

Bringing Sharon home

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— Karen Thompson

B Y K . C . d e G U T E S

Like most couples, you've probably played out worst case scenarios — "What if I was disabled?" "What if I had a stroke and couldn't communicate?" — but firmly committed, you promise reassuringly to love and care for one another, always. You know how it goes, "That could never happen to me."

But Karen Thompson knows that it *can* happen. In 1983, Sharon Kowalski, Thompson's life-partner, was severely injured in an automobile accident. For five years, despite mounting legal bills and bitter court battles, Thompson has kept her vow to Sharon — kept it unrelentingly.

"Can this really be happening?" Thompson writes in her book, *Why Can't Sharon Kowalski Come Home?* "Is this the Sharon who left our house just eight hours ago? I stared at her in disbelief. Will she remember me? I wondered. Will she remember our relationship? The dreams we had shared, which had seemed so important to me just a few hours before, became insignificant in relation to the gravity of what was happening now. I'm not going to let you die. I love you. I need you. You've got to keep fighting, Sharon. I found myself breathing with Sharon, for Sharon. As I heard her labored breathing, I got closer to her, breathing deeply and slowly to keep her going."

Kowalski improved immensely — learning to write, swallow, even speak — largely due to Thompson's persistence and patience. Thompson worked daily with Kowalski, helping her to regain basic life-skills. But neither Thompson nor Kowalski could know that their fight was only just beginning.

Thompson's unflinching commitment aroused Sharon's father's suspicions. In Donald Kowalski's eyes, Thompson was only a "friend" — a friend involved entirely too much with his daughter. Kowalski threatened to deny visitation rights to Thompson. Panicked over this prospect, Thompson disclosed, in a letter, their lesbian relationship.

"I do love her. My love is for an adult, a beautiful, sensitive person who has become my whole world. You can deny Sharon's and my relationship to yourselves. You can pretend that I don't exist. But you cannot alter facts. Sharon and I love each other," Thompson wrote.

But Donald Kowalski does deny the possibility that any lesbian relationship ever existed.



As Sharon's court appointed guardian, he has denied Thompson any visitation rights. Kowalski contends that his daughter is incompetent, hence unable to reliably express her concerns about visitation. Due to the manipulation of Jack Fena (Donald Kowalski's attorney), the court concurred and disallowed much testimony to the contrary.

"They really do believe they're doing what's right for their daughter; that's what's so scary," Thompson said in an interview with *Just Out*. "They look at me with such hatred, like I am somehow trying to hurt their daughter, like what I am doing is so horrible. They can't see. Homophobia and sexism and handicapism, these things are deadly."

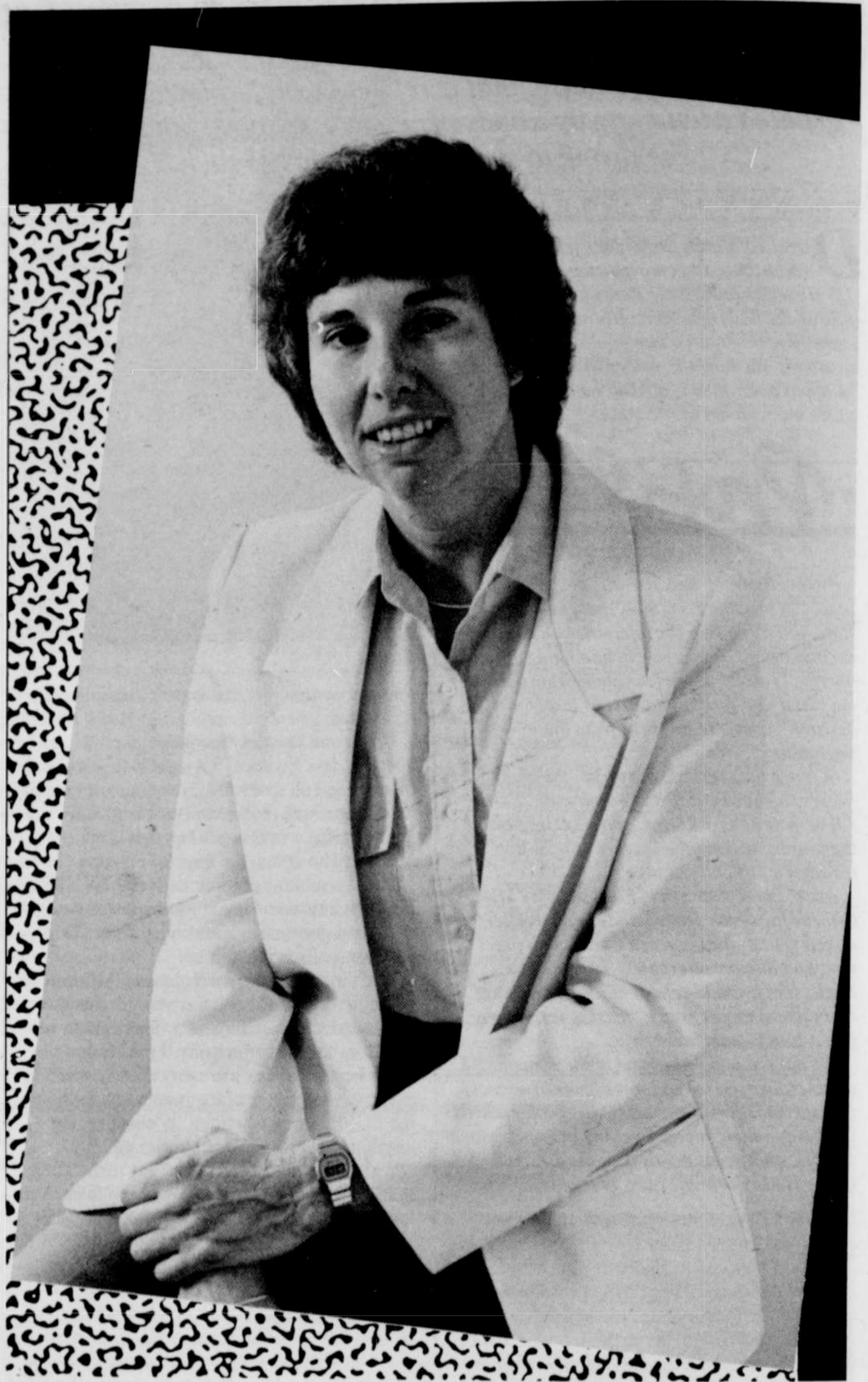
"They are so convinced, in their minds, that Sharon is totally helpless, that she's like a vegetable, that they don't think that keeping her separated from me could possibly hurt her. I'm this horrible creature that obviously they're protecting her from. They just don't get it."

Last September, over strenuous objections from Donald Kowalski, doctors conducted Sharon's first full evaluation for competency, even though the guardianship order required such testing at least annually. Minnesota District Court Judge Robert Campbell, who ordered the tests, also ordered that the contents of the doctors' reports are confidential to Sharon Kowalski and would not be released to the press. He did, however, issue a statement which said: "The evaluation stated that Ms. Kowalski's level of mental functioning is adequate but untested. She is able in a closed but secure setting to express her needs directly. However, communication skills are not adequate at present time to determine her true level of mental functioning. At present time it is recommended that Ms. Kowalski be placed into a long-term rehabilitative facility to look particularly at her communication skills and to also assess the situation concerning her family and significant other relationship."

"The report completely validated that Sharon can understand, that Sharon can communicate, that she wants to see me even though it makes her father angry," Thompson said. "Sharon *understands*. The doctors found that with a viable communication system in place, Sharon is capable of making her basic life choices. And these people [the Kowalski's] read that report and they say, 'See, she's totally helpless.' And I think, my God, how can they live with themselves? How are they able to sleep at night? This time the doctors said the same thing that I've been saying *all along*. Now, *everything* I've written in my book, *everything* I've been saying has been validated."

Kowalski was to be moved on January 3 to Miller-Dwan Medical Center and begin a 60-day program of communication rehabilitation. Once at Miller-Dwan, the facility's doctors, and not Kowalski's parents, would decide who could visit during that period.

"On the third we [Thompson and her attorneys] got an updated court order saying that Donald Kowalski had decided to retain counsel. They were given a two-week delay [in order to study the case] and so Sharon would not be moved until January 17th," Thompson said, anger creeping into her voice. "But I can't give up hope. I'm always optimistic — sometimes more than others — but I've thought from the beginning, and I still absolutely believe that it's possible to bring Sharon home. She needs 24-



Karen Thompson

hour attendant care. I've never denied that. But a lot of people live outside of institutions as long as they have attendant care. There is no medical reason why Sharon has to be in an institution. We need to get her outside of an institution, we need to get her doing things again, living. My God, the woman has been a prisoner for the last three-and-a-half years. She needs to see people, see that what she says means something, have some input.

"But I can't allow myself to get really psyched about seeing Sharon. I can't allow that because I know the games that people [like Donald Kowalski and Jack Fena] play. And yet, we're going to win this. Deep down inside I feel more than I've ever felt, that we are going to win."

"But I've really got split emotions, now. Since I read that report, I've been happier than I've been in a long time. I know that Sharon has not given up. They have not beaten Sharon. She said she wants to see me even if it upsets her parents. She *wants* to see me. I was tremendously excited. On the other hand, I'm probably angrier than I've been in a long time — so many years have been wasted and so many opportunities have been lost."

"Seeing Sharon again — I don't know what my relationship with Sharon is. Sharon and I are strangers. I'm in love with a memory. Through no desire, no will of her own, Sharon, after the

accident, was a totally different person. During that next 21 months (before Thompson was denied visitation rights) we had a chance to grow together, get to know each other again, fall in love all over again, and work through that time. We thought we could make it. Now we've been separated for three-and-a-half years and what's happened? How has Sharon changed? Is she different? She's bound to be different. I'm certainly different. The person she last saw was not a feminist, was not an activist. Will she love me the way I am now? We're two absolute strangers. It's going to take us time. Time to see where we are.

"I know I love this woman with every part of my being. Whether I care for Sharon as a friend or whether we find our way back to being partners, will be something that Sharon and I will have to work out very slowly."

"I know that I am the best qualified person to care for Sharon. I will see that Sharon gets the best possible medical care. I'll see to it that she's self-determining in her own future — as much as she can be — that Sharon lives as normal a life as possible. I want her to be able to live. I want to bring Sharon home."

Editor's addendum: Sharon Kowalski was moved to the Miller-Dwan Medical Center in Duluth, according to a story in Gay Community News (January 22-28, 1989).