, go on," Judith said from the living room.

Young Max waddled in, scratching at his cartoon pajamas. He planted his feet far apart and looked around, taking it all in.

Karin's eyebrows raised. She wiped at her face.

"Well, hi," Max said to her. He turned to Marshall. "Hi." He turned to the cop. "Hi."

"Hi," Marshall and the cop said.

Judith and Wanda had moved to the kitchen doorway. "This is Max," Judith said. "He likes sports, but he also likes hobbies. He really likes to paint things. Don't you, Max?"

"I really like to paint," Max said. He turned back to Karin. He stood at the table and felt its edge. "What if we painted this?" he said. "Me and you. We could make it a new color." He added a smile.

Karin's mouth opened. She smiled.

Max's face straightened. "Don't you worry. I'd let you paint too. We could do it together. Just like this ..." He ran an invisible brush across the table, and he hummed.

"Yeah, that would probably would help," Marshall said. "Wouldn't it?" he said to Karin, looking to her. And she nodded, yes, it just might.

## author bio

Stephen F. Anderson has written everything from radio ads to breaking news for the *Associated Press*, but his true love is writing fiction and lots of it. His stories appear in *Exquisite Corpse*, *3AM Magazine*, the *12-Gauge Review*, and *Elimae*.

Other credits include Honorable Mention in the *Writer's Digest* Writing Competition. He was also a Fulbright Fellow in Munich, Germany, and has a master's in history. He lives in Portland, Ore., where he's working on a new novel.

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