

one story

GIRLS ONLY

KAREN SHEPARD

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One summer when they were all still friends, they were the bridesmaids, determined for once to do their best. Their jobs were to smile and fuss, offer agreement and an extra set of hands. They were to play at intimacy, past and present. They were to overlook that they hadn't been together for the past five years. While they believed the bride belonged in their little human pyramid, they also agreed she'd always been bottom row material. They'd seen the movies and read their Jane Austen. They understood this one time they were to be her back-up singers, her session drummers. Her beaver posse, Cleo said on the day they arrived at the bride's childhood home for their week of pre-wedding Girl Fun, but Cleo had always said things like that. She was spacey and tone-deaf, and since college—could it already be nine years?—had made her living as an escort. Anna, the Legal Aid lawyer and former President's great-great-granddaughter, told her her remark was repulsive.

Cleo said she had just been kidding. “Can’t we just be nice to each other?” she added.

Gwen, the Asian, the smart one with a tendency toward the self-righteous and the cruel—the one who claimed she’d orchestrated Martha Stewart’s return to greatness after her time in the hole—said when looking at Cleo’s tight mini-dress (she really did have an extraordinary body, which many thought made up for her plain face), “Sure. Let’s have sex for money.”

And she didn’t stop there, since it was difficult for her to keep anything of which she disapproved to herself. “Is that dress crushed velvet and Spandex?” she asked.

The rest of the girls said nothing, because she was smart, and it was difficult to cross her. But Cleo had never been intimidated by Asians or smart people, so she said, “Some of us can wear it, and some of us can’t,” and gestured at Gwen’s waistline and made little pinching movements with her finger and thumb.

Gwen said she gathered that what Cleo tended to ingest was pretty low on calories.

They’d met freshman year of college, thrown together by default when it turned out they were the only people in their dorm not in an acapella group. Some of them could sing, and they loved getting on stage as a group on karaoke night and belting out songs, but really, who could stand all that constant harmonizing? They’d always walked the line between teasing and cruelty. It gave their relationships energy and power, as if they’d been told to hold hands and make their way over a cable across a canyon. Holding on was hard but letting go worse.

They were supposed to be getting ready for dinner. The house was a restored barn and farmhouse with various out-buildings that all used to be something other than what they were now. The

bride's wing was the former hayloft with a fairy tale bedroom at one end and a vast living space, now transformed into guest housing for the girls, on the other. They were draped across various sofas and rugs and curled into oversized chairs like a painting of the last days of Rome. From the window seat where she was pretending to blow her cigarette smoke out the open window, Ticien (yes, her parents had named her after the painter, and misspelled the name) sighed. "God," she said. "You people are so—" She trailed off, losing interest.

No one had ever been able to figure Ticien out, and no one had tried. She seemed to make a living doing performance art and drugs. They all did drugs, but no one else made a living at it.

"There's Daphne," Ticien said, gesturing out the window.

They gathered around the window seat like children at the deep end of the pool. They couldn't believe Daphne was the first to be a bride. She'd been the fuck-up with the screwed-up childhood (well, the more screwed-up childhood), the one they'd ushered into clothes and gotten to class, the one who'd slept with half the lacrosse team in a week their freshman year. It had been a movie montage: every night, a different guy making his way to the suite's bathroom. They thought of her as Cleo without the paycheck, and told new friends stories filled with exaggeration about how college had been all about keeping her from running into traffic. Since then, they'd kept up with her by asking each other who she was sleeping with now. They were never more in harmony than when talking about her. She was the one who made them feel better about themselves.

And now there she was walking arm-in-arm with Jack Briggs, 62, DDB advertising, born and raised in Portland, Maine, with two children older than Daphne. When she'd told her mother

his age, her mother had said, “Oh, sweetie, but what will you talk about?” Her father had sent her an ad Jack had created for Metamucil.

The bridesmaids had been surprised. This was a more complicated choice than usual for her. Yes, he was thirty years older, and Ticien and Anna had agreed when they first met him that he had something of the Icky Guy about him. But he was also stable and calm and seemed focused on Daphne in the best kind of way.

They were as circumspect with her as they’d always been when she came to them with her latest enthusiasms. (Freshman year, they’d called her Bad Idea Teen, a play on their favorite *Saturday Night Live* ad. “Well, he’s an ex free-base addict, and he’s trying to turn his life around, and he needs a place to stay. *Bad Idea Jeans*.” “Normally, I wear protection, but then I thought, When am I gonna make it back to Haiti? *Bad Idea Jeans*.”) But they told her how happy her happiness made them, and that was the truth if not the whole truth, and they didn’t feel they were being anything but honest. And she was getting married, after all. They counted themselves as independent women, but even so.

So there she was, the bride, walking across her parents’ Connecticut back forty as if she knew she was being watched. And there they were, watching.

“They look happy,” Anna said quietly.

No one said anything else until Gwen asked if Jack had been married once or twice before. Cleo said she’d heard from Daphne’s father that it was five. Anna repeated the number.

Cleo said that she’d asked about it and Daphne had said she wasn’t worried. What were the chances that he’d fail at it a sixth time? And she’d gone on to say that those other wives had all had

their own opinions, and she was happy to let his opinions rule the day. She was tired of her own opinions. What good had *they* ever done? She *wanted* to ride shotgun for the rest of her life. The girls were quiet, thinking it was true she was less opinionated, but also true that she'd already been riding shotgun most of her life. They all knew what could happen if you got in the wrong car.

They watched some more, all of them thinking some very unbridesmaidly things, some of them ashamed of themselves and some of them not.

“Well, really,” Anna finally said. “What do we know about happy?”

On Friday when Cleo hooked up with the groom, they were unsurprised, and in small, strange ways envious. By that point in the week, they'd given up on being good, as if the bridal shower and the bachelorette Circus Camp day had been all they could manage. So on Wednesday, Anna had refused the massage during Spa Day because she didn't like to get undressed and didn't like strangers touching her. On Thursday, Cleo had said she'd let the dog out before bed, and then hadn't, and in the morning Daphne's mother had spent twenty minutes cleaning the living room rug. Then Gwen and Anna had taken a long hike and had been an hour late to the rehearsal dinner, wandering in sweaty and unshowered. During the drinking afterwards, Cleo had slid her card into the pockets of random men. And who knew what Ticien had been up to, gone for hours after dinner only to return to the house glassy-eyed and purring.

Daphne had smiled and forgiven them all their transgressions. They counted on her having always already forgiven them.

And it turned out that her claims that she hadn't done drugs

since meeting Jack were looking like the truth. No one had seen her drink anything stronger than white wine all week, and she only watched as they spent the night before her wedding downing tequila shots. So by the time they had stumbled their way back to their shared loft, taken what they'd hoped would be beauty-saving doses of aspirin, drunk their weight in glasses of cold water, and laid down beneath 300 thread count all-cotton sheets, they were swollen with sadness. They lay there listening to each other's breathing, feeling laden with it, asking themselves how they would bear the weekend, or the following month, or the one after that. And the more honest of them knew that time wasn't the problem.

And so they were awake when Cleo came lightly up the stairs, her sandals in her hand, her gorgeous body a silhouette in the doorway as she waited for her eyes to adjust to the dark.

"Where've you been?" Ticien asked, as if she already knew, and maybe she did. She was more like Cleo than any of the others.

And at the sound of voices, the rest of them gathered. Thank God, they thought. Something awake in all this quiet.

Cleo reclined on the rug, stretching her arms over her head, pointing her toes. She'd started as a stripper and had been threatening all week to do a pole dance instead of a toast. "Out," she said.

"In New Canaan, Connecticut?" Anna asked.

They sat cross-legged around her, like a séance run by teenagers. "How old are we, anyway?" Gwen asked. She turned on a table lamp, then turned it off. The security lamps lighting the property gave the room an orange glow.

She leaned over Cleo. "Just tell me it wasn't Jack," she said.

Cleo opened her eyes. "It wasn't Jack," she said, smiling.

“Oh,” Anna said. She’d spent her life with these girls feeling like the one Catholic schoolgirl at the party.

Gwen, on the other hand, tended to find the rest of them pathetic. “Perfect,” she said.

Cleo was still smiling. “I know,” she said. She laughed and rolled her head on the carpet side to side.

Ticien said, “Why’re we laughing?”

Gwen said, “We’re not.”

“I hear laughing,” Ticien said.

Gwen turned back to Cleo. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “We were in the playground.” She craned around to look at her back. “I’ve got wood chips on me.”

Years ago Daphne’s father had put in a playground for her. Passersby often mistook it for a prep school.

“The playground,” Anna repeated. “What was he doing there?”

“Playing?” Cleo suggested.

Sometimes Anna hated Cleo, she really did.

While they watched, Cleo rolled onto her belly and kicked her legs lazily against her butt. “He has a huge dick,” she said.

No one spoke. They might’ve had sex. They might’ve just kissed. There might’ve been other things involved. They might’ve done nothing. The girls weren’t going to give her the satisfaction of trying to puzzle it out.

She sat up and stretched her legs. Outside the sky was lightening. “Daphne’s wedding day,” Ticien said.

Cleo shrugged. “I told him I was a professional; it barely counts as cheating, or whatever.”

“You came onto him?” Anna said.

“It was kind of a mutual thing,” Cleo said.

“That’s retarded,” Gwen said. Whenever they got together their vocabularies suffered.

“I told him he should pay me,” Cleo said. “Just so, you know, he wouldn’t feel bad.”

Anna looked at her.

“Seriously,” Cleo said.

It was as if they’d all counted to three together.

“He paid you,” Anna said.

From downstairs came the distant clanking of pans. Daphne’s father got up every morning at five and made breakfast for his wife. Soon they would smell coffee and toast.

“It wasn’t about the money,” Cleo said.

“Where is he now?” Anna asked.

“At the carriage barn, I guess,” Cleo said. “He seemed kind of worn out.”

“Oh, Cleo,” Anna said.

“Oh, Cleo,” Cleo mimicked. “Get over yourselves,” she said. “It’s not like she’s gonna *know*.”

Gwen’s anger had left. She sat in front of Cleo and held her friend’s face in her hands. “What’re you doing?” she asked.

Cleo took Gwen’s hands and brought them down to the rug. “What’re *you* doing?” she asked.

“Who cares what she knows,” Gwen said. “*You* know.”

“And so do you,” Cleo answered. “And you, and you, and you,” she said to the rest of them. She was doing Debbie Reynolds from *Singin’ in the Rain*, but it seemed meaner.

“Hey,” Gwen said, “*I* wasn’t out in the playground.”

“That’s right,” Cleo said. “You guys didn’t do anything.”

A silence followed.

The truth was, she had run into Jack by accident—both of

them insomniac and anxious—and she had come onto him, but it hadn't worked. They'd sat in the tree house and started to talk, but then they'd stopped and just sat there. She'd fallen asleep, and when she woke he was gone. The money was a lie. She didn't know why she did that kind of stuff.

"He said Daphne's friends were his friends. He said we could count on him for help whenever we needed it."

"He did not say that," Ticien said.

"Well, he implied it," Cleo said.

"Implied it how?" Anna said, the weary lawyer.

"You get an ear for these things after a while," Cleo said. "Well, at least I do," she added.

"Who gets an ear for what things?" Daphne asked from the doorway.

No one had heard her come in. After a moment they registered her the way they always did, with a mix of pleasure and shame. They spent so much time talking about her that when actually faced with her, they were always surprised to rediscover the lift she gave them.

Anna stood and hugged her. "We're your Ladies in Waiting, planning what's to become the rest of your day."

"Sounds ominous," Daphne said, coming over to sit on the floor and lean against the sofa. She tilted her head back and started to cry.

A charge darted between them all. It occurred to them that she might know. They gathered around her like birds at a feeder. One held her shoulder, one rubbed her shin. One smoothed her hair off her face. She had tiny hands and large brown eyes. When she cried, they knew what she must've looked like at ten. They waited.

She took some breaths. “He’s good, right?” she said, still crying. “You like him, right?”

They relaxed, understanding this wasn’t about them.

“Why are you crying?” Gwen asked. Everything had a solution; you just had to identify the problem.

Ticien rolled her eyes. “She’s sad, you moron.”

“Daphne?” Gwen prompted.

Ticien took Gwen’s chin and turned it towards her. “Stop ignoring me,” she said.

Gwen took Ticien’s hand and held it down for a moment before turning back to Daphne. “What are you most worried about?” she asked.

It turned out Daphne was worried about everything. Her father. He’d made Jack sign a prenuptial agreement. (Cleo already knew. Daphne’s father had told her by the pool the day they’d arrived. “At least there’s that,” he’d said grimly, watching his daughter swim. At the playground Cleo had asked Jack about it. He’d been understanding.) Also, Jack’s kids weren’t coming to the wedding because Daphne had never even met them. He didn’t want to push.

“You’ve never *met* them?” Anna said, and then after a moment, apologized.

Daphne swiped at her face. “Maybe it’s too hard,” she said, meaning the whole thing.

Gwen said, “You want us to tell you if you’re doing the right thing.” She was using her why-am-I-always-ahead-of-the-crowd voice.

Daphne was crying harder, confusing perception with kindness.

“Oh, sweetie,” Anna said, rubbing her friend’s shoulder. “We can’t tell you that.”

“Why not?” Daphne asked through her tears.

Gwen said, “It doesn’t matter what we think; it matters what you think,” and the rest of the girls nodded. They sat back, their work here done.

“Oh, please,” Daphne said. She stopped crying. “Are you my friends or not?”

Her question didn’t seem to be rhetorical, but nobody answered. She was not behaving as expected.

“Hello?” she asked.

She stood, the rest of them spread around her like landscaping. “Here’s what I’m telling you: I’m scared I’m making a mistake. I need to know what you *think*.”

Downstairs, the dog was barking. Her mother called for her father.

“I will call this wedding off,” she said. “If I need to, I will.”

Her ferocity finally wilted slightly, as if dampened by its own humid heat. “I make mistakes. That’s what I do,” she said.

No one answered, but they all thought of Charlie. He’d been the worst of the cars she’d gotten into.

Her mother called from downstairs to ask if one of them could please take the dog out; he was driving her crazy. And everyone had to eat breakfast. It was going to be a long day.

Her father opened the door. “Up and at ‘em,” he said, and scanned the scene. “What’re you girls up to?” he asked.

Having known them since they were practically children, and having never been privy to the unhappinesses they’d caused his daughter, he liked them. Even *had* he been privy to what they’d done, he might’ve still liked them, blaming, as he usually did, his daughter for her own sorrows. He was a Greek immigrant and a self-made millionaire several times over. He believed you were responsible for your own successes and failures.

“Wouldn’t *you* like to know,” Cleo said. “This is girls only.”

The summer after freshman year she’d seen him walking down First Avenue with his arm around a woman who was not his wife. He’d seen her see him. The incident allowed her certain latitudes.

“Alright then,” he said. “But even girls have to eat breakfast. I have my orders.” With a last smile, he was gone.

“I’m asking for your help,” Daphne said. “It’s not very complicated,” she added, and then she left.

It had never been clear what Charlie had done to Daphne. The graduation plan had been to go to Anna’s family’s place on Nantucket for Dead Week—the days between final exams and graduation—but then according to Daphne’s advisor, her thesis wasn’t going to make the cut unless she stuck around to do some major work. She’d assumed the girls would go without her, and it had been a good assumption. No one would be able to say whose idea it had been, but somehow they’d agreed to stay on campus. Daphne could work during the day and they’d play all night. It would be better than Nantucket. When they told her, Daphne’s face had colored in endearing ways, and whatever misgivings they’d had about changing their plans had dissolved into the warmth of their status as Lady Bountifuls.

The campus had been mostly empty and unfamiliar, as if they’d all stepped into some kind of children’s book, the town’s twin discovered behind some high shrubs and rose bushes. Their dorm was deserted except for their suite of five singles, with one bath and a common room. Charlie was the kind of townie who made forays behind the college walls, and he and Daphne had been sleeping together for a while, so no one thought much of the sounds coming through the walls that last night of Dead Week.

It had been cool for the end of May and their windows had been closed. But Daphne's room had been in the middle across from the suite's entrance, and they had heard the others arrive. They wouldn't have been able to say for sure who they were. It was a group, they knew that, maybe three.

They hadn't been able to hear everything but they'd heard enough. Ticien may have at one point had her headphones on. They lay on their futon mattresses beneath childhood comforters surrounded by stuffed animals and photo collages of Good Times. And all the sounds they heard might not have been sounds of distress. Some of them still told themselves that.

And they'd all thought of getting help and the phone in the common room. But that would have required passing Daphne's door. They'd all listened and tried to gauge the number of people in her room. Maybe she was okay with whatever was going on in there? Would all five of them be enough to do anything if she wasn't? What if it wasn't even Charlie? If things got worse, they'd intervene. Some closed their eyes. Some stared out windows. Some held their breath. They were twenty or twenty-one. They were somebody's children, ashamed and afraid.

What haunted them most, later that night and the next day and the day after, when it became clear that all Daphne was going to say was that Charlie and his friends had gotten weird on her, was the way she had quieted. They'd heard belt buckles hitting the floor and the thump of shoes. They'd heard boy sounds, muffled, but at some point they'd stopped hearing anything at all from Daphne. And none of them had asked that next day which friends, or just how they'd gotten weird.

And now she wanted something from them. They gathered after

breakfast at the pool, its surface quiet and smooth in the morning light. The chairs were still damp with dew, and they sat on the slate instead which was warmer and drier.

Across the lawn the band was running sound checks, and the caterers were setting tables under the vast tent: wedding people doing their wedding things.

Cleo said, “What’re we even talking about? She already knows what we think. We weren’t exactly a chorus of reassurance when she asked what we thought of him. I mean, what do we think can happen here?”

Anna told her that wasn’t the point.

Gwen said that it was the point. “Okay, so we tell her we have major reservations. We give her some evidence for those reservations.” She glanced at Cleo. “We have major reservations, right Cleo?” Gwen asked.

Cleo thought about the variety of reassurances she could offer. She gave Gwen a slow, middle-fingered wave.

Gwen turned away and went on, “And then what? She doesn’t marry him, and we feel shitty. Or she does, and we feel shitty.”

Anna said, “I already feel shitty.”

Gwen said, “Or we tell her all the things we like about him, we leave out the major reservations, and then what? She marries him and she knows we lied to her. She marries him and blames us for years of unhappiness.”

Cleo said, “She already seems pretty unhappy.”

They were quiet.

“Maybe she marries him and they’re happy,” Anna said.

An already-orange maple leaf drifted around the pool.

“Maybe,” Cleo said. She sounded like she was considering it.

Ticien, clear-eyed and calm after orange juice and muffins,

said, “It’s not about what she does with what we tell her; it’s about us caring enough to speak up at all.”

Gwen nodded, but Anna looked as if it was too late in the game.

Ticien, of all people, said, “Are you telling me we’re too pathetic to do even that?”

The sun was over the trees. The sound of silverware and glasses carried across the lawn.

“What’re you saying?” Gwen asked. “We tell her everything? The playground? Cleo?” She looked at them. “Everything?”

“Hey, Ms. Truth Detector,” Cleo said. “I’m a symptom, not the original sin.”

The girls were quiet, imagining Daphne’s childhood bedroom with its Shaker furniture and hand-loomed rug. They imagined telling her everything. They imagined how far back they would have to go. They imagined the pain all around. And they all without a word understood that they would list Jack’s qualities and strengths, the ways in which he was a good match, and hate themselves while they did it. And they understood that they wouldn’t be gathering again anytime soon. Life, they’d tell themselves, had gotten away from them. Because it was one thing to have a secret shame and it was another to have to confess to yourself that you were never going to face it.

But they came together one last time a year later. Their tenth college reunion, not something Daphne had wanted to go to, but the divorce proceedings were underway and what else could she do with herself? Jack was living with ex-wife number five, who he now had to admit he’d never stopped loving. He was paying Daphne a monthly settlement and had promised to resist

his children's pressure to write her out of the will. None of the other girls were any closer to marriage, and the news of the split had been met with a mix of wariness and sadness. So okay, they thought; things will be as they were.

"It's a road trip!" Cleo had effused at the rental agency, insisting on getting a minivan.

Topping the last hill, the college appearing below them, Daphne pressed her forehead against the side window. "God, I hated this place," she said.

"No, you didn't," Gwen said.

Daphne didn't argue the point, but even they could see how miserable she was.

She suffered through the Alumni Parade, refusing to blow the kazoos. She drank and talked so much through the Alumni Achievement presentation that one of the Class Officers came up to their table to reason with her. "Did I sleep with this guy?" she asked Cleo as he pulled his chair closer. She seemed interested. "More than likely," Cleo answered. When Daphne laughed, the guy left.

It was, in other words, the ideal reunion, everyone playing their roles because everyone knew the show wouldn't last. There was even a cameo by Perfect Nancy Flanagan, who came up to Daphne at the Kick-Off Keg and said she was glad to see Daphne hadn't changed a bit. Daphne looked at her, and then said, "Oh, now I remember you," before turning back to the bar.

The girls spent much of the weekend like long-married couples, scattered and socializing with everyone but each other, but last call at the bar after the after-party the last night of the weekend found them squeezed into a red vinyl booth too small for the five of them, ordering final rounds of tequila shots. They

were filled with the goodwill of people on the verge of a long-lasting separation. The self-congratulatory kindness of near strangers.

Around them, people were paying their bills. On the other side of the bar's picture window, their classmates lingered, their sundresses and blazers in mild disarray, putting off the end of something. They'd spent the weekend trying to suggest happiness and success and fulfillment and were tired, but they remained on the sidewalk, rocking side to side, growing chilly in the night air. Ahead of them were hotel rooms with spouses and sleeping children. They stood there, blinking and laughing, their hands falling onto the arms or shoulders of old friends and old lovers. Stay, they were thinking.

And then Charlie was there, smiling and laughing like he belonged, and the girls, like cats who've been waiting outside a mouse hole for days, thought, oh, *there* he is.

Without thinking, Ticien said, "There's Charlie," and the girls looked up. No one looked at Daphne.

Charlie rocked into one of the women's shoulders, and gestured at her date, saying something the girls couldn't hear.

"He's gotten old," Cleo said.

He turned towards the window as if he'd heard her, and they vaguely remembered the thrill of his attentions, but it all seemed like weather on the other side of the world, and he turned back around without noticing them. Daphne was concentrating on pushing her empty shot glass around with a finger, but even she looked like she might be able to make it through this. Pretending and playing you could manage a lot.

Charlie reached out and flicked the woman's hair.

"How does he even *know* her?" Anna asked.

Not long after he and Daphne had started dating, the other girls had run into Charlie at this very same bar. He'd wanted them to know he liked Daphne, really liked her. He hadn't been drunk. For a while they'd sat and listened. Then Gwen had cleared her throat and suggested that Daphne was kind of out of his league, and the others had offered nothing but silence. His humiliation and rage had seeped into the room like flood water. He'd stood there. The girls could see his fists in his pockets moving beneath the fabric like animals. And then he'd left.

"That party at his buddy's place," Ticien said. "The night before graduation. He was all over her, remember?"

"The night *before*?" Daphne asked. "The night after Dead Week?"

It was like something heavy and uneven had been rolled down a flight of stairs. No one spoke.

"You're telling me you partied with those guys the night *after*?" she said.

It took a while for it to reach the bottom, the girls tracking its progress helplessly.

"After what they did to me?" she said. Her face was terrible for them to see.

"I don't remember that," Gwen said.

"What *do* you remember?" Daphne asked her.

Outside, the crowd had broken up, the street empty. Inside, everyone was right where they'd been.

"We all remember," Anna finally said.

Daphne was still looking at them. She stood.

"We should go," Ticien said.

But it was as if that was Daphne's call.

"We still think about that night," Anna added.

“You still think about that night?” Daphne said, her voice as clear as water. “Well. I think about it, too.”

They thought they’d been the drivers, but the truth was she’d always been the car they’d chosen to get into. Where would they go without her?

Daphne had given up looking at them. “I think about every *part* of that night,” she said. And then she left, and none of them followed.

At some point in the years to come, each of them in their own genuine and inadequate ways would try to explain what they’d done. Anna would tell her husband that they’d been scared. Gwen would mutter to herself in the mirror. Ticien would tell her teenaged daughter that Daphne was the one who started everything, and they just followed. Cleo would call Jack, a month after the reunion, meet him for coffee and tell him everything she remembered from that night in the suite. She would apologize for it. He would look at her and tell her that of course she knew she was talking to the wrong person, right? Why did girls do these things to each other?

And Cleo, surprising herself, offered what she knew: Because, she said. That’s what girls do. They do stupid hurtful things until they figure out not to.

And he looked at her with the kindness of a parent. It was the closest thing to forgiveness any of them would receive.

The night of the wedding had been stunning. Everyone said so. White tents lit with white lights. Weather that made people laugh and shake their heads. All the sparkling people in their sparkling clothes.

It hadn’t been about the walk down the aisle, or the first kiss,

or everyone holding their peace. There had been no throwing of the garter, no Dollar Dance, no horseplay with the cake. Gwen had given a toast. Anna had read a poem. Cleo had done her pole dance, more acrobatic than exotic, to hooting and applause. And at the top of the night, as everyone's happiness was cresting, their fear like small sleeping animals outside the warmth of the campfire, the bridesmaids took the stage to belt out their signature song in their best sultry sister voices. Their voices started out low and slow and then rose up and out of the tent, spreading across the lawn. *Gonna use my arms/Gonna use my legs*. Chrissie Hynde had nothing on them. This was for one of their own, and they were a force to be reckoned with. For the final chorus, they pulled Daphne up front with them. *'Cause I gonna make you see/ There's nobody else here/No one like me*.

They held each other. They dipped their shoulders and rolled their hips. They turned their faces to the sky, and waited for all that was theirs and all that was coming to them. They couldn't have been happier.

Karen Shepard is the author of three novels, *An Empire of Women*, *The Bad Boy's Wife*, and, most recently, *Don't I Know You?* Her short fiction has been published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Bomb*, and *Ploughshares*, among others. Her nonfiction has appeared in *The Boston Globe*, *Self*, and *More*, among others. She teaches writing and literature at Williams College in Williamstown, MA, where she lives with her husband, novelist Jim Shepard, their three children and their three uncommonly quiet beagles.

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