

Karen and the Dropout

The couch is turquoise vinyl, overstuffed. The floor is gray linoleum, undercleaned. The walls are whitewashed cinderblock, the windows casement, the ceiling low and overcast. Outside, it is winter in a desert city. Inside, cockroaches abound.

The Dropout sits on the overstuffed couch, smokes dope from come-to to pass-out, listens to music on the radio, looks at the pictures in magazines. Days go by. He is hungry, unemployed, losing weight, coughing, starving. He will throw a party.

“Come to my party,” he tells his friends, of which there are several. They come. Some are drunk, some are high. Some bring beer, wine, vodka, dope, and strangers, friends of friends. The cockroaches are wary, striving to keep out of sight and from underfoot. The music from the radio is loud. The girl who lives in the apartment next door is there. Everyone is “having a good time.” Late in the evening, screaming becomes a motif.

Screaming first is a stranger-girl, friend of a friend. The Dropout’s apartment, crummy little flat in a slummy little building, is filled to bursting with drug- and alcohol-addled fun when the stranger-girl, who has had a great deal to drink and whose eyes are closed and who is slouching in a chair beneath a casement window, lets go a scream.

“Fucking bastard!” she screams. “Fucking bastard!”

Her eyes remain closed. She moans, she cries, she screams, she sobs. The party-goers calm her, help her to the Dropout’s bed, where she can “crash.” Or where she can “burn,” if she has already crashed. No one is sure why she screamed, not even the friend who brought her. She passes out in the Dropout’s bed. Many of the guests decide the party is over and it’s time to go home, including the friend who brought the screaming, passed-out girl. Most of these departing guests, as they are gathering their coats and things, say they had a “good time.” Some really mean it. They say that, too — “I really mean it.” The friend who brought the screaming, passed-out girl, and who is also a girl, says, “Just let her be, she’ll be all right.”

The Dropout says, “All right.”

The guests who stay sit in a circle in the living room, on the couch and in chairs of various sort, some brought in from the kitchen, while the stranger-girl sleeps in the bedroom. Someone suggests something similar to a seance. This either sounds like fun to everyone, or those to whom it does not do not object. They are all smoking

dope and drinking beer, wine, and vodka. It's a wonder only one of them has passed out screaming.

The seance begins. It is very unstructured. The revelers close their eyes. Some hold hands. The Dropout closes his eyes and holds his drink, a screwdriver in a jelly jar. Someone turns the volume on the radio down. Someone else mumbles an incantation to entice the spirits.

Screaming second is the girl who lives in the apartment next door. She has long black hair and a pale complexion. The Dropout drops his drink when she screams, the jelly jar shattering when it hits the linoleum, screwdriver and shards of glass splattering. Everyone has their eyes open now, except for the passed-out girl in the bedroom.

"I saw the face of Jesus!" screams the girl who lives next door.

This marks the effective end of the party.

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This is later that night. The guests have all gone home, the shattered jelly jar and wasted screwdriver have been cleaned up, and the radio has been turned off. It is very quiet inside the apartment. The Dropout has just switched off the last of the lights. City night-light, faint, shines in through the casement windows. He stands at his bedroom door and looks at the stranger-girl sleeping in his bed. She would be sleeping on top of the covers, but there are no covers. The mattress is naked, striped like a prison inmate's uniform. The stranger-girl sleeps on her back. She has wet her pants. From waist to mid-thigh her blue jeans are dark.

The Dropout kneels on the bed beside her. She has a round face under an arch of dirty blonde hair in tight ringlets. He unsnaps the snap of her pants, unzipping the zipper. Remembering her tennis shoes, dirty white, he turns to untie them and take them off, taking her socks off also. They are also dirty and were once white. She may be somewhat conscious now. Shoes and socks dropped to the dirty linoleum at the foot of the bed, cockroaches scatter and the Dropout returns his attention to her pants. He tugs at them and at her underwear, pulling them down and off. She doesn't open her eyes. She may lift her hips a little from the bed as the Dropout pulls off her pants, easing the sliding of wet denim and underwear against clammy skin, or he may be imagining this.

He stops and takes off his own tennis shoes, dirty white, and blue jeans and briefs, both dry except for one small spot in the briefs. Kneeling on the bed again, he pushes the stranger-girl's legs apart. Her eyes remain closed. He makes to push himself into her, but he is too soft. After a while, he stops trying. He goes into the bathroom, lubricates his hand with soap and water, and has greater success. He

comes in the bathroom sink. The stranger-girl sleeps, or seems to, spread-legged on the prison-stripe of the naked mattress.

The Dropout cleans up the mess he has made in the sink, washes the soap off himself with a wet washcloth, pulls back on his pants, returns to the bedroom, looks at the stranger-girl in the faint light, wishes he could get her pants back on. He leaves his on and climbs into bed with her.

In the gray light of early morning, he wakes sleeping on his back. The stranger-girl is on her side beside him, one leg thrown over him. His pants on the side she is on are wet from where she has wet them while they slept.

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“Karen says the two of you made love last night,” says the stranger-girl’s friend.

“No,” the Dropout says. “No, we didn’t.”

The next day, the friend says, “Karen says if it wasn’t making love, she doesn’t know what you call it.”

The Dropout knows instantly what you call it. He thinks it strange Karen would call it anything else.

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The Dropout is the only member of his circle who lives away from home. His parents do not know with precision where he is. For that matter, neither does he. It is easier to say where he is not. He is not among the employed, nor is he among the well-fed. Nor is he among the chronically sober. He throws another party. The girl in the apartment next door, who saw the face of Jesus, does not come. Everyone else does. Most of them get very drunk and very high. This includes the Dropout and Karen. Late in the evening, Karen needs to go home. Her friend, the girl who is also the Dropout’s friend, has already left.

“I need to go,” Karen says. “My mom works nights and she’ll be home in a few hours and I need to go home.”

“Okay,” the Dropout says. He leaves his party to drive Karen home in his rusty old car, leaving a few of his guests behind. One or two of them steal a few things before they leave: the clock radio from the bedroom, the loaf of bread from the kitchen counter, the pack of bologna from the refrigerator, the half a lid of dope carelessly left sitting out on the coffee table. The Dropout never remembers the three-mile drive to Karen’s house. After he wakes the next morning, beside Karen in her bed, a fresh scab upon himself, he remembers only this about bringing Karen home: Karen underneath

him on her mother's paisley couch, penetration, and he didn't take his pants off. They are up and fastened shut when he awakes. He reaches for Karen.

"No," she says. "My mom's home."

He looks at her a moment. Her eyes are green.

"How old are you?" he says.

"Why?" she says.

"Just curious," he says.

"Sixteen," she says. She may be telling the truth. She and the Dropout sleep some more, their arms around each other.

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There is no sign in Karen's house of any sort of mother. There are there several persons who are about Karen's age, which is only slightly younger than the Dropout's age. Two are girls sitting on the paisley couch, one is a boy in the kitchen, another is a taller boy walking down the hall.

"We're going to the fort," Karen tells the Dropout. "Wanna come?"

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Karen and the Dropout walk with the others into the desert near Karen's house, wending their ways past clumps of mesquite. The shorter boy holds hands with one of the girls from the couch. The clumps are as large as the Dropout's rusty old car. The sun is bright and the sky clear, the air cold. Before he sees it, the Dropout and Karen and the others have come upon the fort, between two clumps of mesquite. Its roof is scraps of plywood and two or three old tires, flush with the desert floor and covered with dirt. The taller boy pulls a piece of plywood aside, raising a low and small cloud of dust, revealing the opening into the fort. It is very dark down there.

The kids make their way into the fort one-by-one, sitting at the edge of the opening and sliding down, more dust rising. The shorter boy goes first, the Dropout goes last. The fort is a shallow pit dug into the desert. The kids light candles which sit on crumbly ledges of sand around the interior walls. The scrap plywood ceiling is very low. There is room enough to crawl and sit. Karen and the Dropout sit next to each other, against one wall. They and the others smoke cigarettes as they sit in the flickering candlelight. There is very little talk. They may as well have been sleepwalking.

After a while, they leave.

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Karen and the Dropout are in his bed again. It is the night two nights after the day of the trip to the fort. The mattress is still naked, and now so are they.

“Here,” the Dropout whispers, rolling onto his back. “You on top.”

Karen complies, wordlessly straddling him. He enters her and they fuck for a while. After he comes, he holds her there on top of him, pulling her down to rest against him until he subsides and has slipped out of her. She giggles when he slips out. A few minutes later, he lets her off. She stretches beside him, her arms and legs intertwined with his. They slip into sleep for a while.

They awake and they do it again, this intimate act between two near-strangers, this coupling somewhere near to the making of love, certainly closer than their first night together. This time the Dropout is on top. He is inside her when he stops his rhythmic thrusting and asks, “Did you come yet?”

Karen’s eyes are closed and remain closed.

“I don’t know,” she murmurs.

The Dropout contemplates this for a moment. The concept of not knowing this is alien to him. He resumes his motions. Karen sometimes grimaces. She does not smile, she makes no sound, and she does not open her eyes until after he is done and is stretched next to her again.

“I should go soon,” she says.

“Okay,” he says.

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The time is somewhere between last call and sunrise. Karen and the Dropout are in his rusty old car, where it is parked by the curb of the empty, dark street outside his apartment. It is cold out. His car won’t start. The starter motor cranks but the engine won’t fire up. He has no telephone.

“There’s a 7-11 a few blocks from here,” he says. “It has a pay phone. We can walk there and call a cab.”

“Okay,” she says.

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Karen and the Dropout stand by the phone booth, holding each other against the cold. The booth is lighted, and they stand in the light it casts. Behind them the 7-11, open all night every night, even Christmas, is also lighted. He has called a cab. He will give her money for it when it arrives. He wonders how much will be enough to get her safely home. He wonders if he has that much.