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Karma

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Abstract

A short story about a woman, Indira, who undergoes a formative transformation in her understanding of Karma as she flees her mother's home, and finds her own with her three daughters.

Keywords

Short Story, India, Karma, Women

Disciplines

English Language and Literature | Fiction

Comments

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I. Karma

1 / Desert

As a young woman, Indira imagines herself having a long life. She also imagines herself smarter and more lackadaisical than she truly is. So when scars start appearing on her body, she cheerfully carries on. When she is pushed down the stairs, she will say she has fallen. And when she becomes pregnant, with triplets and nothing less, she carries on and pretends it isn't happening until she cannot ignore it any longer. In her mother's rickety wooden home, built on stilts by the river, Indira, for the first time, feels numb. She leaves her mother, but packs the scars that mummy gave her next to a photograph of the last time they were together, and walks.

2 / Desolate

When she gives birth, just over two months early, Indira does not feel care-free. Indira feels like her entire world is about to implode, starting with her cervix. Who knew the pain would be so biting? It is as if a million bullet ants are sitting in her uterus, conspiring against her, she thinks. Sitting in the waiting room of a small charity hospital that is quickly running out of beds, Indira hopes that she might die. She dreams of that place that is heaven, and thinks that it might feel the opposite of what she is feeling right now. The reverse might be that orgasm that Nikhil gave her – after all he came in, and clearly, a part of him stayed, but it was fighting to get out now. That was a part of science, if she remembered correctly: what goes up, must come down. Therefore, what goes in must come out. Indira hopes that this is what happened, because karma is real and Indira wants her retribution to be over.

When Indira first learns about Karma, it is at five years old. While mummy airs her grievances about not having birthed a boy over the telephone, she takes a coin from her mother's peeling leather purse to buy herself an ice cream from the ice cream man. When her mother asks her why her tiny face is so sticky, she tells her. Mummy tells Indira that she is a thief, and explains that she must punish her so that the world does not. Mummy wanted cigarettes, and what had she done that Indira had stolen her cigarette money? This was her karma, too.

"This is karma, Indira. You do bad things, and bad things will happen to you," mummy says as she pulls out her stick begins to smack Indira's small back.

To Indira, karma is the spectrum between red and purple that lives like a sequence of painful galaxies on her back for weeks afterward.

3 / Empty

When Indira tries to leave the hospital with her three (three!) daughters, she cries. She gets up, tries to carry all three premature bundles in both her hands as she walks, spread legged, out the door. After her second daughter was pushed out, the doctors say she passed out. She passed out again after her placenta came gushing through. Her womb feels as though it's sagging in its emptiness. Her arms are so full, and her hopes are so crushed. Three daughters born early is not a recipe for success when you have the money to raise them. Three daughters are definitely not a recipe at all when you have barely enough to feed yourself. Indira is made up of half-used ingredients that are close to expiring, splattered over countertops and across the walls.

4 / Homeless

Indira has managed to pay a little rent on a room that sits over Mrs. Childs garage. Mrs. Childs is an old woman whose life had been full and filled with family for the most part. She is worried about Indira having none. She is worried about Indira in the street and what men might do to her. Mrs Childs is not a philanthropic woman by any means, but she thinks she can recall a time that she herself did not have a family because her mother was cutting off any and all ties that bound her to the idea of home. Her mother fought with her grandfather and there was yelling and maybe it was not the best time but her mother came and hugged her for days afterward. They sat together in a shelter, huddling against a wall with their meager belongings and didn't move because they were afraid. Mrs. Childs does not want Indira juggling three (three!) little girls on her lap in the corner of a shelter. It is bad karma to leave a mother and her children in the streets (her grandfather should know. He was run over by a truck, or so her mother always told her).

5 / Isolate

By the seventh time one of the girls has pooped in her diaper, Indira knows what to do like it is muscle memory. She pulls tiny feet toward her, and deftly unsticks the diaper and wipes gently with scratchy toilet paper. She understands why they cry when she does, because she tears up when that toilet paper touches her vulva. Wipes are a luxury she cannot afford her girls. She has to stand in line for hours just to get them some diapers. It is a good thing that ma'am from the bookstore where she works understands. She has said that Indira should take a break. Indira likes her, she works hard for her – always cheerful on the outside even though that cheer has been spreading through her body less and less as her belly grew heavier with her triplets. Indira sits back with that diaper done and picks up

the one who is screaming. Her eyes are heavy and so is the child in her hands and the weight in her heart but she has to carry them all in this little room.

6 / Seclude

Two weeks into heaving around the triplets like precious bags of lard, Mrs. Childs asks Indira to move downstairs.

“A girl and her children shouldn’t be so alone – let me help with them,”

Indira cries. She sobs, and she cannot stop. She has been so numb and now is starting to feel a thaw in the ice that had spiraled wildly through her body. Mrs. Childs holds her against her shoulder – like Indira herself has done for two weeks for her daughters. Indira thinks that this is what it might feel like to have a mother who loves you. She decides then and there to be a mother that will always use her shoulders to carry everything they need her to.

7 / Forsake

When they are one month old Indira informs Mrs. Child that she has finally picked out the three names she wants for her daughters. The next day, Mrs. Child has put up three hanging strings with blank pennants hanging down.

“Tell me their names, then? We can have our own little naming ceremony.”

Indira runs to the room that she now calls her own with her three daughters, and she grabs a marker. She comes back and very carefully, to make sure she’s absolutely right, writes out their names, one pennant at a time.

Lalita.

Mastani.

Sindura.

She worries that now that they have names, they will mean more to her. More gained is more to lose. She does not feel an immediate change. The weight of motherhood has knocked her to the floor already; she cannot feel the imperceptible daily additions of the weight of love. She wants them to feel the weight of love – she cannot bear that they might become her.

8 / Renounce

Lalita, Mastani, and Sindura are six months old when Indira decides to finally write to her mother. She has learned that she can get a postal box at the post office so that her mother cannot find her. She does that, and tells her mother everything. *Everything*. She recounts Nikhil (*Mummy, remember you told me not to go to the circus? I went. I met a boy there, I know you'd hate him. He was so nice to me. He gave me butterflies. Someone that handsome giving me the time of day would surprise you. I'm living with his daughters now. Karma, yes?*), she recounts leaving (*I didn't want to disappoint you, so I left. You know, I tripped down the stairs when I left. I pressed the bruise on my cheekbone from that fall for a week afterward when I missed being at home*), she recounts giving birth (*You never told me how hard it was to have me. I shat myself. Did you do that, too? The nurses told me not to scream the whole time so that I would have more energy to push. I was quiet through the whole thing, just like you taught me*), she recounts living with her babies (*My babies are growing so fast. I want you to meet them. I didn't even know how to hold them at first. Now I can change a diaper in under 40 seconds if they've only peed!*). She sends the letter home, and at six months realized she has waited long enough for something else, too. Indira waits up for Mrs. Childs, even though her daughters have gone to sleep and that means she can

too. When Mrs. Childs comes home, Indira has made her a strong cup of *masala chai* and is waiting at the table.

“Will you be our godmother?” She is nervous asking this because for the first time in her life, she has a mother who leaves lipstick marks on her cheek instead of bruises. She wants to keep her forever. She wants her daughters to have her forever. Indira knows that she will not be a good mother.

Mrs. Childs smiles and nods, chuckles a little, “I don’t have much of a choice in this matter, do I?”

Months later, Indira’s mother (bound in memories of bruises and smoky cigarette breath) responds to her letter. Indira cannot bear to read it, so Mrs. Childs reads it to herself and then holds it out to one of her many scented candles. The scent of peaches brings about the death of her mother for Indira.

9 / Destitute

When she gets her third grade homework, Lalita gets a little furrow in her brow; she bites her bottom lip with her two front teeth. These two teeth have a delicate gap between them that Mastani has always envied. Sometimes when they go into town, and Mastani holds Lalita’s hand, she looks at girls with metal in their mouths and laughs. Mastani is laughing at the strangeness of having metal in your mouth. Metal is for forks and for the sills of windows. Lalita grips her hand tighter, and pulls her along. One day as they are getting ready to walk through town to compare the lowest prices of rice, Lalita stops her.

“Please stop laughing at me,” she pleads with wide eyes.

“Okay,” Mastani does not know what Lalita means. She starts to suppress her giggles whenever she remembers this.

10 / Apart

The years pass by in the same way braces tighten in the mouths of the girls that Mastani laughs at, everyone gets themselves straightened out and in line. Except, in some ways they are teeth being pulled apart. Indira’s face cracks a smile in relief every single day when she arrives home to Mrs. Childs house and sees the old woman wrapped up with her three girls on the couch. Mrs. Childs has become their grandmother, and Indira has never been more overworked and grateful for Mrs. Childs.

Tonight, Mrs. Childs eases Mastani off her lap and tells her to go to bed, “I’ll send your sisters up after you,” she promises of the sleeping pair. Mastani runs to hug Indira, and refuses to unclench herself from her mother, even at ten years old. They spend more time without one another than with one another. Indira is afraid that they do not know how much she loves them. She reminds them when she can, but she is not home enough to do it. She is working hard, still at the bookstore where she started, and now runs the place for Ma’am. But she can pay her bills now, and she can buy her daughters clothes, and she does what she needs to do to make their lives move forward.

Mrs. Childs is silent for some time after Mastani finally goes upstairs, and as Indira begins to prepare herself a cup of *chai*, begins, “Indira, this is serious,”

“What? I know I’m not home enough, I’m trying to cut back my hours but – ” Indira begins a protest, mostly to herself. She knows her faults.

“I’m old. You know I might die soon. And they won’t know you who you are, but you’ll have to teach them,” she starts.

Indira gives her a blank look.

“It’s better to start now, don’t you think?”

Indira takes weekends off. She starts coming home early (hugs and constantly brushing her hands over them anywhere she can reach them).

11 / Hope

Indira has finally saved up enough money to take her daughters on a little holiday. They are sixteen years old, smart, and loved. It is very important to her that they are loved. Mrs. Childs is still alive (seventy-nine and still going strong), but Indira is thankful that she had started to spend more time with them.

She takes all five of them to a tiny inn in the woods where the owners have promised that a lovely homemade breakfast will be served promptly at nine am every morning. On the second morning (definitely before breakfast, because Indira has become accustomed to waking with the sun), Indira wakes up and brushes her lips across her daughters’ foreheads. She decides that they are each the loveliest women in the country; she is pleased that they have been raised well.

Indira decides to go on a walk that morning. The forest has more greens within it than Indira has ever before seen in her life. She decides to bring her daughters with her later in the day when they’ve really woken up, to bring them out to see the sights of this gorgeous, lush place.

Indira has noticed that she has been making decisions more confidently lately. Probably because they have all led to her daughters being who they are. Lalita is focused and steady, Sindura is fragments of fun nestled within hope, and Mastani... Oh *Mastani*. Her dear little girl is not *quite* normal, she can tell. She speaks a little more slowly than she should, and

she drenches herself in everyone else's emotions. But that wonderful girl is Indira's gem. She will not admit to having a favorite out loud ("you're all my favorites,") but Mastani's genuine caring for anyone and the kitchen sink makes Indira's heart blossom. Truly, India thinks, Mastani has collectively spent at least a day of her short life standing over the sink and scrubbing as hard as she can to make it shine.

Indira decides she is happy now. She sends a hello up to Nikhil as she wanders the woods; she does not know where he has gone, that charm-you-out-of-your-panties circus boy. Likely he is in another town, putting on another show. She knows now why her mother told her never to trust the *circus-wala*. Indira does not regret going now, years later, because that *circus wala* helped her fall in love. With Nikhil? God no. She decides that her triplets (triplets!) are the loves of her life.

Perhaps she wonders if it were him when she heard that the circus was coming around again. Indira never pursued him; Indira is irrevocably in love now and has decided that she does not have space for another in her heart.

In this forest, Indira finds a babbling brook – smooth rocks spill clear water down the hill. She pauses to splash water on her face and as she does, knows that she will be okay.

Indira cannot find that brook again, no matter how hard she searches with her three gems (Mrs. Childs sits in the inn, her legs are too old for this jungle, she scowls).

Indira knows now that her daughters were never result of bad karma for sleeping with Nikhil and doing bad deeds. They were good karma for enduring the lashes that mummy disguised as love for so long. Oh, how angry mummy would be to see her happy now.