

Bedding down

By Sarah Trounce

The baby's father was an occasional consultant at the place where Karen worked. She hoped the baby would not inherit his body which was far from desirable. His legs were short and his flesh flabby and pale. He was scruffy too, though they had that in common. His wiry grey hair was several inches too long. His scraggly beard was the result of laziness, pure and simple, though his dark, thick-rimmed glasses dictated that, as a visionary, he could be no other way. His rumpled checked shirt hung out of the back of his corduroy trousers and his tie was shot through with dark brown flecks though it was not enough to disguise the stains that spotted it. Over the top he wore a knobbly, sludge-coloured cardigan, its buttons wrapped in squares of shiny brown leather. They reminded her of squeaky chesterfields in dark clubrooms or those old-fashioned rugby balls, made of pigs' bladders. The leather had peeled off in places, revealing dollops of hard yellow glue. He had not bothered to replace the buttons and neither had his wife. Naked, he had looked almost blue, like a fish gasping for air.

The afternoon he had asked her to go for a drink, she had watched as he sat in the middle of the open-plan office floor, in a glass box where people brainstormed and wrote things on post-it notes, sticking them up with fingers that smudged the glass. All afternoon she had watched him and found him to be restless. One minute he wore a harried expression, his exhausted shoulders hunched, and his small eyes running all over the scrawled pages of his notebook like they were at war with the rest of his lagging body. The next, his feet would be hoisted onto the desk, as he leant back in the chair, shimmying on the wheels. His head lolled like an overripe grapefruit, heavy on a swaying tree. The yawns he produced contorted his entire face and the groan of them, like a wounded animal, could be heard all the way over by the water cooler. When a thought came to him and he considered it enticing, he hammered the table, a feeble gorilla in a tank, ignored by its comrades.

He was a creative. He was a dreamer. That was what they paid him for. *We're on a journey*, was one of his favourite catchphrases. *We're on a journey*, he'd sigh, waving away the agreed number of billable days. *We're on a journey!* he'd yell, pumping his fists and jiggling his upper body so that the cardigan and its cargo bobbed and danced.

When he came into the office on one of his flying visits, he would bring along his dog, with her feral eyes and madly streaked fur, and let the animal run wild, panting and slobbering all over the women's skirts and the crotches of their trousers. He had brought her home from a trip abroad and argued he could not be held accountable for the traits she had picked up before coming into his care.

The dog always went for the women, like she wanted to reside with a pack of her own and finally be rid of the imbecile who did not deserve her, could not control her, couldn't even close the back gate properly to prevent her from constantly escaping. *Fuck you!* Karen imagined the dog singing, as it rounded the corner, disappearing into the morning's traffic of pushchairs and scooters and hurrying feet. The consultant himself strongly resembled a dog, Karen thought, noting his droopy eyelids, his fleshy downturned mouth and the flaccid tongue that kept escaping from inside it.

But that day, the dog was calm, calm enough that Karen worried the animal might be sick. The dog's eyes were fixed groggily at an indeterminable point in space from where she lay bunched up and dejected in a corner, while the consultant napped in his chair. Karen tapped on the glass and he opened his eyes: frightened, then immediately hopeful.

It was late and she felt sorry for the dog as they dragged her outside and onto the cacophonous street. *Good girl*, Karen said over and over to the dog, soothing her matted fur, caressing her warm, gentle belly, as they sat in the bar.

‘All it really takes is for *one* of you to forget the deal you made,’ the consultant was saying, pointing the neck of his beer bottle towards Karen’s face, as if she was the one who had forgotten.

She felt the dog’s breath rise under her fingertips. *Good girl.*

‘It’s like, I wouldn’t have a problem if *she* wanted to get up and leave for a while. Just how would I *stop* her from doing that?’ he continued.

Good girl. She did not look up to answer his question.

‘Now, *you* on the other hand. You seem like an independent kind of a person.’

His words were vague and shapeless to her, like she wasn’t even in the same room.

Good girl. She was still saying it, inaudible to anyone but the animal, when his mouth appeared and she had finally raised her face, more in surprise than desire, and allowed the pink gape of it to swallow her words.

You could say that the baby must have some special power, or else it wouldn’t have come into being at all. Karen was the daughter of parents who, by anyone’s guess, had been too old to have her. *Her* being born had been a miracle too. She wanted to speak to her mother about this fact, this strange coincidence, but her mother was no longer in a position to talk. Karen longed to ask her about all the things she was afraid of, the things she worried she was incapable of giving. Karen’s friend Olivia didn’t have a clue what she was talking about.

‘Don’t you think you ought to be taking better care of yourself? Have you been doing your exercises?’ Olivia pestered when she came over to Karen’s one night.

Karen had lowered herself into a chair, but Olivia hovered in the doorway, a position from which she could better evaluate the situation, it seemed. She had brought with her two bags heaving with green vegetables and out of season berries which she now unloaded into

the fridge, tutting as she discarded the bulk of last week's wilted offerings. Karen drank from the bottle of juice Olivia handed her and it tasted good – surprisingly sweet, like virgin dewdrops on grass – but she made a face anyway.

Most people thought Karen was either brave or stupid. Even the ones who thought she was brave had started avoiding her now she was getting bigger, like the physical aspect of it was somehow less appealing than the abstract idea. Olivia was the only one who had stuck by her. Karen was grateful to have someone who cared enough to check in on her but Olivia wouldn't have been her first choice. It was painfully obvious that Olivia wanted the proximity of pregnancy. She was dying for it to happen to her too and though she was a good deal younger than Karen, dating was still a long and fruitless slog.

At first, Olivia didn't believe what Karen had done, what she had been capable of. Karen had not been in a relationship with any man over the years the two of them had been friends and though Olivia had often broached the subject, her advice had been in vain. According to Olivia, Karen had not shown even a *normal* amount of interest in changing this situation, in making herself a more attractive candidate.

Once the thing had happened – and how it could have been be so successful, Karen had no idea – Olivia had found it hard to believe that Karen didn't want to force on the consultant any kind of parental responsibility, or some monetary reward for her carrying his child.

'It's just a matter of time,' Olivia was saying. 'You may think you're strong. And you *are* – I respect you for that – but it's just a matter of time before you need him for *something*.'

Karen shifted in her seat. She could feel the frown on her face. She tried to manipulate it into something more accepting.

‘Better to catch him *before* the birth, I think.’ Olivia paused, gazing at Karen’s expansive middle. ‘Less threatening.’

But Karen had no intention of making contact. She saw the baby for the prize it was. The consultant was too big a baby himself – *Don’t touch me there. No, not like that! Here. Yes. There. Ok, keep going. No! Not like that. Are you trying to frighten it?* – to be of any help at all. Though he doubtless made more money a day than Karen did in a week, she kept her mouth shut. The baby was a gift she had not anticipated. She didn’t want to draw undue attention to the fact, did not want to be found undeserving.

Karen did not exactly feel aglow. But she felt something alive and radiating, underneath all the layers of stretching skin and swaddling clothes. She had been spectacularly sick at the start but now she sensed she was hitting her stride. The elastic of the maternity trousers felt safe and bracing, like a tight hug. She channelled a renewed purpose as she walked to work from the train station each morning, her flesh bouncing with more vigour than it ever had before. She saw the baby as a pure and fragile thing, a spotless creature, once the size of an almond, that had already transcended its sordid, grunting beginnings. She could not prevent thoughts of the angel from entering her mind.

She had only had one serious relationship in her life. Steve had been twenty-eight, she a student of nineteen, when she had trailed him round the campus library where he worked, dreamily pushing a trolley among the stacks. A respectable enough profession, she thought, having his hands in books all day. He was lanky and tall where the consultant was squat and pudgy, and had a languid, lazy ease to him she mistook for mystique. She’d finally bumped into him in the student bar where he sat alone at the counter, flirting shyly with the sloppy girl who served him and ignoring the students in the back room chattering like monkeys. He had however, conceded to buy a drink for this serious, clumsy girl who wore no makeup on

her papery skin and whose plum-coloured hair hung in bunches down to her elbows – it was before she thought of cutting it – when she dropped her purse on the floor and nearly knocked over his stool as she bent to pick it up.

Karen was more than willing to attend to Steve's modest needs in exchange for a place to escape the other students she was supposed to be mixing with. She was quick to get over the fact that he was incapable of knowing her. It became obvious when they started spending more time together, outside of the barely concealed performance of a date, that she had already seen everything he had to offer. Maybe he was bemused by her, she thought. Maybe she confounded him with her frequent silences and occasional furies. She had the pleasing suspicion that someday, someone might feel at home in her soft, secret body but Steve had no interest in exploring those territories. He took things at face value. He couldn't be trusted to know what to do with something more complicated, more guarded. Karen knew that nothing would change. As a basis for a relationship, she acknowledged it was not ideal, but what she needed now – even more than the dazzling surge of possibility she craved as a child – was a static place, a place to gather her thoughts and work on her insides.

Once he told her, unhappily, 'You talk about books the way other people talk about *fucking*,' and she had laughed, unsure of whether he saw it as an impressive thing or not. It was true in a way. She *did* get excited about learning something worthwhile, something beyond the relentlessly ordinary world that showed its face each day. When the veil was lifted, if just for a moment, it was like it put a fire in her that set off other little fires everywhere else, all around Steve's flat. In his laundry basket, at the stove where she cooked him his meaty stews, in the bathroom where she scrubbed at the stains inside the bowl. She did not mind these activities when her mind was at work. Her frantic hands had a life of their own. And on those days, he seemed grateful to be the recipient of her efforts though she knew he never listened to what she had to say. It was like he thought the sounds and

shapes of her words were enough, as if the ideas they represented would reach him by osmosis. It amused her to think Steve might conceive he had a hidden, higher intelligence.

She never complained when he finished quickly. It was irrelevant. He rolled off and she would stare at the ceiling, eyes wide, thinking of the other things, the more magical things up there. Her mother was among them. And though she scarcely let it happen, every now and again she would lie in bed, unable to move from under the flattening thoughts of her mother. She would feel her face cloud over, Steve's voice distant and shy, her arms and legs paralysed in a pair of pyjamas printed with frolicking kittens. Sitting up the next morning, when she tried to tug herself free, she found their faces stupid and menacing all over her body.

The summer Karen graduated from university, they went to France. From the moment they set off, it was clear that the relationship was in uncharted waters, an expanse that Steve especially did not feel confident in crossing. By the time they arrived at the campsite, sweltering and exhausted, their t-shirts streaked with sweat and dirt, things between them were fraught. And as if to highlight their every flaw, their wrongness for entering a place that required an orderly and bright demeanour just to survive its basic amenities, let alone delight in its simple pleasures; an angel was staying in the tent next to theirs.

The angel was small and sprightly, some might say elfin. But elfin would imply mischievous and she was unquestionably a doer of holy good. Her hair was dark and cropped like a sultry young boy's and she had the face of a quivering doe. Her body was made of unsalted butter. It was cool and slippery, like a beautiful, firm dessert. You could slide a knife right through her and it would come out clean. The angel wore an embroidered white smock, the dress of a simple peasant girl, and she was playing ping pong.

Karen had never seen anyone move with such grace. The angel had formed a triangle with two gangly children, while a toddler napped in its buggy, a look of bliss on its face. She spun and pranced and sweetly gasped as she hit the tiny ball back and forth between her enraptured opponents. Karen looked down at her own body, the soft bulge of her pale stomach and the small doughy lumps of her breasts. Her long hair felt heavy and faintly moronic. When Karen returned her gaze to the game, the angel was in flight.

In the evening the angel cooked spaghetti for the three children and they sat under a tree, their gentle faces dancing in the light of a flickering candle. The angel sipped from a tumbler of red wine while the children, still wearing their swimsuits in the balmy dusk, entertained her in their breathy French voices. She laughed so raucously at their giddy attempts to amuse her, she might have been seated at a dinner party in the elegant apartment belonging to some fascinating and artistic people of her own age. When she carried the dozing toddler – it was a boy Karen now saw – into the tent, kissing him softly, over and over, the other two children clamoured to help her put on his pyjamas and brush his teeth. With the angel, everything was a precious game.

The next morning, as Karen sat in a collapsible chair, drinking instant coffee while Steve snorted and spluttered in the sleeping compartment, she saw with a flutter of panic that the angel was packing up. She was barefoot, wearing a billowing flowered shirt that skimmed her downy thighs. She was striding across the dusty ground, her arms full of towels and toys.

Karen saw that she had dropped something. Something small and yellow.

The angel had her head in the boot of her car, moving things determinedly this way and that.

Karen put down her plastic mug and walked towards her.

Up close, the flowered shirt was lifted, the angel's honeyed haunches taut and soft underneath.

Karen bent down to pick up the thing. It was a child's cardigan, the colour of a primrose. The cardigan was velvety, delicately knitted, with tiny iridescent buttons, the size of petits pois. They sparkled in the sun.

The angel cleared her throat. 'I think it is a little on the small side, no?'

Karen blushed and handed over the cardigan. The angel looked at Karen and smiled, knowingly. Karen could not disguise the facts of her sad, small mortal existence. They were written all over her. She crossed her arms, fidgeted. It was hard being looked at by an angel.

'You're off then?' Karen mumbled. She felt her eyebrows move upwards.

'Yes, all good things must end.'

The angel looked in the direction of Karen's tent. Inside the hole of the door, Steve was watching.

'I suppose,' said Karen, tentatively. 'You seem to manage alright?'

'Oh, things are better here. They have the sun and the woods and the beach. They go as they please. I like to see them free and happy.'

The daughter appeared at the angel's side just then. Karen hadn't seen her coming. The girl nestled under the angel's arm, swaying a little as she looked up at Karen with her big eyes. An urgent anguish was seeping into Karen's stomach. She did not want the angel to leave. She wanted to keep talking to her, to learn her secrets.

'Not much of a holiday for you, is it though?'

'Life will be one long holiday when I am old and my hair is grey. I enjoy the children while I can.'

Karen couldn't imagine the angel at any other age than the one she was right now.

‘I’m not sure I’d be any good at it. Motherhood, I mean. It seems... *unforgiving*.’
Karen did not know why she was telling the angel these things. The angel did not flinch.

‘You will surprise yourself. I am sure of it. I thought I could never do this alone but... the children give me strength. They make me laugh.’

Karen shook her head, baffled by the idea of any man leaving the angel. He must have died. It was the only possible explanation, she decided.

‘Well, it was nice meeting you. Now we have to go.’ The angel reached out and touched Karen’s arm so lightly, it was like a petal falling. Karen jumped a little but something in the angel’s shining eyes told her that she had potential.

After the angel left, neither of them talked about what had occurred but more than once Steve caught Karen gazing at the angel’s tent, and at the place her car had been, as they sipped miniature bottles of cheap lager in the aggressive afternoon sun.

Karen felt like she was floating out of reach. The space from which the angel and her family had vanished felt charged with a white electricity. It hummed in her ears, thick with the memory of fierce love. Sharing a tent with Steve felt seedy and exhausting. They had not had sex since they arrived.

‘When are you going to put me out of my misery?’ Steve said one afternoon, throwing down his magazine.

Karen imagined his body drifting in the pool, the children of the campsite – none as charming as those belonging to the angel – shrieking and laughing when they found it face down and sun-scorched.

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It was clear the consultant was avoiding her. His visits became more infrequent, but he could not keep himself away from the office completely. Today, he was sweating. She could see the perspiration that stained his shirt as he furtively glanced in her direction from inside his glass cave. The dog was misbehaving, howling at the door.

He looked at Karen when he left, hurriedly, but said nothing. Did he think she was just *fat*? She thought, *I know all about you*. She had seen everything she needed to know in those pale, graceless thrusts. Then, he wrote her an email:

Dear Karen,

Sometimes the greatest experiences in life should not be repeated. They exist only to teach us how to be adventurers and pioneers, to be open and receptive to the opportunities we are entrusted with.

I know you understand this as well as I do.

J.

She wanted to scream at him then: *I'm not who you think I am!* But who did he think she was exactly? And more to the point, who was she? Still, she had to admit she liked the idea of being a person to whom others were entrusted.

She thought of the angel from time to time, driving away with the car loaded up to the hilt, her chuckling brood strapped in, a basket of rustic sandwiches tossed into the boot. The angel would put on a CD of a French children's choir and they would rumble along, singing

gayly. Karen could imagine herself squashed into the rear, her knees aching and the seatbelt straining. The music made her soar.

Then there were the moments for Karen when everything went quiet, when her new energy concentrated itself into something stranger, something more unnerving. Like when she herself was driving and she felt the sun suddenly on her face and turning a corner it confronted her vast and warm and full, flooding the car and touching her whole body with its tiny yellow hands. The pulsing golden patch that hit you right in the eyes with a brightness so intense it made you want to lie down and bask. That delicious expanding and brightening when her sunglasses were on and she pulled down the visor but it couldn't be suppressed. It was the promise of life, the promise of love.

She was bedding down, bedding in. She was stocking up the cupboards with onesies and food tins and nappies and wipes and lotions. She had hung a mobile! But all she really needed was right here, in her expectant breasts and swollen belly. So this is what it meant to nest. To pluck straw and gather feathers, stowing the scraps in the pockets of her wings, stitching them into the tangled mass with her beak, smoothing out the lumps and extracting the prickles. She would fill up every crevice of this house if she had to, would drive away the crafty fingers of the dark. All the light they needed was right here.

Karen thought of her mother, the motherly craving in her eyes as she came into the nursery in the morning to find baby Karen, fat and ready and waiting in her cot. She thought of their private moments, her own sweet, plump skin cradled in the lined, delicate hands of her mother as she bathed her, dressed her, held her. The smell of soap on dry hands. She imagined herself in a long line of women, ancient women, their feet dusty and hardened by the sun, their bodies hairy and strong. They were all walking, all working. They were getting up the momentum. Any day now. Any day now their feet would lift off the ground.