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Some Kind of Manifesto

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Author Bio

Kriscinda Meadows is a sophomore English major with a writing minor. Recent accomplishments include a paper given at Oxford on the zombie genre audience, and the acceptance of a short story for publication in a horror anthology. She is currently working on a paper, to be read in Boston this year, regarding HP Lovecraft's "Reanimator" stories and the gothic aesthetic.

Some Kind of Manifesto

I

The door swung inward and a small, young woman with cropped brown hair appeared, wearing a sweater and skirt set that should have belonged to a middle aged woman in the 1950's. She smiled and suddenly the nylon-rayon blend suited her.

"You must be Karen," she said as she stepped aside, motioning for Karen to enter; she did so cautiously. The foyer was cozy and dimly lit, with a large desk made of dark wood to the right, a fringed standing lamp, and a wing-backed chair. Everything had a doily, which made the space seem from another century. "Wendy told us you'd be stopping in this evening."

"She did?" Karen asked. "Is she here yet?"

"I'm afraid she called about ten minutes ago. She said something's come up and she won't be able to make it." Karen's initial inclination was to politely excuse herself and make her way back out of the foyer. "Oh, but she stressed that she hoped you'd stay and make yourself comfortable. Is this your first time?"

Karen smiled, knowing her window of opportunity had just closed in any sense that manners dictated. "Yes, I've never been to one of these before."

"Well then, just relax. My name is Marla, I'll be conducting events this evening. If you'd like, you can sign our registry—no reason, really. We just like to know who we're with." Marla motioned to an open book on the desk and as Karen stepped towards it she heard the rattling of beads and Marla was gone into the next room, from which came the sound of subdued voices.

Karen took a few more seconds to absorb her surroundings. The wallpaper was reproduced from what was probably a popular original Victorian print—a deep, scarlet red damask. Over it were hanging portraits, all of which looked too old to hold anyone still living. At the sight of one, she caught her breath and her hands flew involuntarily to her stomach—it felt as if a firecracker had gone off inside. The portrait was of a young, serious man, dressed in a smart suit of the very late nineteenth century. He sat somewhat sideways, legs crossed in a decorative wood-framed chair, with a scrolled design and what looked like an intricately embroidered and possibly beaded seat. He was leaning back, with one elbow propped onto the back of the chair, holding a pair of wire-rimmed glasses, and the other rested, book in hand, on his lap. It was his face, with his eyes that looked intently off into some distance. It wasn't dead-on, but it was so close. Karen had just left that face at the hospital.

Jude, Karen's fiancé, lay in a coma and had been in this state for the past eight months. There had been an accident, just like any one of many thousands that occur on the roads every year. Karen, at first, imagined they were the only ones this had happened to, until she joined a support group for people who had lost loved ones, or were in the same comatose predicament that she and Jude were in. The group helped at first. It put things into a

certain, more realistic perspective than she had had up to that point. But now the group was stagnant to her—or, as she more precisely realized, Jude was stagnant and the group was no longer as effective as it had been. The doctors couldn't decisively conclude if the images showing up in the brain scans were signs of real activity, or merely ghosts of what once was. He relied on tubes and machines to eat and breathe, and the face she had always thought was so handsome wasted and became sunken and drawn. She longed to hear him speak to her. That's why she was here.

She leaned forward and took up the pen from its holder. It was a ball point pen, but with a feather plume attached to the end, to give it the look of antiquity. After a few scratches to the side of the page to get the ink going, she scribbled her name, and wondered how on earth Wendy had talked her into coming here. She looked at the still slightly swinging beaded doorway that separated her from a roomful of murmuring strangers, inhaled once, exhaled forcefully, and stepped through.

II

Karen could see that dimness was the theme of the house, as no bulbs seemed to be above twenty-five watts. There was a smallish dining room table in the middle of the room, though its chairs were missing. The table itself was covered in a finely crocheted spread, possibly made by the same hands that manically produced the foyer doilies. There were six people in the room, each of whom held either a small stemmed glass of wine, or a tumbler of brandy. There was a round man in a top hat and tails, with a white handlebar mustache, and a tall, slender woman in a black twenties flapper dress. They seemed to be together, but not in a way that indicated they were intimate.

There were two women talking quietly with one another—one had red plastic rimmed glasses and tightly permed orange-red hair with a pencil sticking out of the back. That and the fact that she wore a somewhat wrinkled turquoise pantsuit made Karen think she had come here straight from a 1980's office job. Karen jokingly warned herself to be careful here—she might get lost in another decade, another time. The woman Mrs. Eighties spoke to looked as if she might crumple inside herself at any moment—homely with mousy brown hair, she had librarian written all over her.

Karen checked herself at this thought, and smiled. She herself was a librarian and had always prided herself on not falling into the old clichéd description. Karen had long, dark hair that fell below her waist, and was New York fashionable in the latest sense. In this weather, it was autumn colors, mock turtleneck with jacket, and knee-high boots with sensible heels that met the hem of a heavy but comfortable tweed skirt. She felt keenly out of place here.

In the middle of the table were a few crystal cut decanters—probably just glass, Karen thought, thinking of the pen in the foyer—and a man was helping himself to another drink. His hair was somewhat long, but combed back with the help of some kind of product. He wore a short sleeved button up shirt with a black back and a red front—there were devils embroidered on

the shoulders, the way cowboys wore images of cacti.

Karen was staring at him and making a mental note to check later to see if he was indeed wearing cowboy boots, when he looked up, directly at her. Her face went hot with embarrassment, and she looked away, focusing instead on some wall-hangings. Her eyes fell on one in particular—Charles Joseph Minard's 1861 statistical map of Napoleon's Russian campaign of 1812. She forgot about the man in the devil shirt completely and became lost in a memory.

The summer following the completion of Jude's graduate studies, he had attended a conference in Moscow. He'd just finished completing two masters degrees in Sociology and Economics, and had convinced Karen that the former Soviet Union would be a great place for a short vacation.

They walked from the Budapesht where they were staying on ulitsa Petrovka, past the Bolshoy Theatre and to the Red Square.

"That must be it," Jude offered, pointing ahead to a long line of people that stretched from the Historical Museum down to what looked to Karen like a McDonald's. They only had a few days in the city, so they tried to fit in everything they could—today was the only day they could visit the Lenin Mausoleum. It was open only a few times a week, for only a couple of hours at a time. Jude asked two nuns in the line if it was indeed the right line, and it was. They made their way to the end, passing many people, just like them—tourists. But something caught Jude's eye.

"Is that Lenin over there?" he asked, pointing towards an equestrian statue of Georgy Zhukov.

"Funny," Karen replied, trying to discern the end of the line and a group of Japanese buying military style caps bedaubed in old Communist buttons and badges.

"No really," he chuckled, "look." And she did. Standing beneath Zhukov atop his striding stallion was Lenin, wearing his trademark revolutionary's cap, black jacket and red ribbon, what was sure to be a worker's newspaper, or some kind of manifesto peeking out from his jacket pocket. He looked to be drinking a can of Sprite.

"He looks pretty spry for a dead man," Karen laughed, as Jude's eyes widened as he frantically tapped her arm, pointing again towards Lenin. Vladimir was now being joined by Stalin, in military regalia.

"Stalin was taller than that, wasn't he?" Jude asked, sniggering. "We have to go over there."

"What? Why? No," Karen sputtered, still laughing.

"We have to—they're impersonators," he pleaded. "We have to get our pictures taken with them. Hey, there's Marx!"

"Where's Engels?" she asked.

"That's a good question," he replied, looking around. "Oh, Kare, can we?"

"We'll lose our place in line," she answered, trying to stop smiling.

"It'll still be here. It'll only take a minute," he pleaded, bending at the knees for emphasis. Karen deliberately drew this out, knowing all the while that they would go over and get some snaps. Of course they would. She loved Jude all of the time, every day—but there were certain moments

that presented themselves only now and then that explicitly reminded Karen exactly how much she loved him. His face became boyish—as if all he wanted in the world was a piece of candy. In all the many hours of scholarly seriousness, these moments were among her favorite and she cherished them.

"Karen, this is how it is," he said to her very seriously, gently pulling at the lapels of her jacket. "If you don't say yes, I'll have to call you the bourgeoisie for the rest of the day, and I will have to play the part of the oppressed proletariat. You don't want to be bourgeois, do you?" He stuck out his bottom lip slightly.

"You're impossible," Karen rolled her eyes and Jude kissed her.

"Viva la revolution!" he cried as he grabbed her hand and they headed towards the dead communists.

* * * * *

"Everyone," Marla announced as she clinked the side of her wine glass with her fingernail, waking Karen from her reverie. The room went silent and all eyes were on Marla as she motioned towards Karen. She looked around, telling herself to stop looking at the walls for fear of what she might find next.

"Wendy can't be with us this evening, but her friend Karen is joining us, for the first time." Faces smiled and heads nodded towards her as the clock struck—it was nine o'clock. "It's time!" Marla beamed. Glasses were set aside and they all began filing out of the room, and deeper into the house.

III

Karen followed them through yet another beaded doorway, into a room that was just big enough to hold the seven of them. She now saw where the chairs from the dining room had gone—they were in here, supplementing a number of other chairs, which surrounded a large, low round table. A tall pewter candelabra stood in the center, and, in keeping with the dim motif, held only three candles—though there were spaces for eight—and provided the only light. Everyone seemed to have a particular place, so Karen waited until they were all seated before finding herself between Mousy on the left and the Cowboy on the right.

"Do I know you?" Cowboy said before she'd gotten herself fully into her seat. He still held his tumbler, almost empty already. Karen saw letters tattooed on the fingers that wrapped around the glass. In the darkness she couldn't tell what they spelled out, but she assumed it was something like "Hate," or "Kill."

"No, I don't think so," Karen answered without looking at him and scooting her chair away from him and towards Mousy as discreetly as possible. Cowboy watched her, snorted to himself, and then emptied his glass, set it on the floor, and lightly kicked it under the table.

"Ignore him," Mousy leaned over and whispered to Karen. "He's been here a few months, but he's not fitting in so well." She smiled.

"I see," Karen replied.

"So, you're a friend of Wendy's?"

Karen nodded in response, looking around the room and allowing her eyes to adjust. There were more portraits, but other than the table and chairs, there was nothing else. In addition to the candelabra, there were a few objects that she strained to make out, and she leaned forward. Nearest to Marla was a small brass bell, a sturdy cardboard cone with a handle—like an old-style megaphone—and a sheet of paper and a thick pencil.

"Marla's a physical medium," Mousy assisted.

"I see," Karen repeated and leaned back.

"Wendy's nice," said Mousy, smiling feebly. Karen returned the smile as best she could as she thought of all the ways she would upbraid Wendy for ditching her with these people. This was Wendy's idea. Wendy, being heavily into the paranormal, fit into this group a little more than Karen. She worked part-time at the library as an assistant, which was how they met, and tended bar at a club in the city. When she wasn't working, she was going off on mystical expeditions, and attending séances here. Her idea—though she admitted it was a complete shot in the dark and hadn't really been tried before, that she knew of—was to see if Jude was indeed gone. If he was, he could possibly reveal himself in a séance setting. Karen, a born skeptic, pishawed the idea at first. She appreciated Wendy's endeavor to help but really didn't put much stock into that kind of thing. But as the months wore on, she became more desperate, and last week decided that, yes, she would give it a shot. What could she possibly lose, besides Jude and a little pride? Karen shuddered.

"Silence," Marla demanded dramatically, and all parties brought their hands up to the surface of the table and laid them flat. There was some adjustment as tips of little fingers scouted out others, forming an unbroken chain around the table. Karen quickly joined in imitation. Suddenly, Marla blurted so loudly that Karen jumped.

"I am asking all of my Friends in the World of Spirit to come forward and bless this sitting, bless this table, bless all those in this realm and all those who inhabit the other, who might come to us, so that there is a clear and open channel."

Karen was almost overcome with laughter, but she silently pushed it back down from where it came. She'd read a book years ago—*Hell House* by Richard Matheson—and there was a medium in it who had named her "Spirit Guide" Red Cloud, or maybe White Cloud. Running Bear, Walking Sky, something-or-another. She wondered what the name of Marla's spirit guide was. She guessed it was June Cleaver, and stifled a snicker. Marla prayed quickly and quietly under her breath for several minutes, and then slumped abruptly into her chair.

"There she goes," a female voice whispered excitedly.

Marla's breathing became erratic, rough, and then steady and deep. Moans issued from her, seemingly originating in the pit of her stomach, softly and then louder and louder. It sounded as if Marla needed a moment alone with herself; it sounded so intimate and went on for so long that Karen began to feel uncomfortable. Finally, one last sigh emerged and transformed itself into a rasp, then a gurgle, then a choke, and then Marla recovered to stable breathing.

"Charlie?" a voice came from Marla's direction, and though it didn't

sound like Marla, it was only the usual unsteady, jerky voice everyone used to imitate the elderly. Karen wasn't impressed, until a voice to her right answered. "Yes," Cowboy—who was clearly Charlie—said.

"Charlie boy," the voice from Marla said. "You're a good boy, Charlie."

"Who is this?" A voice in the direction of the man with the handlebar mustache asked.

"It's my grandfather," Charlie answered.

"...such a good..." The voice faded.

"Is there...anything...you need to tell me, Pappap?" Charlie asked, his voice low, serious. Karen became absorbed in the story that unfolded before her—she remembered why she was here. The candles flickered, throwing shadow and light on the astonished faces around the table, transforming them with each flutter into abstract and grotesque clowns. Karen wondered why they were all here. What were their stories and were they as tragic as her own? A sadness crept into Karen's heart, as she pictured Jude's once angelic face—blue eyes beneath a scholarly mess of blonde curls. She mourned him; she mourned them.

"We're alright, Nanna and me, we're just fine. You...need to...move on...Charlie," urged the voice coming from Marla. Just then, there was a sliding sound, something coming across the table. Karen's eyes grew wide, as she made out the bell approaching her. As an inappropriate knee-jerk reaction, she almost burst out laughing until a candle in the candelabra went out, leaving just two and a little more darkness. Karen squinted, and then suddenly gasped out loud as the bell scooted closer.

"You and Nanna are okay," Charlie said. The bell seemed to be rising, just a few inches from the table, and soon a slight tinkling sound could be heard just below the huffing astonishment of the guests.

"Yes, yes, Charlie...good boy...good..."

"Alright then," Charlie murmured, and his left hand grasped Karen's right one and squeezed it. All Karen could hear was the bell chiming in her ears which, in her head, transformed itself into the sound of a beeping heart monitor, and then quite suddenly, it stopped. Marla slumped into her chair again and the bell hit the table, rolling from side to side in a crescent.

"I need another drink," Charlie announced. "Join me?" he asked Karen, who had just enough time to say "huh?" before he stood up and pulled her from her seat and out of the room.

"You can't just break the circle like that!" a voice from the séance room yelled after them. "Marla, are you okay?" it asked, lower now. In the dining room, Charlie filled two tumblers from the decanter of brandy and handed one to Karen.

"Let's go outside, I need a smoke," he said. Karen looked back at the room, speechless. "Don't worry about them, they'll get right back into it, they always do." She had no idea what had just happened.

IV

They walked through the foyer and out onto the front stoop, into the

crisp fall air, closing the door behind them. The attractive brick house was of the old Gothic revival, with a roof that pitched steeply and window casements that came to a point, mimicking cathedrals of Europe. There was a smattering of houses on this block of the same era, but none quite matched the majesty of this one.

The porch light was on and now Karen could read the letters etched across Charlie's fingers: PEG, and a small black heart on the pinky.

"What the hell was that?" Karen asked, gesturing inside.

"Nothing." Charlie leveled her with a matter-of-fact look. "Marla's a fraud. They're all frauds." He sighed and brought his hand down his face, as if wiping away the anger. "I have seen you before," he said. Karen looked quizzically at him, so he continued. "St. Luke's." Charlie lit a cigarette, the smoke rising nebulously into the night air. Karen's heart fluttered and she felt as though she'd been caught lying.

"That's where they took Peg after the aneurysm. She didn't last long, but I'm sure I saw you—a number of times—while she was there." He looked at her and added, "I'm sorry."

"For what?" she asked for no real reason. "He's still alive." Charlie looked at his drink.

"Well, that's a good thing then." He took a swallow. "Pappap's not dead either. And Marla is a fraud." He smiled up at her. Karen sighed as her body relaxed to the point of almost dropping her glass. She looked at it and threw back the last of its contents; the soothing warmth spread down her throat and swirled around her stomach, finally settling. Karen felt her cheeks glowing and for the first time that evening, she felt comfort. This wasn't where she expected to find it. She didn't really think she expected it at all.

"If she's a fake, why do you keep coming here?" she asked. Charlie contemplated the name etched across his knuckles.

"Houdini was a skeptic," he answered. "Do you know anything about Houdini?" Karen shook her head no. "He didn't buy any of it, and then his mother died."

"And then he was a believer?"

"No," Charlie went on. "Then he dedicated his life to debunking mediums and spiritualists. I look at it that way. Marla is like an ambulance chasing lawyer. She's an opportunist of the worst kind—she makes her living off of people who are no longer living. She profits from grief."

"And you're Houdini. Is that what you're doing?" Karen asked. Charlie sighed and wiped his face again, this time trying to rid himself of confusion.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he said and smiled up at Karen.

"Want to grab some coffee?"

* * * * *

They were initially going to go to a diner Charlie knew of, but the thought of all the noise and smoke didn't strike Karen as a particularly ideal place to talk, so they went to a small café that she knew of that also functioned as a used bookstore.

Karen led the way into the cozy shop, walking past the small table

where she and Jude used to sit, choosing instead the next table over. Everything here seemed some shade of brown, but not in any depressing sense. The shelves, the walls, tables and chairs, the spines of books, the mugs and the coffee itself—all deep tree-bark browns, lustrous golds, and stunning russets that always made Karen feel as if she was relaxing in a skillfully painted portrayal of a New England autumn. Charlie offered to get the drinks, and Karen found herself in a moment of silence. She toyed with her engagement ring, turning the modest diamond towards the palm of her hand, her thumb rocking back and forth on it as the band slid over her skin. Involuntarily, she ducked back into what she mistook as the safety of her thoughts—her recollections of Jude.

After they had rejoined the line for Lenin's tomb, it moved quickly while they amused themselves viewing the pictures they just took. The one in which Jude and Marx were doing a two-step got the biggest laughs. When they got to the gate that separated the line from the Square, they checked Karen's bag and camera, went through the scanner, and walked off towards the mausoleum, over gray cobbles. It seemed very far—a small cubed pyramid cut from red granite and black labradorite, dwarfed by the vastness of the blank, stone space that stretched over 500 yards from the museum to St. Basil's Cathedral.

As they walked, Karen thought of the scenes she remembered from television, during a time when this space was filled with parading soldiers and orating dictators. They reached the tomb and, as they followed the others inside, all around them became hushed. Imposing uniformed soldiers seemed to be everywhere, and one stopped a man in front, requesting that he remove his hat, before going forward. Karen was somehow surprised at the solemnity, for a man who had died over eighty years ago in a country that was now supposed to have forsaken communism.

The tomb was quite dark, and the line walked slowly up a short flight of stairs, to the left of which was Lenin. He lay stiff and waxen under dramatic but yellow lighting, arms thrust downwards, hands resting on his pelvis—one curled into a loose fist. As they crossed over the foot of the casket, Karen stared, transfixed. She was quietly overwhelmed with the weighty figure of this man, but could only think of how precisely trimmed his mustache and beard were—he didn't look real. She and Jude moved down the other side—not quite wanting to leave just yet, but having to—as the line was kept moving, slowly but surely, by somber guards and curators. The next thing they knew, they were out in the bright spring sunlight again, squinting.

They walked silently to the left of the building and around to the back, where, before the foot of the Kremlin wall lay buried other famous communists—Stalin, Brezhnev, Andropov. Each grave was capped with a length of marble, ranging from light gray to an unforgiving black, and from each slab rose the dead man as a block of the same stone, his image carved—his face welcoming whoever it was that apparently laid fresh red carnations on the sites every day. Karen imagined it was a lady from the old city, herself now aged as well, clothed in black with her tiny, sad face lost beneath a thick head scarf.

"So, what did you think?" Jude interrupted her romantic daydream. The fact was that she didn't know what to think—the whole scene left her ambivalent.

"There's dignity there, right?" She wanted to say that there was, but

wasn't sure, so she asked rather than stated. "I mean, I went in expecting a sideshow, you know? With his body preserved like that." Jude nodded as they strolled past Soviet history, names and faces in stone, an era. "But it wasn't. Well, it was, but it wasn't."

"I think it was a façade," Jude offered. But Karen didn't quite understand, and he saw this. "The dignity." There was silence again as they both pondered the issue. Karen searched for some kind of bench, something to sit down on and contemplate, because once they were out of the necropolis, the time for this was over. There was nothing so she slowed her pace even more.

"I guess it seems fitting," she finally said. Again, there was a thoughtful pause.

"He didn't want this though," Jude said. "Neither did his wife. The people wanted it. To preserve him for future generations. I suppose they weren't expecting Stalin, and they weren't expecting the communist state to ever end. But it did, and what does he represent now?" Karen thought about it and nodded. Lenin was a ghost. His bones were real, but they may as well have been ash. The people just wanted to keep them from blowing away, that's all.

* * * * *

At the sound of ceramic mugs clanking together Karen came to—tears streaming unnoticed down her face and the diamond of her ring pressed painfully into her thumb. For just a moment, she was overcome with the urge to run from the café to the hospital. She would cry and scream as she yanked cords from the walls and tubes from Jude's lifeless body. It wouldn't feel a thing; it is only ashes wrapped in wax.

Karen quickly composed herself, wiping her face with her sleeve and paying special attention around her eyes where she knew the mascara would be smudged. Charlie was approaching with two mugs—one latte and a house coffee, black. Karen was smiling, but her eyes were red-rimmed and her lashes stuck together, so he smiled back and set the latte down in front of her.

"I don't think I'll go back to that place," she said between cooling blows across the surface of her drink, moving the foam aside. She considered going to Jude's mother the next day. She might try to talk to her. They could sign the proper papers, and she could hold his hand and listen for the monitor until the incessant beeping became a long, drawn out siren, and the nurse would make it stop. She considered these things.

"Where, to Marla's?" Charlie asked, stirring his coffee although he'd put nothing in it. "Me neither." Karen nodded and blew the foam to the side again, eyes narrowed to the caramel ripples as she did.