

Knifepoint  
By Jeff James

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## Characters:

John, 30s

Karen, 30s

Kidnapper

*We are in a room empty of any distinguishing characteristics other than a film of filth that seems to permeate the air. On one wall, very high up, is a very small, very grimy window covered with bars; the window is so dirty that it is hard to tell what sort of light may or may not be coming through it. There is one very formidable door to the room - with bars in its window - currently closed. There is no other way out. Two rickety-looking wooden chairs sit dead center, backs to each other but separated by a few feet. Far downstage is a metal lock-box, easily seen by the audience but not in the immediate sightline of the characters. Most of the illumination in the room comes from a bare light-bulb hanging from the ceiling.*

*After a moment the lock on the door jiggles and it swings open. The KIDNAPPER, who is wearing all black, including a black neutral mask, leads in KAREN, who is blindfolded and bound by the hands. She does not struggle. He makes her sit down in one chair and he quickly ties her to it. He then leaves through the door and leads in JOHN, also blindfolded and bound and not struggling. He ties*

*JOHN to the other chair, shuts the door and audibly locks it.*

*A moment of stunned silence, perhaps as though they are testing to see if the kidnapper is still in the room, and then they both begin struggling with their bonds. John's ropes seem to be tied tighter, and as he becomes more frustrated he starts grunting and swearing. He appears to think he is alone in the room.*

JOHN

*(Loudly.)*

FUCK!

*With this, Karen pulls off her ropes and blindfold and stands up. She stares as John frantically pulls at his ropes. After a moment, the fact that she is free and John is not sinks in and she starts to case the room. She looks in every corner and tries to reach the window, but without success. Then she sees the lock-box. She creeps towards it as though afraid it might jump at her, and then jumps a foot when John swears again very loudly.*

JOHN

FUCKING HELL!

*John stops struggling with his ropes for a second and pants with the effort. Karen creeps around him as quietly as possible and then goes to the door. She checks for cracks and openings while John goes*

*back to twisting around his ropes. Karen jiggles the door very quietly, and then in a sudden burst of frustration shakes it very loudly. John freezes, and so does Karen when she realizes what she has done.*

JOHN

Who's there?

*Pause.*

JOHN

Hello?

*Long pause. Karen walks softly to the other side of the room. She stares at John the whole time, and seems to be considering something.*

JOHN

Is... is somebody th...

KAREN

*(Cuts him off.)*

Tell me why you're here.

JOHN

I... I don't under...

KAREN

*(Cuts him off again.)*

What's there not to understand? *(Pause.)* Why are you here?

*Long pause.*

KAREN

Answer me.

JOHN

I... I...

KAREN

What?

JOHN

I don't know.

KAREN

What don't you know?

JOHN

...Why I'm here.

*Pause.*

KAREN

You're lying.

JOHN

No, no I'm not, I...

*Karen grabs his hair and pulls. He yelps and stops mid-sentence.*

KAREN

Don't lie to me.

JOHN

Oh God! Oh Fuck oh fuck oh...

KAREN

Shut up. *(Pause.)* What's your name?

*Pause.*

KAREN

*(More insistently.)*

Your name!

JOHN

John! *(Pause.)* John Ferguson. *(Pause.)* What... what do you want?

KAREN

*(Pulls his hair in warning.)*

No questions.

JOHN

I... I don't have any money. *(Pause.)* I mean... my family doesn't... have any money. So I don't know why...

KAREN

Think about it. *(Pause.)* You must know why. *(Pause.)* If you think about it you'll know why you're here.

*Pause.*

JOHN

Is someone angry with me? (*Pause.*) Have I done... have I done something wrong? I can't... I can't imagine...

*Pause.*

KAREN

You don't know?

JOHN

I just said...

KAREN

You don't fucking know?

JOHN

Look, just tell me what... what it is I've done. Just tell me, alright?

*Long pause.*

KAREN

FUCK! (*Pause.*) Listen, tell me... tell me how it happened.

JOHN

What? I mean, I don't... I'm sorry I don't... (*Pause.*) I don't understand what's going on here.

KAREN

When you were kidnapped. How did it happen?

JOHN

Don't you know?

KAREN

*(Pulls his hair.)*

Fucking tell me!

JOHN

Christ, alright! *(Pause.)* I was walking to my car, and... there were a bunch of men, all in black. Wearing... masks or something.

KAREN

How many?

JOHN

I don't know. I didn't count. Maybe three or four. *(Pause.)* Look, what is all this? Why are you doing this to me?

KAREN

I said no questions!

JOHN

Look... I've been locked in that room for God knows how long dealing with this shit, and I'm sick and fucking tired of it, okay? If you're gonna kill me then fucking kill me. If not, tell me what you want!

*Long pause.*



KAREN

Give me a reason I should trust you.

JOHN

What do you mean, trust you?

KAREN

Why should I?

JOHN

You shouldn't. I mean... I don't know why you would need to trust me.

KAREN

I can untie you... if I decide to.

*Long pause.*

JOHN

What's going on here? (*Pause.*) Who are you?

KAREN

I said that I could untie you. But I need a reason.

*Pause.*

JOHN

I don't know what to say to that. (*Pause.*) Stop being so fucking cryptic and untie me.

*Pause.*

KAREN

Where were you before here?

JOHN

A room.

KAREN

No shit. What kind of room?

JOHN

There wasn't much to look at.

KAREN

Doors? Windows?

JOHN

One door and one tiny little window.

KAREN

Anything else?

*No response.*

KAREN

I said, anything else?

JOHN

No. Nothing. Will you untie me now?

*Karen reaches over and pulls off John's blindfold. He blinks furiously for a second and then strains his neck to look at Karen.*

KAREN

Did it look like this?

JOHN

Yes. *(Pause.)* I don't know. It could be the same. *(Pause.)*  
Who are you?

KAREN

We're in the same situation.

JOHN

*(Indicates his bonds.)*

No, we're not.

*Pause.*

KAREN

Alright.

JOHN

What?

KAREN

I'll untie you.

JOHN

I thought you needed a reason.

KAREN

I have one. *(Pause.)* I can't think of anything else to do.

*John sits still while Karen loosens the ropes. When he is finally free he rubs his wrists for a second while staring at Karen. Very suddenly, he leaps up and grabs her, slaps her, and pushes her to the ground.*

JOHN

You fucking bitch. Why wouldn't you untie me?

*John walks around the room and checks every part for a way out. After fiddling with the doorknob for a few seconds he turns and sees the lock box.*

JOHN

*(Pointing.)*

What's that?

KAREN

I don't know. *(Pause.)* You would have done the same thing.

JOHN

No, I wouldn't. What makes you think I would?

KAREN

I didn't know who you were.

JOHN

I don't know who the hell you are and I would have untied you. It's the only decent thing to do. *(He grabs her.)* Maybe I should tie you up again, see how you like that.

KAREN

*(Trying to twist away.)*

NO! *(Pause.)* I'm sorry, alright! I had to be safe.

JOHN

Safe, huh? How safe do you feel now? *(Squeezing her arms.)*  
Huh, you bitch? *(Pulls her hair.)* How does that feel?

*Suddenly John drops her and goes over to the lock box, which he picks up and begins examining from all angles. He tries to pry it open without success.*

KAREN

Be careful with that.

JOHN

Why do you care what I do?

KAREN

You don't know what might be in it.

JOHN

No. I don't.

*He shakes the box up next to his ear and listens to it rattle. After a second, he throws it on the*

*ground very suddenly. It makes a loud sound but nothing else happens.*

KAREN

JESUS! Why the hell did you do that?!

JOHN

It could have opened. *(Pause.)* Shit.

*Long pause.*

JOHN

Tell me your name. *(Pause.)* I told you mine. Tell me yours.

KAREN

Karen.

JOHN

Just Karen?

KAREN

Wilson. Karen Wilson.

JOHN

Well, Karen, I still don't understand why you didn't untie me, but...

KAREN

*(Overlapping.)*

I said I was sorry, alright!

JOHN

*(Overlapping.)*

..But I'm going to ignore that for right now, okay? Okay, Karen? *(She does not respond.)* Alright, then. *(Pause.)* So, what have we got here?

*He gets up and walks around the room, indicating as he talks.*

JOHN

One door. Locked. One window, very high up. Covered in bars. Four walls and no way out. Two chairs, one light-bulb on a string, you, me, and one very locked little box with oh-wouldn't-you-like-to-know rattling around inside. *(Pause.)* Nothing to do, and... plenty of time to wait.

*Pause.*

JOHN

So, why don't you tell me why you're here?

KAREN

I was kidnapped. *(Pause, she sighs.)* The same as you.

JOHN

The same as me, huh. How did it happen, then?

KAREN

Men in black... wearing masks. I don't really remember. It happened so fast.

JOHN

You don't remember, huh? (*Pause.*) Obviously not. You would have untied me if you remembered.

KAREN

Look... after everything they... (*Pause.*) I'm sorry.

JOHN

Do you think you're the only one they fucked with? Do you?

KAREN

I still think you would have done the same thing.

JOHN

You don't know me.

*Pause.*

KAREN

How're... how're we gonna get out of here?

JOHN

I don't know. Why don't you tell me?

*Long pause, then John gets up and walks over the door and starts pounding on it and yelling.*

JOHN

YOU FUCKING ASSHOLES! FUCK YOU! LET ME OUT OF HERE!

*Pause.*



KAREN

Did that help?

JOHN

Shut up.

*Long pause.*

KAREN

What now?

JOHN

I don't want to talk to you.

*Pause.*

KAREN

What else are we going to do?

JOHN

Sit here quietly.

*Pause.*

KAREN

What does that achieve? I mean... we were put here in this room together.

JOHN

So?

KAREN

So... I don't know... the least we could do is compare stories.

*Pause.*

JOHN

Why should I trust you?

KAREN

Because... I'm the only other person here.

JOHN

That wasn't enough for you!

KAREN

I'm sorry. I freaked out. I made a mistake. (*Pause.*) But now you're untied... and we're stuck here together.

*Long pause.*

JOHN

Alright. What do you want to do?

KAREN

Ask me a question.

JOHN

What?

KAREN

Anything. What do you want to know?

*Pause.*

JOHN

Okay... How long have you been here?

KAREN

In this room?

JOHN

No, the part before too.

KAREN

It's hard to say. Maybe a week. I don't have a very good sense of time, and I don't have a watch. You?

JOHN

They took my watch, so, yeah, about the same. A week... maybe. (*Pause.*) So, you were in a room like this, before?

KAREN

It looked the same, yeah. After they blindfolded me I remember walking a long time before I ended up in here. This might be the same room, might not. (*Pause.*) Did you get a good look at any of the kidnappers?

JOHN

No. One minute I was looking for my car keys, the next I was lying facedown trying to blink gravel out of my eyes and wondering if my nose was broken. And then they blindfolded me. (*Pause.*) I mean, I saw big black blurs and... I know their faces were covered, but that's about it. Then they drove me... here, I guess... and threw me in a room. (*Pause.*) When they came to take me out of the other room they rushed me with a

blindfold so quickly that they might have been big walking shadows for all I could tell...

KAREN

Yeah. The whole thing is... *(Pause.)* It all feels so unreal to me. I mean, I remembered being kidnapped, but it's blurry, and there are chunks of time right before and after that I just don't... have anymore.

*Pause.*

JOHN

Maybe you got hit on the head or something.

*Long pause.*

KAREN

Are you important?

JOHN

...What kind of question is that?

KAREN

Well, I mean... would someone pay a big ransom for you?

JOHN

No, I'm not worth... *(Pause.)* No. You?

KAREN

Well, I'm not a politician and I'm not royalty, so... no. *(Pause.)* Any enemies?

JOHN

Just my ex-wife. (*Laughs. Pause.*) No, no enemies.

KAREN

The only enemy I ever had was in the third grade, so...  
(*Pause.*) So, there's no logical reason for us to be here.

JOHN

Well, that's a happy thought. (*Pause.*) Sometimes I feel like life is a freight train, and you're strapped to the front of the engine, and all you can see up ahead is a big blurry something... until it runs you over.

*Long pause.*

KAREN

...What do you think they're waiting for?

JOHN

I don't know... maybe they want us to break into song or something. (*He gets up and begins flailing his legs around in some approximation of dance.*) You like that? (*He dances a few seconds more, and then kicks over one of the chairs.*) Motherfuckers! (*Pause.*) You know, I bet they're watching us right now... wouldn't miss it for the world... They're probably sitting out there somewhere with tubs of popcorn watching us through cracks in the walls while we twiddle our thumbs... and they're laughing. They're watching us and fucking laughing. (*Karen shivers at the thought and looks around at the walls.*) They've been watching us for a while, you know? I mean, yeah, they've got us here, but... we were picked, right? They watched us to figure out our little daily

patterns - when we went outside to walk the dog, when we went to work, so that they could make sure that nobody would be around when they finally decided to grab us... I'm sure they know everything about our pathetic little lives...

*Long pause.*

KAREN

Look, there's something more, isn't there?

JOHN

What do you mean?

KAREN

I mean... everything else that has happened to us has matched up, and... well... (*Pause.*) In the other room... (*Pause.*) What happened in the other room?

JOHN

I waited. A long time.

KAREN

At first, yes, but... then what?

*He does not respond. Pause.*

KAREN

I know what happened to me. (*Pause.*) The room was just the same as this, yes, but... There was a little slot in the door that they pushed bread and water through two times a day, like clockwork. Just enough food and water to keep you from keeling over, I guess. I mean, I was never really... hungry.

(*Pause.*) There's no slot on this door. I guess they aren't planning on feeding us anymore.

*Pause.*

KAREN

Anyway, there was something else about the room. (*Pause.*) On one wall there was a great big... white screen. The first couple of days I didn't realize what it was because it stayed blank and, then... in the middle of one night it flickered on and started playing...

JOHN

Home movies.

KAREN

Yeah, home movies. It was like they had... gone to my house and dug through my video collection... I recognized all the videos they were playing; it was all videos of my family - stuff with my mother or stuff from our vacations. Stuff with my... with my daughter. (*Pause.*) After about half an hour it turned itself off.

*Pause.*

JOHN

But when it turned itself on again the next day, it was... different.

KAREN

Yeah. Different. At first I didn't notice the change; it was still videos of people I knew, but it was stuff I

hadn't seen before. Videos of my mother when she was young. People I knew from school. Some of them were still home videos, but the later ones were more like... like the person with the camera was following these people around without them knowing.

JOHN

It kept showing me video of one of my ex-girlfriends... cheating on me. I never...

*Pause.*

KAREN

The third night was when I really started getting scared. *(Pause.)* At first it was more videos of people being followed around, without them noticing... but then... the camera started getting close enough that the people were... looking right in the lens.

JOHN

Like... they could see you?

KAREN

I started seeing people that I had known... but that I had forgotten about. And they would just stare silently into the camera, like they were looking at me from across a table. *(Pause.)* And then, as I was watching... everything...

*She stops, unable to continue. Long pause.*



JOHN

Everything about them started coming back, didn't it?  
(Pause.) I'd see... an old ex, and while I was staring into her eyes... it was like I was seeing a big long list in my head of everything I had ever done to her, good or bad.  
(Pause.) Sometimes more bad than good. A lot of times.

KAREN

I would... I would see someone, and suddenly I would realize that... maybe without even knowing... I had hurt them terribly, and I would feel... all of it. Everything. (Pause.) Or I would see someone that I had a crush on in middle school, and all those feelings... came right back.

JOHN

It felt like that night would last forever, didn't it? That you would just sit there forever watching videos of... all these people, feeling all these things, but then it ended, and...

*Long pause.*

KAREN

On the fourth night they started talking to me. (Pause.) But they were just saying... one thing. Over and over.

JOHN

What did they say?

*Pause.*

KAREN

"One did it and to the other it was done." It didn't... make any sense at all.

JOHN

It was my mother that got to me. I haven't seen her in...  
(Pause.) She kept asking me "What's the difference between the living and the dead?"

*Pause.*

KAREN

"What's the difference between the living and the dead?"

JOHN

"One did it and to the other it was done." (Pause.) That still doesn't...

KAREN

Shh! I think I hear something! (She goes to the door.) I think I... I think they're coming! We... we need to get back into the ropes!

*Karen runs around frantically grabbing the ropes and tries to figure out how to make it look like she's still tied up.*

JOHN

No. There's no point. They wanted us to get untied. If they're going to keep me here like some caged animal, I at least want to look them in the eyes.

*John stares intently at the door. Karen looks at the ropes for a few seconds and then gives up. There is a pause, and then perhaps we hear approaching footsteps. Then a small brown envelope slides underneath the crack in the door.*

JOHN

Almost as friendly as my neighborhood mail carrier.

*John walks over and picks up the envelope and stares at it for a few seconds. Pause.*

KAREN

Are you going to open it?

*John breaks from his reverie and tears open the envelope something small and shiny falls out and hits the ground.*

KAREN

It's... a key!

*John picks up the key and rushes over to the doorknob, but the key does not fit. Then, he turns around slowly and walks over to the lock-box. The key fits, but John does not turn it.*

JOHN

You know... when I was a little kid my brother and I used to catch bugs and stick them in a jar and shake it up to make them fight. Sometimes we watched for what felt like hours until our mom called us in for dinner or because the sun

was going down. We'd just run off and leave the bugs in the jar all torn to pieces... never even had a second thought about it.

KAREN

What... what are you trying to say?

JOHN

I get the feeling that they're about to shake us.

*Pause.*

KAREN

Just open it!

*John turns the key and opens the box, but we cannot see what is inside. There is a moment of stunned silence, and then John very slowly lifts out a huge butcher knife and a piece of paper.*

JOHN

*(Dazed.)*

What... what is this?

KAREN

*(Taking the paper.)*

It's... some kind of drawing. It says "Ritual Human Sacrifice" and there's a picture of a man... cutting off another man's fingers...

*She trails off when she realizes that John is staring much too intently at the knife. He slowly*

*reaches up to touch the tip, but flinches away quickly and sticks his finger into his mouth.*

JOHN

That was predictable.

KAREN

*(Almost growling.)*

PUT IT DOWN.

*John turns and looks at her, and then slowly puts the knife down to one side. He reaches for the note and Karen gives it to him. Karen looks at the box, and says:*

KAREN

There's another note in there. *(She picks it up and reads.)*  
"Be back in 15 minutes."

*Long pause.*

JOHN

I... I don't know... *(Pause.)* Well, that's an awful lot to think about all at once...

KAREN

Oh God! What the fuck is going on here?

JOHN

*(Almost hysterical.)*

Well, there's a simple enough explanation for it all. We've got... a butcher knife, a primer on human sacrifice, and a

time limit. *(Pause.)* And just to make sure we get the picture, we have a little riddle - thanks to our friends and family!

KAREN

We don't... I mean, we don't know what all this means. I don't know...

JOHN

*(Indicating knife.)*

Maybe we won a contest, and this is our prize. *(Pause.)* A super-duper steak knife made out of titanium with a diamond-encrusted edge. Cuts steel drums with a single slice. *(Pause.)* What the fuck do you think it means?

KAREN

We have to get out of here.

*She picks up the knife from the floor and takes it over to the door, where she tries prying at anything and everything out of desperation.*

JOHN

What are you doing?

KAREN

Maybe I can pry this open!

*Pause.*

JOHN

That'll never work.

*She ignores him and continues hacking at the door for a few seconds, but soon gives up.*

JOHN

Let me try.

*Long pause.*

KAREN

No.

JOHN

Why not?

KAREN

You said it yourself. *(Pause.)* That will never work.

*Pause.*

JOHN

Fine. *(Pause.)* I guess all we can do now is sit here and think about all the different things there are to do with a knife.

*Long pause.*

JOHN

So what's your guess on this, huh?

*He indicates the paper that says, "Be back in 15 minutes."*

JOHN

Time's a tickin', you know... So... "ritual human sacrifice - its customs, etiquette, and cultural signifiers." Very interesting. (*Pause.*) Well, what do you think?

KAREN

I should never have untied you.

JOHN

Now that's a terrible thing to say. (*Pause.*) You have to remember that we're in this together.

*Long pause.*

JOHN

Okay. "What's the difference between the living and the dead? One does it." But does what, that is? Human sacrifice? "And to the other it is done." (*Pause.*) Hmmm. So, one person - the "living" - uses the other - "the dead" - as a... little offering.

KAREN

You're... not human!

JOHN

No, (*points at door*) they're not human! What kind of kidnapper asks for a human sacrifice? That's what I'd like to know.

KAREN

We don't know if that's the answer!



JOHN

Can you come up with anything better?

*Pause.*

KAREN

What makes you think we even have to do this? Maybe somebody is on the way to rescue us right now!

JOHN

How long have we been here? Maybe a week... maybe more? And nobody has found us yet, and I don't think that our kidnappers have demanded a ransom. Why would they? They want us to put on a little show for them. Putting out a ransom note would be pointless. *(Pause.)* People might not even realize we've been kidnapped... we're probably just two more in a long line of missing persons.

KAREN

But what if you've got it all wrong?

JOHN

Does it matter? It's all we've got to go on. *(Pause.)* Look, I didn't choose it. It chose us. *(Pause)* So... come on. Which of us deserves to die?

KAREN

Neither!

JOHN

Alright then, who deserves to live?

KAREN

Why does somebody have to die? How do you know they won't just come in here five minutes from now and set us free?

JOHN

I don't, but then maybe they'll come in here and just... kill us both. (*Pause.*) I think that losing a few fingers is a perfectly good solution, and, you know, if somebody has to die in the process... so be it.

*Long pause.*

KAREN

Don't you wonder, even a little bit, why I got myself untied first?

JOHN

Your ropes were loose. So what?

KAREN

We wanted it that way. I had to be free, but it had to be believable, so they tied me up first. (*Pause.*) They put me here. Just to fuck with your head. (*Pause.*) Is it working?

*Pause.*

JOHN

I don't believe you. It doesn't make any sense. You've been behaving like a scared little animal, not like somebody with anything to hide.

KAREN

Maybe I'm just a good actress. (Pause.) Are you much of a bleeder?

*There is a silence as Karen and John stare ferociously at each other. Suddenly, someone jiggles the knob on the door. Both jump in surprise. Whoever it is then apparently starts searching through a set of keys and tries each one. Karen and John turn and lock eyes and in a sudden concerted burst of action, both dash across the room to try to grab the knife. They collide and land on the floor a few feet away from it and start struggling violently. The person outside the door continues trying keys as they struggle, until finally one works and the door swings open. All we can see standing the frame is a black silhouette lit from behind. Blackout.*

*After a moment, the lights come back up. There is blood everywhere, and Karen and John are lying on the floor, both dead. The kidnapper, still wearing a black neutral mask, is standing over them with a clipboard, examining each of their bodies. Then he reaches down and pulls a white cloth out of John's closed mouth. The kidnapper pulls out a small metal scale and weighs this cloth, makes some kind of decision, and writes something on his clipboard. He then does the same to Karen. After he is done, he snaps first in front of John's face and then in front of Karen's, and they both stand up as though in a*

*dream. The kidnapper indicates the door, and Karen and John walk through it. The kidnapper follows them and shuts the door behind him. Blackout.*

THE END