

THE DEATH OF KARENSILKWOOD

The difference between true story and a fictional one is this: a fictional story has an ending, but a true story does not. When we have read the last page of a fictional story, we know everything: there is nothing more to discover. In a true story, there is always more to find out, because we can never know it all.

People often say that real life is stranger than fiction. It can certainly be just as frightening - and sometimes much more worrying.

This is a true story about the death of Karen Silkwood. Her death is a mystery. Was it an accident? It's the old, old question: 'Did she fall, or was she pushed?' We don't know. But somebody does. Somebody out there, in the real world, knows if her death was an accident, or if it was not. Somebody knows - somebody who is alive and well and living an ordinary life, somewhere in America, and who remembers what *really* happened . . .



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The Death of Karen Silkwood

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The Death of Karen Silkwood



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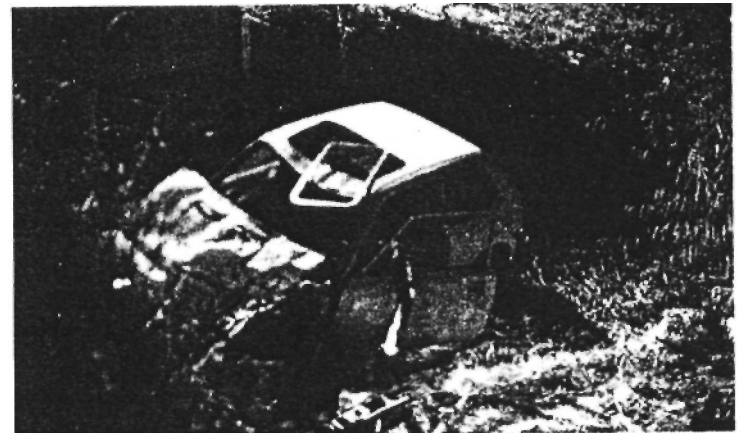
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The accident

It was dark. Nobody saw the accident. The small white car was found on its side by the bridge. A river ran underneath the road there, and the car was lying next to the bridge wall, below the road. Inside the car was a dead woman. Her name was Karen Silkwood and she was twenty-eight years old. It was November 13th, 1974.

How did the car come off the road? Why was it on the wrong side of the road? Why was it so far from the road? There was nothing wrong with the car, Karen Silkwood was a good driver. Everybody knew that.



How did the car come off the road?

The new job

The police thought that there was an easy answer to these questions. Karen was tired after a long day, so she fell asleep while she was driving. It could happen to anyone very easily. They took the car to a garage and they took Karen's body to a hospital.

But some people were not happy about the accident, first of all, her boyfriend, Drew Stephens. Also a newspaper journalist from the *New York Times* and a Union official from Washington. These three men were waiting for Karen on the night of the accident. She was bringing them some papers and some photographs in a big brown envelope. The papers were very important. The men were waiting for Karen in a hotel room a few miles from the accident. But she never arrived. When they heard about the accident, the men looked for the brown envelope at once. They looked for it inside the white car. They looked for it at the hospital and at the police station. The next morning they looked all around the wall and in the river, but they never found it. Nobody ever found that brown envelope.

The story of Karen and her brown envelope began in 1972 when she took a new job at a nuclear factory in Oklahoma. Before that, she worked as a secretary, but in 1972 she was really tired of a secretary's life. She looked in the newspaper and saw that there was a job at the nuclear factory. The pay was much better than a secretary's pay, and the work was more interesting. She went to see Mr Bailey, the manager of the factory, and she was surprised and happy when he gave her the job immediately. He asked Karen to start work the next day.

On her first day at the factory Karen learnt a lot, Mr Bailey told her that she had to wear a special white coat, some special shoes and a white hat.

'These clothes protect you from radioactive dust,' he said. 'There isn't really any danger, of course. Everything is safe here. We check everything all the time.'

'I see,' said Karen.

'You need an identity card to get into the factory every morning. Just give me a photograph of you and I'll give you a card. A pretty picture of a pretty girl.'

He smiled. Karen didn't like that smile.

'He thinks I'm stupid' she thought. 'Why do men always think that pretty girls are stupid?'

He was still speaking.

'Now I'll call Mrs Phillips. She'll take you round the factory and show you your laboratory. The manager there will explain the job to you. Don't worry - it's very easy.'

He smiled his thin smile again.

The door opened and Mrs Phillips came in. She was about forty years old and a little fat. She looked afraid.

'You wanted me, Mr Bailey?'

"Yes, Susan. This is Karen Silkwood. She's going to work with you in your laboratory. Could you take her round the factory and tell her about the work?"

'Oh, I see. Of course, Mr Bailey. Please follow me, Miss Silkwood.'

When the office door closed, Mrs Phillips smiled at Karen, and said,

'That was lucky! Usually if he calls me, he wants to shout at me about something. Please call me Susan. Can I call you Karen?'

'Of course,' said Karen.

They walked down a long corridor with heavy doors on both sides, Susan opened one of the doors.

'This is our laboratory.'

Karen saw six or seven people in the room. They were all wearing white gloves and their hands were inside a big

glass box. There were holes in the side of the box - just big enough for hands. Everyone looked at Karen.

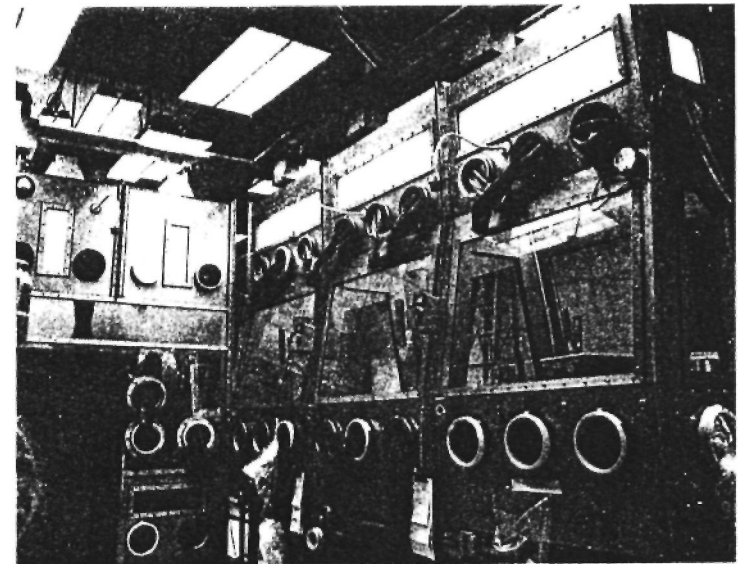
'What's in the box?' Karen asked Susan.

Everyone laughed.

'Not chocolate,' said one worker.

'Or beer,' said another,

'Don't listen to them,' said Susan. 'It's fuel rods and uranium. We put uranium into the fuel rods. That's why you must always wear your gloves. And when you leave the laboratory, always remember to take off your gloves and check your hands in front of the scanner.'



There were holes in the side - just big enough for hands.

Karen and Drew

She showed Karen the scanner, which was near the door.

'It there's any radioactive dust on your hands, the scanner knows at once. An alarm rings all over the factory.'

'And when the alarm rings, the parry begins,' said one man.

'Parry?' Karen asked.

'You can take off all your clothes and have a swim . . . with lots of water.'

'He means they wash you in a shower,' said Susan. 'It doesn't happen very often.'

Karen went home happy at the end of the day. She didn't think that the work was difficult. And the money was good . . . very good.

At first Karen liked her new job. She was an ordinary, small-town girl who liked ordinary things: a comfortable home, a glass of beer, an evening with good friends. Soon she had some new friends from the factory.

She also liked Drew. He worked in another part of the factory, but everyone used the same coffee bar. She met him a few days after she started the job. In the coffee bar she and Susan were laughing together at a story in the newspaper. Then Karen suddenly heard a voice behind her.

'Here's a new face'

She turned round quickly. A tall man was standing just behind her chair with a coffee in his hand.

'Be careful with that coffee, will you?' said Karen. 'You're going to drop some on me in a moment.'

'It's too good to be true. Nobody as beautiful as you ever works in this factory. What about having a pizza with me tonight after work?'

Karen wasn't sure what to say. He looked nice, but she didn't know anything about him.

Susan understood what Karen was thinking.

'Don't worry, dear. It's only Drew. He's big and he doesn't talk much, but he's not dangerous.'

Drew laughed.

'Thanks, Susan. I'll buy you a coffee every day this week for that.'

He turned to Karen.

'Can I buy you a pizza or not? What do you say?'

Karen smiled,

'I never miss a free meal.'

When Karen arrived at the restaurant that evening, Drew was already there. He stood up when she came in and gave her a big friendly smile. Karen thought of Mr Bailey's smile. How could two smiles be so different?

Karen found that it was very easy to talk to Drew. He listened to what she said and they laughed at the same things. It was like talking to her favourite brother. In the next few weeks they spent a lot of time together. Everyone at the factory saw how happy they were. Life was going well for Karen.



In the next few weeks Karen and Drew spent a lot of time together.

The shower

But in the summer of 1974 everything began to change. One evening Karen and Susan were leaving the laboratory. First Karen checked her hands in front of the scanner, and then a minute later Susan checked her hands. Suddenly there was a terrible noise. It was like a high scream. Everybody could hear it all over the factory. Susan didn't move. She just looked at her hands. Then the door of the laboratory flew open. Two men in white coats ran in and took Susan by the arms. Before Karen could do anything, they pulled Susan through the door. The terrible noise of the alarm was still going. Karen shouted:

'Where are you taking her?'

Nobody could hear. Nobody answered. Suddenly the noise stopped. Karen turned to the other workers.

'Where will she be?'

'In the shower room.'

Karen ran out of the laboratory and along the corridor to the shower room.

Inside the room Susan was screaming. Karen pushed open the door.

Susan had no clothes on, and the two men were showering her from head to foot - in her eyes, inside her