

Kiss Me
Someone

stories

Karen Shepard



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For
Leonard and Zelda Glazer

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POPULAR GIRLS

YOU KNOW WHO WE ARE. WE'RE KAETHE AND ALINA, CJ AND Sydney. Stephanie. We're Asian or Scandinavian, white or vaguely black. We call ourselves Mayflower Madams or Tragic Mulattoes, tossing our dreadlocks, showing off our flawless skin. Our hair is blonde or brown or black. Rarely red; rarely curly. We run our fingers through it and hold it away from our faces long enough for you to see our striking eyes. When we do this, you get shivers.

It's 1984, and we sit on the benches lining our New York private school's entrance after classes are over and before we head home. They're old church pews, and we're from another world. Our canvas schoolbags mass at our feet. They're from Sweden. They come with an excess of zippers, a plastic ID tag on a small chain, and a ruler that we never use. We buy them at Chocolate Soup, the store for cool kids on Madison. We say things like, "Tenth grade is the Howard Johnson's of school life."

You can sit on these benches too, but we don't notice you. Last fall, we excised some of you from our group by taking you aside before chapel and saying, "It just isn't working out."

We see everyone who walks past, in and out of our two-hundred-year-old school. We sweep you with our eyes as if you're a landscape. We've seen everything the world has to offer, and we've dismissed it.

We lean back in the pews, our heads against the brick wall, our feet wide in front of us if we're wearing jeans. If we're wearing miniskirts, we cross our long legs and tuck one foot behind the other calf, like CJ told us she saw Anne Sexton do in a photo. We are weary. Our day was long.

Our book bags spill into the corridor in front of us, a moat. We reach into them to refold twenties into our Coach leather wallets, or to lift and then complain about that bio textbook. We mention the biology teacher's name and flutter our lashes, holding our hands over our hearts. We also discuss the theater teacher. And that one English teacher.

We have breasts. When we stretch and yawn, we arch our backs and our buttons strain. You can see bits of our Lily of France bras. We've seen the theater teacher looking at them. We're not shocked. We're not surprised. We wear them in mocha and black, dark purple and fuchsia. They're sheer and iridescent. If we're not careful, our fingernails snag on them. We don't let boys take them off. We take them off ourselves.

We listen to the tribulations of other girls' boyfriends. The boys muse about affairs. We suggest ourselves. We hold other girls' boyfriends' hands and write in our diaries: "Bingo!" We cross out the ex-girlfriends' pictures in the yearbook with a blue ballpoint pen.

We talk to senior boys on our private phones for three hours a night. We discuss girls' sexual limits. They suggest that the first time should be with an older, more experienced person. We lie under our Charlie Brown bedspreads, hug our pillows, and agree.

Some of us are virgins and some of us are not. Rumors have floated about some of us giving blow jobs in the wrestling room. Kaethe, people say, slept with Treat Williams.

Some boys we're friends with, and some we date. There's rarely any crossover. The boys we're friends with—Andy and Greg, Hunter and Miles—can join us on the pews. They sit outside the moat, on the carpeted floor, leaning forward to look at us, or leaning back on their hands. We talk about last weekend or this one. It's always a Friday in April. We consider who has passes to Studio or Xenon. An Ivy League party at Limelight. The boys hold up postcard invitations and ask if we're going. We take their postcards and make no promises. We turn to each other and debate meeting at that bar, or the other one. We have fake IDs from the fake ID place on Eighth Street. They claim we go to Vassar, NYU, Columbia. We stopped going to Dublin House a year ago; that's for ninth graders. We drink on the Upper

East Side, at Dorrian's or Fitzgerald's or JG Melon. We know the managers. The bartenders give us free drinks. If we go to the West Side we go to Nanny Rose. Crayons on the table and ice-cream drinks that make our teeth ache. We pass out in the bathroom, forgotten until we're remembered and returned to the group.

We chew gum in school. On the sidewalk around the corner, out of sight of Mr. Bleakley, the upper school principal, we smoke. Virginia Slims. Lights. Some of us smoke Gitanes. Well, just CJ. If Mr. Bleakley catches us, we flirt with him until he lets us go with a warning. Stephanie touches his arm. Alina leans in close to let him smell her. We love warnings.

You can't get enough of us. You've seen girls like us every step of the way through school. We're out of your league.

We walk in the formation of migrating cranes, Stephanie at the head, Sydney and Alina on her left and right, Kaethe and CJ last. Only Kaethe cares that she's last. We haven't figured out what CJ cares about; we don't spend much time on the subject. She's Chinese, and aren't they the inscrutable ones?

Stephanie cares that she's first. She's the tallest. She was the first to wear boot-cut acid-dyed jeans. Her mother, grandmother, aunt, and great-grandmother were all ballerinas. She danced for the New York City Ballet. She was in *The Nutcracker* when she was eight. She gave it up at thirteen. Her mom was pissed. Stephanie says she's going to be a fashion designer. In her Swedish book bag

she carries an artist's sketchbook and colored pencils. Sometimes she just peels back the cover of her book and starts working on her fall line. She designs her company logo. She says with a sweep of her arm that when we grow up, she'll dress us all. Her father lives in a castle. Her grandmother was the queen of Holland or something like that.

We live on Eighty-Ninth and Park, and Sixty-Sixth off Fifth, and Sutton Place in penthouses and duplexes and town houses. CJ lives in SoHo where there is a portrait of her done by someone famous. We roller-skate in parquet hallways and throw water balloons from roof gardens tended by Japanese men whose names we don't know. We get stoned in walk-in closets organized by color and in guest rooms we've never seen used. We make our Sasson jeans fit just right by putting them on and soaking in tubs filled with warm water in mirrored bathrooms.

To school, we wear sweater vests from Benetton in maroon and forest green and bright pink over men's white T-shirts. Sometimes a bandana around our necks. Our socks match our vests. We wear wool side-zip tapered-ankle trousers in yellow and purple and red from Fiorucci, or dyed painters' pants from Reminiscence. We wear boys' black penny loafers with dimes in them, or black suede booties that make us look like we're from Sherwood Forest. We wear watches with black metal bands that are slightly oversized and slide up and down our forearms like bracelets.

We wear some makeup—Sydney wears the most; she was the first to use lip liner—but we're naturally radiant without it. Men look at us when we walk by. Men with jobs and wives and children not much younger than us.

On weekends our clothes get shorter and tighter. Lycra is involved. For fancy occasions, Ungaro, Versace, Armani, or small French designers that only the French have heard of. Those of us who can't quite afford to keep buying Versace dry-clean the outfits and return them. CJ wears vintage. Her Bond Villain outfits, she calls them.

There's a certain Cartier ring. A must according to Stephanie, whose father buys only from Cartier. Three interlocking bands of three different kinds of gold: yellow, white, and pink. Its name is the name of our school, and we take that as a sign. Stephanie says a lot of knock-offs are on the market. Stephanie says she can tell the difference. Some of us tuck our hands under our thighs.

Our rooms are designed by architects and interior decorators famous for their work on small museums and boutique hotels. Our rooms are multileveled and carpeted with custom-made circular beds—an extra one for sleepovers. Or they are sunken, with marquetry wood floors designed to look like Persian rugs. We have first-generation big-screen TVs and phones in the shape of something else: Mickey Mouse, Elvis, a red Mercedes 280SL. We have cordless stereos the color of steel, Cy Twombly throw pillows, and Steiff stuffed animals: horses and goats and elephants. We have doll collections our fathers add to every time they go to a foreign country,

and add-a-pearl necklaces begun by our mothers on our first birthdays. Our glass animal collections we add to ourselves. Our walls are decorated with Rolling Stones and Police posters and the *New Yorker* cover with New York as the center of the world. If our parents are art collectors we have child-appropriate Jim Dine prints of hearts or red robes.

Our parents are the presidents of department stores, interior decorators, film directors, investment bankers, psychiatrists, royalty, real estate developers. Housewives, board volunteers, fundraisers, art collectors, alcoholics, adulterers. Angry, sad, and distant. Or they're Legal Aid lawyers, doctors in Harlem clinics, cancer researchers, cooperative-nursery-school directors. Empathetic, energetic, and loving. They mystify and enrage and enthrall us. Stimulate and bewilder us, frustrate and entertain us. Very rarely, they surprise us. Mostly they bore us. We evade them, slipping around corners like cats, not wanting to confront their gifts and legacies. We tell each other they don't know the real us. We worry that even they can see through us.

We tell them we're going to one another's houses for sleepovers, and they know we're lying but let us go anyway. Have a good time, they say. Don't stay up too late. Okay, we say. We love you, we say. And we do.

This Friday in April 1984, we are on our way to the Ivy League Limelight party when a limo pulls up alongside us on Park Avenue. Boys are in the limo. Not boys we're friends with. The kind of boys we could date. They're

older. Older than college. Old enough for jobs. But we're not curious about what they do. They're drinking champagne. They're wearing open-collared shirts in white and blue and lime green to show off their tans. They speak with accents. They're named Gilles and Pablo and Antoine.

Only three of them, but who cares? the five of us think, stepping gracefully into their long black car, bending so they can see whatever it is they want. *I will be one of the three*, each of us thinks. I will be one of the three they choose, nosing ahead of the other girls like horses at the wire.

We offer our hands, and they take them, but only to pull us to them, to kiss us on both cheeks. They keep their lips to our faces longer than they should.

The boys mix us Kir Royales and we giggle at the bubbles the cubes of sugar make. They introduce us to the chauffeur, a young black man to whom we give our small, kind smiles. CJ thinks he's hot. The boys ask where such a beautiful pack of women could be going on such a beautiful night, and we don't reveal how thrilled we are at being called women. We pull the postcard invitations from our sequined evening bags. They read and frown and say, *S'il vous plait*, and rip our postcards into pieces, and we laugh and open the windows for them and watch the pieces fly away.

We're not on Park Avenue anymore, and we ask them to close the window. And Gilles takes Sydney's hand and kisses her palm and the rest of us are jealous. Welcome, these men say. Welcome.

They take us to the new club. They're on the list. They know the bouncer. So do we, of course, from another club, another time. They hold their hands to the smalls of our backs, ushering us past the people who have to wait. The club is called Area; it has a long entrance tunnel lined with the equivalent of shop windows. Tonight is Red Night, and all the window tableaux have something to do with red. Real people stand in the windows. Beautiful women with bored, superior faces. Alina says she recognizes one of them from a *Seventeen* shoot she did a few months ago. Antoine pulls her dark hair back to get a better look and says he thought he'd recognized her. The rest of us silently swear to give up another two meals a week, to eat raw fruit and vegetables, to get back to 100 or at the very most 105.

But we don't like the windows. There's something about them. We walk quickly to get past them into the club, where it's dark and hot and too loud to think.

We dance to Billy Idol and Modern English, "Mony Mony" and "I Melt with You" and "I Love Rock 'n' Roll" and extended dance versions of "Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic," and Blondie's "Rapture," and anything by the Cars.

We like the dance floor. We dance in groups, letting the boys in, closing them out. Dancing is not about the boys. It's a performance of us, the group of us. Our energy, our happiness. The good things that happen when we come together. We hold our arms above our heads. We swivel our hips. We flip our hair as if we're out of control.

We point to one another and smile. Look at you, we're saying. Look at you. We're happy to be together, part of something and not alone, and we celebrate that out loud.

Off the dance floor are the bar and the bathroom. At the bar we drink Tanqueray and tonics or Melon Balls or Cape Codders, and thwart unwanted advances by putting our arms around each other and standing tall. "Sorry," we say. "We're together." If the guy hangs around, we ignore him and drop our voices to say, "What a dork," "What a loser." CJ likes more theatrical dialogue; sometimes being Chinese gives her the right: "You are so hot," she'll whisper in Kaethe's ear. "I want to lick you all over." Certain guys go for CJ.

In the bathroom, we pee quickly, and stand at the mirror in a row, brushing and talking and dabbing and talking. If we do cocaine in one of the stalls we go in by twos, using that cool little bullet of CJ's that's clear acrylic and looks like it should be in the design section of MoMA. We compare this week's to last's, reflecting on the sordidness of our dealers. Our dealers are not real dealers. They're private-school boys whom real dealers use to get to us. We also do speed. CJ does shrooms. Occasionally, we get stoned, but we agree that we were pretty much over the pot thing by the end of seventh grade. We're tenth graders. It's all about getting through the whole thing as fast as possible. Who wants to go through tenth grade in real time?

CJ collapses on the red velvet divan in the ladies' room. "Hey," she says. "I don't feel so good."

We gather round. Her skin is pale, but her skin is always pale. She has rings under her eyes. Her eyes freak us out. They're shiny, too shiny to be a sign of anything good.

She holds her head. She lists to the left. She hangs her head between her knees. She lifts it.

"You're crying," we say, pointing.

"I am?" she says, reaching to her face.

Sydney takes over. Sydney says she's going to be a doctor. Sydney's father is a heart surgeon. She kneels by CJ and feels for a pulse. She looks closely at CJ's face. She stands up and turns to us. "She's really cold," Sydney says. We nod.

The door opens. It's Pablo, wanting to know what's up. We fill him in. He comes over to the divan and we glance around, disconcerted. A boy in the girls' bathroom.

He says she probably ate or drank something bad. We nod. He'll take her back to their place and keep an eye on her. He has her on her feet and walking before we say anything. We follow them out. We ask CJ if this is okay. She seems to nod, and rests her head on Pablo's shoulder. He slides his hand up her back beneath her shirt, unhooks her bra with one hand and reaches around to cup her breast. It's almost gentle.

We don't walk them out. We tell her we'll hold her bag. We tell her we'll call her later. Kaethe remembers that CJ said Pablo was gross.

That leaves four of us. It's three in the morning. The crowd is thinning. Some people are heading to the

late-night clubs. Others stare dumbly, trying to figure out how to get home.

We dance until the lights come on, revealing a dance floor of spilled drinks and dropped coat-check stubs, glasses holding triangles of lemon and lime. In a corner an empty condom packet. Atop one of the speakers a lipstick and compact mirror. On another a naked man with a ponytail is dancing even though the music has stopped. Very nice, we say, frowning and taking the arms of our men.

At their loft apartment—one vast rectangle—CJ is better. She's pouring upside-down margaritas into Pablo's mouth. We must, she says, holding the tequila and the triple sec to her chest, do two of these to be allowed in.

We take turns, in a black metal chair that looks like it came from Rent-A-Center, tilting our heads back for CJ to pour. Alina gags on her first and spits it all over Antoine. We laugh. Stephanie is a pro. Sydney and Gilles are already on the couch. He accordions her miniskirt and rubs the skin beneath the elastic of her underwear.

We notice the three beds. There are five of us, three of them. With these boys, there will be consecutive sex or two-on-ones or more-than-two-on-ones. Whatever happens will be performed in front of the group. We ask ourselves whether we can actually do this; we imagine how we'll step out of our clothes gracefully. We're uneasy. Nothing about this whole thing will be graceful. No one is leaving.

It's five in the morning by now. In our homes our parents who love us are still sleeping. Our younger brothers and sisters, who think we're way cool but who tease us mercilessly, have kicked off their covers and are murmuring in their dreams. Our dogs have their tails curled over their twitching noses; our cats are prowling the kitchens. Our goldfish named Snoopy and Linus are floating in their bowls. And there we are, in our beds too. Wearing our all-cotton pajamas, sleeping the sleep of the innocent, the young, the entitled. Our arms are flung above our heads; our legs are hanging uncovered off the side of the bed. It doesn't matter. There we are. So here in this apartment with three men whose last names we don't know, it doesn't matter what happens. We're loved. We're protected. Do with us what you dare. Do with us what you can.