

DINNER WITH FRIENDS

BETH: I know!

KAREN: I'm telling you, this whole thing with you and Tom . . .

It's like men get by for years without really talking to you and then, one day, when they finally do, it's to tell you they're leaving.

BETH: You and *Gabe* talk . . .

KAREN (*Equivocally*): Yeah . . .

(*A beat.*)

You sure you don't mind eating outside?

BETH: Not at all; the sun feels great.

KAREN: I feel like I haven't seen you in ages!

BETH: I know.

KAREN: You look wonderful! You really do!

BETH: Thank you.

KAREN: We were worried about you.

BETH: Really?

KAREN: You disappeared on us.

BETH: I didn't mean to.

KAREN: I'd leave messages and you wouldn't call back right away . . .

BETH (*Over "right away"*): I know, I'm sorry, I needed some time to myself. *You know.*

KAREN (*Nods; then*): You're not mad at me or anything, are you?

BETH (*Over "are you?"*): Mad at you? Why should I be mad at you?

KAREN: I don't know . . . When this thing first happened, we talked all the time.

BETH: I know.

KAREN: You dropped *by* all the time, then after a while . . .

BETH: I thought you were getting sick of me.

KAREN: No . . .

BETH: *I was* getting sick of me.

KAREN: Are you sure I didn't offend you in some way?

BETH (*Over "in some way?"*): Karen, why would you have offended me?

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KAREN: You don't think, on some level, you blame me for this whole thing?

BETH (*Over "whole thing?"*): Oh, God, that is ridiculous!

KAREN: It was my idea to introduce you.

BETH: So what?! We were grown-ups, we knew what we were doing.

KAREN: Yeah, but I set this whole thing in motion. All the rancor and rage, the pain the kids are going through . . .

BETH: It was out of your control. That we came together was as much out of your control as our falling apart. You can't control everything, Karen, even though you'd like to think you can.

(*Silence.*)

KAREN: So, I guess you immersed yourself in your work all this time, which was probably the healthiest thing you could've done . . .

BETH: Well, actually, no, I haven't been in my studio in weeks.

KAREN: How come?

BETH: The pressure to paint has totally lifted.

KAREN: Oh, that'll pass . . .

BETH: Oh, I'm not worried about it; I don't want to paint anymore.

KAREN: Why?

BETH: Right after Tom left . . . This *unburdening* took place. I looked at what I'd been doing with my life and it seemed so insignificant to me.

KAREN (*Reassuring*): No . . .

BETH: Yes. I realized Tom was right: I *was* using painting as an excuse not to get on with my life.

KAREN: How can you say that? After all these years? All that hard work?

BETH: Let's face it, I was never very good.

KAREN: That's not true, you're *very* good.

BETH: Karen, you don't have to say that anymore.

KAREN: I *like* your stuff.  
 BETH: It's okay. I'm over it. It's not important anymore.  
 KAREN: Wow. So what have you been doing with yourself all winter?  
 BETH: Well, therapy twice a week . . .  
 KAREN: Good . . .  
 BETH: And . . . I'm seeing someone.  
 KAREN (*A bit taken aback*): Why, you little devil. Isn't that great!  
 BETH: It is. He's a wonderful man.  
 KAREN: What's his name?  
 BETH: David.  
 KAREN: Uh-huh. How'd you meet him?  
 BETH: Actually, I met him years ago, like ten years ago or something.  
 KAREN: Oh, yeah?  
 BETH: He and Tom used to work together.  
 KAREN: Uh-oh, another lawyer.  
 BETH: Yeah, right.  
 KAREN: Oh, well, can't have everything.  
 BETH: *Anyway*, he just happened to call, for Tom . . .  
 KAREN: Uh-huh.  
 BETH (*Continuous*): . . . and I filled him in on what was going on . . .  
 KAREN: Uh-huh.  
 BETH (*Continuous*): . . . and he was very compassionate, and it turned out *his* marriage was falling apart, too . . .  
 KAREN: Uh-huh.  
 BETH (*Continuous*): So we met for a drink and, *you know*, it turned out we had a lot in common. And I've been seeing him ever since.  
 KAREN: Well, it certainly seems to agree with you.  
 BETH: Oh, it's been . . .  
 KAREN: I think it's great you're getting your feet wet. The hell with Tom.  
 BETH: Well, actually, it's a bit more serious than wet feet.

(*Karen looks at her intently; Beth giggles.*)

I'm sorry. Isn't this silly? This is like high school—I'm blushing. It's been so exciting, stealing away when we can . . .

KAREN: How long has this been going on?  
 BETH: A few months.  
 KAREN: Uh-huh.  
 BETH: We're having such a good time.  
 KAREN: A few *months*?  
 BETH (*Continuous*): He's teaching me how to roller blade!  
 KAREN: Oh, God.  
 BETH: I'm getting pretty good at it, too. We play hooky some afternoons and he takes me out to, *you know*, along the canal?  
 KAREN: Do you wear knee pads and a helmet and everything?  
 BETH: Yes.  
 KAREN: 'Cause you could really hurt yourself on those things.  
 BETH: It's fun! You should try it. We'll give you and Gabe a lesson.  
 KAREN: Yeah, I can just see Gabe . . .  
 BETH: He's so full of life—David—he's so open and optimistic. He's a playmate, *that's* what he is, a wonderful playmate.  
 KAREN: Boy, that was fast.  
 BETH: What?  
 KAREN: Tom is barely out the door . . .  
 BETH: Oh, Karen . . .  
 KAREN: You didn't want to be alone for a while? You haven't been alone in a dozen years.  
 BETH: I've always been alone, don't you see? I spent my *marriage* alone.  
 KAREN: But to get *involved* with someone, right away?  
 BETH (*Over "right away?"*): I'm in love with him.

(*A beat.*)

KAREN: How could you be in love with him?  
 BETH: I am.

KAREN (*Continuous*): You've only just started seeing him.

BETH: I knew him years ago, I said.

KAREN: Through Tom.

BETH: Right. We went out socially a few times, the two couples.

KAREN: But that's different.

BETH: I mean, it's not like he's a stranger. The preliminaries were out of the way. There's a history there. There was already a kind of shorthand.

KAREN: I can understand its being exciting, I can understand that. But love?

BETH: Why is that so hard to believe? I fell in love with Tom that first weekend at the Vineyard.

KAREN: Okay, and look where *that* got you. Sorry. (*A beat*) I just think you have to be careful.

BETH: Karen . . .

KAREN (*Continuous*): You're very vulnerable right now.

BETH: Oh, please . . .

KAREN: I don't want you to get hurt.

BETH: I'm gonna marry him. (*A tense pause*) David is not Tom. He's not. They're very different men. There's no hidden agenda with him. What you see is what you get. You know? He *talks* to me; he tells me what he's thinking. He lets me in.

(*A beat.*)

So much of my marriage to Tom was this dark little tango, this adagio dance. I don't want that anymore. I want another shot at it. With David. And David wants me.

KAREN (*Nods; then*): I wish you well.

BETH: Thanks.

(*Pause.*)

He's great with the kids. You should see him with them. They're crazy about him. Particularly Sammy. He's all

over him. Things were so gloomy, after Tom left, you have no idea . . .

KAREN: I know.

BETH: I never thought my kids would laugh again, I mean it, it was that grim.

KAREN: I'm sure.

BETH: I know what I'm doing, Karen. This is the man I was meant to be with. I really believe that. I had to survive Tom so I could end up with David. It was my fate.

KAREN: That may be, but, still, I wish you'd give it more time.

BETH: And let this moment pass? No way. I don't want to let this moment—look, why do I even bother?

KAREN: What?

BETH: You think I'm crazy.

KAREN: I never said that . . .

BETH (*Continuous*): This is my opportunity for a real marriage, a real partnership. But you don't want me to have that, do you.

KAREN (*Over "do you"*): What an outrageous thing to say! Of course I do!

BETH (*Over "Of course I do!"*): I'm finally feeling whole, finally feeling like I'm on the right track, for the first time in my life, and what do you do? You undermine me!

KAREN: I am not undermining you, I'm only thinking of what's best for you.

BETH: Oh; I see.

KAREN: Try being alone for a while. That's what *I* would do . . .

BETH (*Over "That's what I would do"*): What's so great about being alone? Huh? What's so great about it?

KAREN (*Continuous*): I would *indulge* myself; get to know myself better . . .

BETH: That's easy for you to say: you have Gabe, you have this life . . .

KAREN: Beth . . .

BETH: You know what I think? I think you *love* it when I'm a mess.

KAREN: What?!

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BETH: You do. You love it when I'm all over the place, flailing about. I finally find someone who's like a, like an *anchor*, and you don't want to hear about it!

KAREN: That is not true.

BETH: As long as I'm artsy and incompetent, everything is fine. The minute I show any signs of being on an equal footing with you, forget it, you can't deal with it, you have to knock me over!

KAREN: How can you say that?

BETH: Come on, you *need* me to be a mess; you're *invested* in it. Every Karen needs a Beth.

KAREN: That really isn't fair.

BETH: We all play the parts we're handed. I was The Mess, The Ditz, The Comic Relief. You got to be Miss Perfect. Everything just right. Just the right wine, just the right spice, just the right husband. How was I supposed to compete with that?

KAREN: Nobody was asking you to compete with anything.

BETH: You're right, there was no contest; I couldn't possibly reciprocate . . . The hostess gifts you would give me! I could never tell if you were being remedial or just plain hostile.

KAREN: I had no idea you felt this way . . .

BETH: We can't all be like you, Karen. God knows I've tried. No matter how much *I* stir, my soup still sticks to the pot.

*(Pause. In a conciliatory gesture, Beth takes Karen's hand.)*

KAREN: We loved nothing more than having you in our home and cooking you meals.

BETH: We loved it, too.

KAREN: You're my family.

BETH: I know.

KAREN: I spent my first twenty years doing whatever the hell I could do to get *away* from my family and my second twenty years doing everything I could to cobble together

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a family of my own. I thought if I could *choose* my family this time, if I could make my *friends* my family . . .

BETH: Congratulations. The family you've chosen is just as fucked-up and fallible as the one you were born into.

*(They eat in silence.)*

How are the boys?

*(Karen, distracted, nods.)*

And you and Gabe?

KAREN: We're good. We're fine.

*(Beth nods. Silence.  
Lights fade.)*