

Conversations with a Convict

My transition from That Kristan to This Kristan

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When Karen Bowen called and invited me to her home for a bonfire with her family, I hesitated on accepting the offer. I had just finished my last exam of my freshman year of college and I was craving peace and relaxation, both of which were conspicuously absent from the Bowen home. Karen, despite her habits of telling ridiculous lies and being a little too emotional every now and then, was a good friend of mine; the Bowen family in its entirety, on the other hand, was downright insane and in their company, I was wary. No one in the family exceeded five foot six and they were all very slight in stature. Standing at five foot nine, I was commonly referred to as “Kristan the Friendly Giant” and “Amazon Queen” in their home. Though this became irritating after a few months, the nicknames were nothing I couldn’t handle. It was the little pieces of information I picked up on over time and the events that transpired after meeting Karen that caused the wariness.

Karen was the only person in her family to attend college. She was in graduate school; I had only just begun college, so I looked up to her in that she was committed to her ambitions. Karen’s father was an alcoholic who had spent ten years in prison. He spoke in a brusque manner and was blissfully unaware of his disintegrating family. Her mother was in an assisted care living facility because of her severe mental instability. Her sister, Ally, was a gorgeous, tattooed brunette who turned heads everywhere she went. The beauty did not go much further than skin deep, however. Ally, though she was a few years older than Karen and I, acted about as responsibly as a small, stubborn child. She had just returned home after a tumultuous couple of months. Her adventures had included faking a

pregnancy, going to jail, renouncing her family, setting her boyfriend's belongings on fire, getting dumped by said boyfriend, slashing Karen's tires for no apparent reason, going back to jail, and finally returning home with her pride and dignity somehow fully intact and no repercussions whatsoever from her family.

I was about to make up an excuse about how I was tired and just needed to get to bed when Karen whimpered, "I just need friends to be there for me right now. It's been a bad week. Please?" Because I am easily manipulated, I begrudgingly accepted and trudged out to my car. As I was about to hang up, Karen added, "Oh yeah, Ally's new boyfriend is here. He just got out of jail. He was in there for... three years, I think? See you in fifteen minutes." At this news, I perked up. It was always wildly amusing to meet the winners Ally brought home, and it sounded like this one was no exception.

When I arrived at Karen's home, I stepped carefully toward her small home and peered through the darkness at the ground, making sure not to step on any of the broken bottles that always littered the ground. Her house was twenty minutes out into the boonies of our little town, and the single story clapboard house was the epitome of a quaint country home. As the practice of knocking and being allowed inside had become obsolete long ago, I slung open the front door and crept back to the kitchen, where I heard voices. I slid into the room where Karen and Mr. Bowen were listening to Ally rant about how her boss at a local gas station didn't like it when she texted throughout her entire shift. Slouching by Ally's side was a boy with a scraggly mustache, two teardrop tattoos on his face, sagging cargo pants, and a grossly oversized Tapout shirt. I have no doubt that my face lit up. He definitely met my expectations. Because no one in their right mind who knew better would ever, ever, ever interrupt Ally, ever, he waited until her story was over before approaching me.

"I'm Knox," he stated as he thrust his hand toward me. *Would you look at that, he's going for a handshake instead of a fist bump.*

“Kristan,” I responded out loud. I made sure our hands didn’t touch for longer than a second and a half as I did not wish the wrath of Ally Bowen upon me. Suddenly, Mr. Bowen hopped up from his seat, swayed ever so slightly, and began stumbling toward the door to go outside.

“What are you doing there, Mr. Bowen?” I asked, both amused and slightly concerned.

“I’ma make a fire so’s we can sit ‘round fire,” came his gruff response. *Father Bear is drunk. I think the experts say that drunks should probably not play with fire by themselves.* As he stumbled toward the sliding doors that lead to the patio, I sighed, heaved myself up from my seat, and began to follow him. Meanwhile, Ally dove into another story about how every male she has ever met has inevitably fallen madly in love with her. I was sliding the glass door closed behind me when Knox caught it.

“I’ll help too. I don’t really want to hear that shit,” he huffed. *Fair enough.* I released the handle and let him follow me and Mr. Bowen to the fire pit. As we pulled the tarp off of the wood bin, Mr. Bowen’s head suddenly shot up and his eyes bore into Knox’s.

“So ya been to jail, Ally says,” Mr. Bowen barked.

That’s one way to bring it up, Captain Subtle.

Knox pursed his lips and said slowly, “Yes, sir. I got out six months ago. It was just because of an accumulation of DUIs and petty drug charges.”

Mr. Bowen slurred, “So a ac-accum... a buncha bullshit, really?”

I stiffened. “I’m not sure risking the lives of yourself as well as random innocents sharing the road with you on multiple occasions constitutes as ‘bullshit,’” I hissed. Knox pursed his lips and Mr. Bowen shot me a look of surprise and began,

“Now, Kristan—”

“She’s not wrong,” Knox interrupted, “it definitely wasn’t worth possibly hurting somebody—or jail time.” I nodded and turned back to the wood bin. Mr. Bowen shrugged and murmured, “I been to jail. It don’t make you a bad person.” I rolled my eyes. *I didn’t say it made you a bad person.* Knox grabbed a few logs and tossed them into the fire pit then turned to Mr. Bowen.

“That’s just something you deal with. It’s part of it. People are going to make assumptions. No matter how much they say they won’t judge, it’s just impossible not to. I judge too, so I understand that. Want to know the part that’s hard, though? The worst part is coming back to the real world after living somewhere where people understood what it meant to mess up. Out here though... out here it’s easy to buy into it—what everyone else thinks. That I’m worthless.”

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I reached for a few more logs in an attempt to hide the guilt that had washed over me. Knox looked to the ground and took a step back into the shadows cast by the house as if he were desperate for refuge; refuge from the harsh judgment of society—refuge from me. Mr. Bowen, realizing he may have begun a conversation he wasn’t ready for, excused himself to get another drink. I finally dropped the logs I’d been clinging to into the fire pit, added two more, and began setting it up. Knox knelt down to help me.

“You had someone get hurt, didn’t you?” Knox asked after a moment of silence, “Because of drunk driving?” I refused to look up but nodded stiffly. Knox exhaled slowly.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. I forced a half-ass smile and nodded again.

“I’m assuming you don’t want to tell me what happened?” Knox ventured. I pulled my hands away from the fire pit and sat down crosslegged. *You want to hear? Fine.*

“This guy Austin was driving on back roads after drinking. My friend, Michael, was in the passenger seat. They wrecked. Michael died. Austin’s fine.” I turned back to the fire pit and adjusted logs that were already in place. Knox fidgeted with the hem of his pants.

“My sister died. She was killed by a drunk driver.” I froze. Knox took a deep breath before continuing. “She had just had a baby, like, a month before. Well, I was drunk out of my mind one night and I didn’t have a way home. She was on her way to get me.” I stared into the mass of logs in the fire pit and said nothing.

“I hated myself for a long time. I went crazy. I hated the guy that hit her, even though he died too. I hated the rest of my family because they weren’t struggling like I was. I knew my sister’s baby would spend the rest of his life hating me for being the reason his mom was dead, so I hated him back. I got into so many fights; they were so stupid—they were always over nothing. I had a reputation. I was that piece of shit that hurts people to make himself feel bigger and stronger. I kept getting in trouble with the law. I went to jail for a few days at a time, then a few months, and finally made my way up to three years. None of this really helped the self-hatred thing.” He rubbed his face and closed his eyes.

“Do you like yourself now?” I asked after a fairly lengthy period of silence. Knox grinned and looked my way.

“Usually. Do you like yourself?”

Before I had time to think, I had already responded with, “Not really.”

Knox simply nodded, “May I ask why?”

I cringed. Did I really want to jump into this conversation?

“I was just a mean person in high school. I was selfish and judgmental and hateful.” Knox leaned forward and placed his elbows on his knees but remained silent. I didn’t want to talk about it anymore but the silence was suffocating.

My voice dropped as I finally admitted, “I lost all of my friends after high school. It turned out we were only friends because of our close vicinity—a convenience thing you know? I couldn’t blame them. I wouldn’t want to be my friend either. Who would? Who wants to be around someone who constantly berates you and does little else? I hated myself so much. I thought I didn’t deserve friends, so I isolated myself and just let all that negativity fester. After a while, I figured out that was not the best plan in the world, but I was in a really bad place by then. I’m getting better now—but sometimes it feels like every time I turn around, I just—I can’t help but remember all the people I’ve hurt.”

Knox waited a few seconds before saying, “That’s a lot of past tense. What have you done in the past week that was selfish or judgmental or hateful?” My eyebrows knit together and I looked up at him for the first time in a while. *If only you knew.*

“Look,” began Knox, “you’ve improved. You’re self-aware and you want to improve; these factors immediately disqualify you from being a terrible person. Everything you’ve been through up to this point has been essential. If This Kristan, this Kristan sitting right beside me, met That Kristan, the one who was a heartless bitch, they would not be the same person. This Kristan would probably tolerate That Kristan, because This Kristan is a good person, but you would be two very different people nevertheless. If you like yourself now, and you certainly should as far as I can tell, that’s all that matters. Everything else is just a detour you took to get here. Granted, it may have been ugly, but the result—

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well—isn't. You're going to mess up sometimes and go back to how you used to be sometimes; that's okay. Just recognize it, address it, and move on. Forgive yourself. You are a good person." At that moment the sliding door slammed open and Ally's voice pierced the night.

"Oh my GOD Knox, where were you? Come in here and tell Karen about how I literally almost died the other day when that guy threw a Frisbee at my head!" Knox looked over at me but I was carefully avoiding eye contact.

"Come on!!" With that bellow from his charming girlfriend, Knox scurried away and slid through the door.

When I was finally alone, I stood up and tried to wipe the tears from my face but they kept coming. I pattered toward my car and finally collapsed in the driver's seat and let the tears fall freely. I desperately wanted to believe that I was good, but I had lacked the courage to even hope that I was. My attitude entering the evening certainly didn't support Knox's faith in me, yet he insisted upon it. I had judged Knox and he had not only forgiven me, but demanded I forgive myself. He had helped me catch hold of that elusive hope; I was more than the person I was in high school. No, I wasn't the person I wanted to be quite yet, but I could change; I didn't need to hate myself. *I didn't need to be perfect to be a good person.* It was the single most liberating realization I have ever made, and it could only be attributed to a tattooed ex-convict. Thank you, Knox.

**I could be
proud of the
person I was. I
didn't need to
hate myself.**