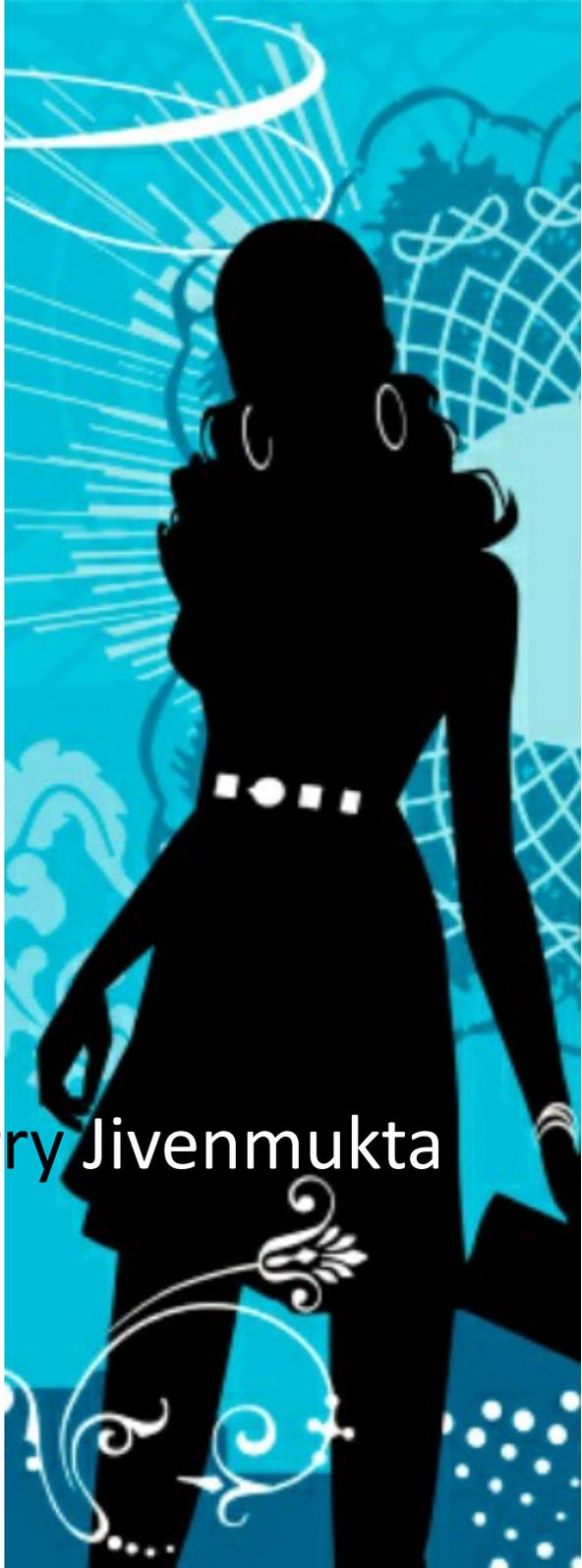


KAREN

By

Harry Jivenmukta



First published 2015 by Loosewords Publishing Company

www.loosewords.org

Copyright © Harry Jivenmukta 2015

The right of Harry Jivenmukta to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988. All rights are reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission of the publisher.

Dedication

I dedicate this story to myself. I have wanted to write about the contradictions and conflicts faced by the children of immigrants for a long time. Meeting Karen, who is also the child of an immigrant, presented the opportunity to write the story.

Introduction

I have written about astral flying and levels of reality in detail elsewhere and so refer to it in simple terms in this story. If you want to know about these practices, please refer to the relevant documents. I find it both boring and distracting to have to explain certain practices over and over again, and so ask the reader to accept this story as it is.

THIS IS A FIRST DRAFT FOR THE BENEFIT OF FEEDBACK. PLEASE FORGIVE ERRORS AT THIS TIME.

Karen Part One – The Long Weekend

Part One

It was 3pm on Friday 30th November. I was just stepping out into the street after the Write Stuff writer's workshop. I have been attending the sessions every Friday for more than three years and have, in fact, never missed a session in all that time. I should explain what it's about. Simply put, like minded people gather to write poetry or prose and share it with the group. We usually write three or four short pieces in one two hour session.

Anyway, I digress from the story. I was stepping out into the street when I bumped into Karen. She started talking immediately as if she had been waiting for me.

"I haven't been in the session today and it's all your fault."

I was a bit surprised at having bumped into her and by her seemingly pre prepared ambush. As someone who never misses the session I felt somehow guilty that, although I didn't know why it was my fault, it must be if she said so, at least a bit anyway.

There was a pause, a bit like the phoney war in 1939 after the world went in to conflict.

"You said everyone already thinks we are an item. So, tell me, how can I be in the same session as you without feeling that they are all watching me and making up their own minds about what I must be thinking and analysing every word that I write? And I so much liked to attend the session. It's not just made for you, you know. And when you passed me the letter last time, everyone saw you do it."

She waved the letter in my face without realising that she was now displaying it even more brazenly than I had, for everyone to see, although there was in fact no one around. For the benefit of my readers, I now present the offending letter for your eyes only.

Dear Karen,

Why am I writing this? Probably because I am a writer and have the bad habit of writing too much. Seriously, it's because we don't really have the opportunity to talk at the writing sessions and so I thought a letter might be a good idea.

Everyone at the writing session thinks we are an item already and so it might be a good idea to get to know each other better, just in case. My details are: (I have omitted my address and telephone number in this account)

Anyway, text me or phone me and we can meet. I live at the other end of the road where we attend the writing workshop and so you could come to my flat if you like, or I could come to yours if you prefer. We are no longer teenagers and so don't need to be shy or too reserved.

Let me know. Harry.

Well, I thought the letter was pretty succinct and to the point. There was no reference to romance or any such matter; after all we didn't know much about each other.

"I'm sorry, Karen," I began, and then ran out of words.

We walked along the road away from the workshop and towards my flat, at the end of the same road.

"Ok," I began again, "but do you want to us to get to know each other better or not? Is there something there or isn't there? Did you feel the same as I did when we met for the first time?"

She walked along silently, but I knew there had been a spark. It started spitting a bit with rain and so I asked her if she wanted to come in for a cup of tea, or something, and also to pursue our 'getting to know each other' process.

She stopped at the car park entrance to the flats and looked up at me from under her coat hood. When I said she looked up, it's because she's only about five feet tall, slim, with long black curly hair, Indian, well spoken, and from London. Actually the only one description of the last several ones I have given, led her to look up at me; the one about being five feet tall.

Since her original outburst, outside the workshop, she had become strangely silent, and didn't say much at all. So we stood at the entrance to the flats and just looked at each other. I tried to look respectable and honest, just in case that might lead to a next step. In the end it was the rain that decided it for us both. It started to come down hard and that convinced her.

As we walked up the stairs to my flat, my mind went into overdrive. I thought about if I had left the flat in a mess, whether she would want tea or coffee, and if there were enough eggs for breakfast if she stayed the night. Just before I began fantasising about how she might be in bed, we arrived at my front door and that brought me back to the present. After all, all we had done so far was walk along the street together. We hadn't even held hands.

I took her coat and invited her to settle down on my sofa. "Would you like a drink?" I asked. "I've got; tea, coffee, pineapple juice, apple juice, orange juice, tomato juice, or a nice bottle of Australian Chardonnay." I realised I was trying too hard but it was too late now. She thought about it and then said she'd like a cup of tea and a glass of wine. Strange combination or what?

We had relaxed a bit by the time the tea had been drunk. Incidentally, I had also decided on tea and wine, just to make it seem normal. And so it was on to the wine. I was quite nervous and could easily have drunk the whole bottle myself in five minutes flat, to calm me down, but in polite company you have to behave yourself, don't you?

"There are two ways we can get to know each other better," I offered. "One is to talk about everything under the sun, including all our previous histories, both good and bad, happy and sad. The other way is to declare year zero."

"So, what is year zero then?" She asked exactly as I had expected her to.

“Well, year zero became famous in the 1970s, in Cambodia. The government decided to start again as if it was a new beginning and declared that they would start the dating system at zero. It didn’t last long because no one else in the world agreed. It can work between us though, because we aren’t asking anyone else. It’s just between me and you. In effect, it means that we start our relationship as a blank piece of paper. We don’t need to carry the weight of the world on our shoulders. We can be as light as a feather. We don’t have to trawl through the past. So, which one do you want?”

I had presented the offer to her that really left no choice and she fell into line but with reservations.

“Year zero sounds good,” she began, “but we can’t ignore everything that has happened in the past. All our likes and dislikes and stuff like that are based on our previous experiences.”

“You’re right,” I agreed, “but with year zero we can bring matters up as and when necessary, and because we are starting anew, they are like remembering a past life; important yes, but they are only a memory.”

With that bit of wizardry on my part she relaxed immediately and I watched with interest as she unfolded like a flower in the morning sun, even though it was now almost evening.

Part Two

We were in the supermarket because I had invited her to stay for an evening meal. There was lots of food at home, but she said she was a vegetarian and so I told her we needed supplies. The rain had let off a bit and the supermarket was only a few minutes walk away. I got a trolley because I decided I must get the ingredients for a proper evening meal and potentially for a good breakfast as well.

I asked her to select whatever she fancied and I shopped for breakfast, although I didn’t tell her that. I got eggs, mushrooms, spring onions, cheese,

tomatoes, cottage cheese and wholemeal bread in case I was called on to cook my signature breakfast dish; after all I do tell everyone that I am the second best omelette maker in the world. And, I do wonder whether girls like me for me, or like me for my breakfast the next morning. The number of times I have thought about that. I also remembered to get an extra couple of bottles of wine to supplement my stash at home. By the way, the reason why I say I'm the second best omelette maker in the world is because no one would believe it if I said I was the best one, would they?

Part Three

Although I am a good cook, I wanted her to contribute to the evening meal so that she would feel more involved and an equal partner in this venture. As most women are, she was practical and matter of fact in her cooking, and was soon buzzing along, stopping only occasionally to ask me where I kept this or that ingredient. I opened a new bottle of wine and poured us both a glass without asking her first. She accepted it and the evening proper had begun. I have a radio in the kitchen and asked her what she wanted to listen to. Karen said she had nothing in mind and so I tuned into a Hindi station that usually played songs from old films. We were soon smiling along to the classic tunes, and I even ventured to hum a line or two. I didn't think she was ready yet for my bursting into song and so suppressed my instinct to do so.

"So, tell me about your life," she asked.

"Year zero," I declared, and then went on to tell her of the last four or five years which I was comfortable about. "...and so, in conclusion, I am a Zen-man, a Tantric and a writer. Don't worry about the Zen or the Tantra, but we can share the writing."

"And what about you," I asked, not really wanting a long winded answer. She simply replied year zero and we left it at that. In any case, I didn't want to know about previous relationships, broken marriages and all that. All I wanted was to relax with her this evening and see where it led.

Part Four

I always wake up early, and as I turned in the bed I felt her body next to mine. It took only a split second for everything to fall into place and then I was up to speed. Her face was only inches from mine and she looked lovely, with her hair spread all over the pillow, and her soft breathing with a hint of a nasal snore.

I slid out of bed and put the kettle on. In the living room, I lined up the three bottles of wine, two empty and a third half full, and switched on the TV. I was in automatic mode; that's what I do every morning, and it wasn't until I had a cup of tea in my hand and the early morning news telling me the day's headlines that I realised this was not a day like all the others. In the bedroom there was a girl in my bed. We had made love, what, on the first date!

It began dawning on me that now there was something else besides tea and news to work on. And she was Indian! Now, for those of you who don't know, Indians of my generation very rarely have one night stands with other Indians. One night stands are fine with anyone else, but Indians expect commitment like that to lead on to other things. And then I remembered something she had said:

"I've been living on my own for four years now and I'm not sure I could live with someone else."

This meant that if she accepted me, which she did last night, she would be thinking this morning of a life together. The hairs on the back of my neck were standing up and a chill went down my spine. We knew nothing of each other and yet there was an implication of mega proportions. You see, it's got something to do with arranged marriages. When you are old enough to get married, someone arranges it all for you, there's none of this, do I love her, and does she love me business. Love and stuff like that comes later.

I didn't know anything about her. Let's play year zero! So much for that little ploy; year zero might mean forever! I stopped myself from thinking too much and decided to slow down. I didn't know if she had been married before, had children, or anything. But then again, she didn't know about me

either. This called for a drink, and so, at 5.45am I poured myself a glass of wine from the half empty bottle and drank it down in one.

I took her a cup of tea at seven thirty. I always do this with girls in my bed because I am always the first to get up and seven thirty is almost lunchtime in my world. I kissed her gently and when that didn't work, I started to work my fingers down her neck. Instinct brought her round before I could get to her breasts. She held my hand in hers, looked at me glassy eyed, and then I saw the creasing up of her features as she realised where she was. She became self conscious then and tried to cover up.

"A cup of tea." I pointed to the bedside table.

She sat up and quietly accepted it. There were no words. At least I had been able to rationalise all this on my own, in the living room. I expected that she was doing exactly the same as me, but had to do it with me watching. I wanted to leave her to her own thoughts but she did look really appetising and what I really wanted to do was have sex with her right now. I couldn't pull myself away until she asked what time it was. That broke the spell and then I did manage to get out of the bedroom and leave her to her own thoughts.

Part Five

"I haven't got anything to wear except the outdoor clothes I came in," she said in a matter of fact way.

I pointed to my two rails of clothes. "Wear anything you like. One of my t-shirts will come down to your knees, and there are some track suit bottoms. They have a drawstring so really, there is a whole wardrobe for you." She looked at me unconvinced. "Look, you get sorted, there's loads of hot water for a bath, and then I'll make us breakfast."

I am the grand master at breakfast for girlfriends, and so I cooked mushroom omelettes, with cottage cheese, wholemeal toast and hot mugs of tea. She might only be small but she ate like a trooper about to go to war, and was a

wonder to watch as she shovelled everything in sight almost impossibly into so small a belly. We didn't talk at all over breakfast, I imagine both of us for the same reason; because we are Indians and there was the huge question of what next, sitting like an elephant in the room and squashing us into the crevices of the walls.

After breakfast, Karen was transformed and looked bright and cheerful. She looked around the living room from her seat on the sofa, seemingly assessing everything; stocktaking perhaps? I sat next to her and held her hand.

"I'd better get dressed and get on my way," she said.

I looked at her and thought about where there was to go? Then I said: "and where will you go? Where is there to go?"

"I do have my own flat, you know."

"No. I don't mean that. I mean where is there to go? I'm happy, and so are you. And the things you are going to mull over in your flat are in regard to me. And the thinking I will do will be about you. So, doesn't it make sense that we do our thinking in one place, together, and where necessary, apart, in separate rooms?"

"Well, just because we slept together last night doesn't mean that the world has changed forever. I still have a flat to go back to, and I need to do some shopping and open the mail. And I haven't got any more clothes here, just yesterday's."

"I don't think you understand," I said. "We have changed, both of us. And you can't answer the questions you have without asking me for information, and it's the same for me. OK, let's just try for the next half an hour or so, and then decide if I'm right or not."

She sat, looking at me, waiting for me to start. I really didn't think she had got the gist of my position. It is simple really. Why do we have to walk away to the familiarity of our own environments, and then toss and turn trying to solve matters when we are precisely as far away from the object of our ques-

tions as possible? Wouldn't it be easier if we simply stopped, listed our questions as far as we could, and then asked for answers from the person directly?

"Right, I'll start," I said. "Was it just a one night stand?"

Karen: What sort of question is that? You do know that there were two of us there and the question is more complicated than a simple yes/no answer.

Harry: OK. Was it just a one night stand for you, as far as you can make sense of it right now?

Karen: I don't know. She paused. No, it wasn't a one night stand.

Harry: If it wasn't a one night stand, what was it?

Karen: Well, for one, we have met before a few times and there was an attraction. And for two, I'm still here. I didn't slink off at dawn. We have had breakfast together. And we will probably meet again.

We both fell into silence.

"You are strange," she said after a while. "Most people just get on with it. You know, yes we made love, but life goes on. People don't ask so many questions or analyse."

"You can ask me questions as well, you know. Go on, ask me some and see if that helps your thought processes."

She shrugged her shoulders but the silence weighed heavily on her and so she had to ask.

Karen: So, was it a one night stand for you?

Harry: No. I've never had a one night stand.

Karen: So what was it? For you?

Harry: I knew from the first time I saw you that there was some chemistry between us. One night doesn't satisfy my feelings. There is always more, layers and layers to every person.

Karen: So, what do you want us to do now?

Harry: At least spend the weekend together. Find out more than just a bottle of wine and fumbled drunken sex.

She looked away, out of the window. I got up and went to put the kettle on.

I have always been disappointed when people let good physical and emotional experiences simply disappear in the cold light of day, turn a golden sun soaked experience into a cold December morning. I've always been intense in most things I do. I don't like, and cannot, simply be turned on and off like a switch. Just because we are expected to return to the humdrum of the everyday, we allow ourselves just a glimpse of something different, something that gives us ecstasy and happiness. Why should it be just fleeting? How can you put emotions into a box? Can we measure our pleasures in hours and minutes? And I return to the question; where is there to go? Where can we go? Aren't we free enough to shake off the shackles that bind us to the everyday, to decide to stay in bed for a whole weekend, or just relax into each other as if there were nothing else? And as far as the rest of the world is concerned, we don't matter to anyone else. And so, why do we insist on being there for the world to see us? If we didn't emerge from our homes for weeks, no one would really care, would they, and after a few days we ourselves wouldn't think it was a big deal that we disappeared for days on end. When we step outside again, everything is still the same, isn't it?

These were my thoughts, and after making a cup of tea for us both I went back and told her, word for word, what I thought. She listened and was impressed, or so I thought. But she did keep sitting there and we did keep holding hands, and we did.

At about eleven she said; "But, I still need to get some clothes and stuff. I can't wear oversized men's clothes all weekend."

Although I wanted her to stay with me and I wanted us to be two Robinson Crusoes, shipwrecked and abandoned on our own in my flat, reality and women's needs made me accept the compromise of her requirement for more 'stuff' as she had put it. I proposed that she go in a taxi, get her 'stuff' and return here, but for the experience to be as good as possible I asked her to come back as soon as she could. It crossed my mind that she might not return at all, make an apologetic phone call and cry off. I had to trust her and in any case I wouldn't want her to return under duress; for me it had to be genuine.

I also had another reason to be content with her decision to be away for a while. The problem with Saturday was that I always watch and listen to the football matches from 12.15 when Football Focus begins, until almost seven thirty in the evening when the commentary of the late kick off ends. And today, the late kick off was Reading at home against my team, Manchester United. Love or no love, seduction or not, I wasn't going to miss that match, oh no!

And so, I timed it that she booked a taxi for 12.10, just five minutes before Football Focus started.

Part Six

When she shut the door behind her and left, the first feelings I had were of loneliness. Now, I'm never usually lonely especially on Saturdays, during the football season. Today though, no matter how much I tried to enjoy the football previews, my mind kept wandering to the subject of Karen. It is really strange, isn't it, that a small change to routine can throw everything off course. I'm not saying that Karen is only a small change to my routine, but if you think about all the things that make up the whole person, it puts it into perspective. After all, she has only stayed one night, although she has been on my mind for several weeks.

Anyway, Football Focus came and went and I can honestly say, I can't remember any of it. I put on BBC2 for the snooker, muted the sound and

turned the radio on, for live coverage of West Ham versus Chelsea, the lunchtime kick off. Life is a lot like football, although you can also compare it to other things as well. All the football teams start the season with no points, but also they are not equal. Some teams have cost hundreds of millions to build and they will expect to win trophies, whilst others have just been promoted and will be happy just to survive the season without being sent straight back down. And, during the season there will be ups and downs, just like in life. I reflected that at the moment I was definitely on the up. However, the managers say that one win doesn't make a season, which is true, but you can enjoy the moment, can't you? Like this match, with West Ham, the newly promoted club beating Chelsea 3-1. Sweet!

My phone rang. It was Janet. I'm having a book of poetry published and Janet is contributing the artwork. She just wanted to remind me of our meeting next week to finalise the publication. I told her I would never forget that meeting and noted that this part of my life was also a win. I told her to prepare for fame and fortune and go out and get a posh frock. She was none the wiser until I reminded her of my fantasy of us both collecting an OBE for our outstanding work, the least society could do to recognise our immense talent.

The three o'clock kick offs were just getting under way, and I had a bit of a wobble regarding Karen. She had been gone now for almost three hours, and although women always take time with outfits and the like, I wondered if she was going to come back. Deep inside I knew she would, but the mind can get a bit anxious over little things. On the positive side, it meant I could carry on with my football fest, although I had hardly registered anything at all. This was the highlight of my weekend, but apparently not this week.

Karen appeared at my flat at exactly 3.45pm, just as the half time whistles were blowing and for once I wasn't interested in the football. She came in breezily, with an overnight case and a carrier bag. She walked straight into the bedroom, put her case down and returned holding the carrier bag up high:

"I did some shopping," she said. "Have you eaten yet?"

“No,” I replied

“Chiabatta loaf and a British cheese board,” she declared.

So we had a buffet, more like a picnic, but indoors. I added ham and meaty stuff to my sandwiches, whilst Karen produced a jar of olives; very upmarket! We did also have some wine, one of us more than the other, I must confess.

The way she behaved, made me think she had made her mind up about us because she was more relaxed and felt part of the flat rather than a guest. Maybe going back to her flat and being in her familiar surroundings had helped her to work things out. There was one thing amongst everything else that bothered me though. We were both Indian but I wasn't sure how Indian she was. It often happens that people look very liberated and free outwardly, but sometimes underneath, they are as traditional as their parents or even more traditional than them; subconsciously seeking out the arranged marriage contract that may have failed them the first time around. I hadn't asked her though, whether she had been married before. There was one way to find out:

“Karen, I want to ask you a question that breaks the Year Zero rule.”

She stopped mid bite and looked at me suspiciously.

“Have you been married before?” There, I had done it, and her answer would certainly give me clues to how Indian she was.

“Year zero,” she replied and carried on eating.

It was clear that she wasn't going to say and so I decided that bigger questions would have to wait. So, I just enjoyed the moment and took another slug of wine and a slice of ham.

Part Seven

It was dark outside and the rain, which had been spitting nearly all day, was now lashing against the window. We had simply sat together on the sofa, she lightly napping, and me trying to follow the Reading match against Manchester United on the radio, the volume of which was so low, I could hardly hear anything. Anyway, Manchester United won 4-3 with all the goals coming in the first 35 minutes; another win for me. I was beginning to think I was on a winning streak especially with Karen folded into me and with her hair spread across my chest.

After waking up and blinking into the moment, Karen broke the Year Zero rule and said:

“I was married before.”

The sudden admission left me silenced for a few seconds and then I told her that I had also been married before. As it turned out, we had both had arranged marriages and now my theories could begin to flourish. I knew instantly that this was leading to a long term relationship or more, and the only way to stop it, if we wanted to, would be to stop thinking like Indians, immediately! I could feel her brain whirring away as well, thinking the same as me because that was all we were capable of thinking like.

“How Indian are you?” I asked her.

She wrinkled her features, confused by my question. Actually, it is all she could have done because she didn't know my definition of Indian. I explained my thinking to her.

“Basically, it's all about upbringing, when we are all brainwashed into thinking like our parents. That happens to children from any background because we cannot help but learn from those around us. The problem is that our parents were from India; my ancestors were peasant farmers, and they can only think in that way. But we are not peasant farmers. We can be anything we want to be but our thinking is still dominated by the peasant farmer mentality. That is why we both fell into arranged marriages without questioning the system.

“In the village, you can not meet or talk to the girls, mainly because of custom, but also because that relationship has no future. If you keep marrying girls from your own village, eventually you get inbred families. And, because you are a farmer, there is no need to travel elsewhere; your work is in the fields. So, when you are of marriageable age, your family finds a suitable partner from another village and you get married. It makes a lot of sense in the Indian village. And, you can apply the same logic to most of our other beliefs. The problem is that we don’t live in a village in India. We are educated, we are mobile, and we are living in a multifarious society. We can make decisions for ourselves but are equipped with a set of values that are not really relevant. We are like dinosaurs living in the modern world.”

I had gone into one of my diatribes and left Karen simply listening open mouthed and wondering what had led me to this. It was, after all, supposed to be a love filled Saturday night.

“You really are a very strange person. You have to analyse everything and you think so much.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” I said. And then I asked again:

“You don’t have to say anything now, but think about it and let me know; How Indian are you?”

And we left it at that.

Part Eight

Sunday morning was very similar to yesterday morning for me. I woke up early, slipped out of bed and made tea, and turned on the news, all on automatic pilot. This morning though, I was much more relaxed. Karen had stayed the night again, and that sort of cemented the deal. I knew now that it wasn’t a one night stand. There were still huge gaps of information though, and caused by me. By applying the Year Zero principle, I had shot myself in the foot and knew nothing about her. She seemed to be happy not knowing about me which I found strange because women usually want to

know everything. I took her a cup of tea at 7.30 and had decided that she was also going to get sex as well. In the end she didn't get to drink her tea at all and I had got my way; always a good start to the day, I think.

Breakfast wasn't that elaborate this morning because Karen wasn't the ravenous trooper she had been yesterday. And I had a treat for her in any case. I know of a café, run by a Syrian woman, that I like to think is my own secret hideaway that no one else knows about. Obviously, other people do know about it otherwise it would have gone bust, but I like to think of it as my secret place. It's hidden away down an alley, off a side street in town. So I took Karen there for brunch, another posh activity, like olives.

I picked up a Sunday paper on the way, out of habit rather than any desire to read it at the table. We ordered some sweet cakes, I don't know their proper name, and small cups of strong Turkish coffee, served together with glasses of water. I have never known the proper protocol in drinking the coffee and water, or which to drink first. Karen followed my lead and so too is now a confused coffee drinker.

Back at my flat, Karen attended to the lunch, evaluating all the leftover vegetables and other ingredients. I observed her even closer now, watching how she fell in to the role of wife, as defined by the peasant farmer code. It hadn't occurred to her that she was in my flat, not hers, or that I might want to help her with lunch. I must say, it was a very happy situation for me; being waited on by a modern woman who couldn't help but fall into a traditional role, a role that she had been impregnated with from childhood.

"I suppose I'm quite Indian." Karen was beginning to analyse my question. "In fact, I must be a lot Indian because I grew up in an Indian family. But I don't see what that's got to do with us."

"It has everything to do with us," I explained. "You see, when I first saw you at the writer's workshop, the same triggers that are in you were also set off in me. Why didn't I want to have a relationship with the other women in the room? Why was it with you? It is simply because at a sub-conscious level I was looking for an Indian girl, and you were looking for an Indian man. Despite your failed marriage to an Indian man, the pain and the consequences

of being single at your age, you are still drawn to the Indian man again because you have been filled with all that expectation since childhood. You can not do otherwise because the strength of your past drives you on inevitably.

“I have noticed in myself that I still act very much to the peasant farmer code as well, and my immediate attraction to you is because you ticked all the boxes. But, whose boxes were ticked; mine, or the boxes of family, society, and upbringing?”

We were quiet then, in order for Karen to begin digesting this information which was new to her. And then I dropped the bombshell:

“We could get married as soon as possible and would probably be happy enough. We’ve been together for two days, this is the third, and you’re thinking it is impossible to make decisions like these so quickly, but just think and tell me; how long were you with your husband before you got married to him?”

“I wasn’t. It was an arranged marriage. I did meet him in the family home first and we had photographs and a few telephone conversations.”

“When I met my wife,” I explained, “I saw her once in a tea shop in the Panjab before we were engaged. I didn’t take any time at all to make my decision because it wasn’t anything to do with me, was it? The system tells us that. I was married for over 20 years, and have three children. We were happy in the sense that we were fulfilling the process.

“And so, look at you, here, now. You have already fallen into your traditional role. Who cooked the lunch and who cleared it all away afterwards? And whose flat are you in? Mine. And yet, some of the domains of this flat already belong to you, as is expected.

“In Fact all of your life, and mine, have so far been run to the system, on time and properly.”

Karen was a bit confused, I think, both at these revelations and the speed and directness of my delivery. “I’m not sure I understand the bit about the ‘system’ as you put it.”

“Well, let me tell you about me, and then you can apply it to yourself and see if it rings true. I did everything that was expected of me. I went to school and got good grades. There was never a discussion about going to college, and then university. It was expected. I left education, and after a few years of not doing a lot, I got a job, got married, and we presented the family with a first born son just as expected. We had a further two children. I bought the obligatory house, detached, and we had two cars in the driveway. I had a business, and a job, and we were pretty perfect and as expected. Now, think about yourself.

“But, just before you do, remember why you are now a failure in the eyes of the system. I woke up and realised that I was still a child at 36 years old; I was still basically doing as I was told. I was declared a failure because I got divorced and sought out my own, my real life. You are a failure because you are divorced as well and because you couldn’t deliver the first born child in line with the expectations of the system.”

I got up and wandered away to the kitchen; she was going to need a lot of time to digest all these revelations and information.

Part Nine

It was deep into the evening before Karen and I could talk properly again; there had been too much intensity.

“We could just go to bed and make love,” I offered. You will notice that I said love and not sex. Women tend not to have sex, but prefer love. Men on the other hand have sex. It is the same; perhaps two sides of the same coin.

"I'm confused," she admitted. "But a lot of what you have said makes sense to me. You know, about the system. Do you really think we could get married?"

"Of course, but only if we're Indians. Really, we are at least two personalities; we have the Indian side and the British side to our make up. If we both switch into Indian mode there is no reason why we shouldn't get married at once. After all, we know much more about each other than we did when we had our first marriages; and we've had lots of sex and know that's a fit too. The problem comes if we accidentally or purposely switch to our British side. That tells us that marriage is a big deal that you have to be certain about before taking such a huge plunge. Of course, they are wrong, because so many of those marriages fail as well. So, if you are in Indian mode we are already fully committed to each other, aren't we?"

"I don't want to believe that we are just automatons, that there's nothing else to us." Karen was showing me a different side and I could feel her wrestling with all the stuff we had been talking about.

We had a 'sort of' evening meal and then went to bed. I was tired in my mind but the body was still fresh and so it was the most intense of nights; we made love (had sex) several times and each time I woke up I wanted more.

Part Ten

I woke up exhausted on Monday morning, mainly because of the sex, but also my mind was tired. If there was a lot for Karen to take in, it also had an effect on me. I went through my early morning ritual of tea and news. I looked around the living room and thought of all the little simplicities of my life; the poems, my plants and the simple pleasures of football and beer. If this relationship went any further we would be in new curtains territory. That's when you get the inexorable invasion of the other person, who wants to move things around, and add bits of stuff, here and there, and probably deny me some of my most precious stuff; drink less, get a job, turn off the football and turn on Coronation Street!

When I took her the regulation cup of tea at 7.30 there was no intent or designs for sex. I also noted that taking her a cup of tea at a certain time was the beginning of a new routine, the start of an insidious process of the everyday. She looked bright enough this morning and told me she had to get to college for her lectures. She was studying something to do with counselling and psychotherapy.

“So, when are you expected at college?” I asked.

“The first lectures are not until the afternoon, but we’re supposed to do some library work and project research in the morning session.”

I thought to myself that the morning stuff wasn’t probably so important and maybe I could have the morning with her; a final hurrah before I could declare the long weekend complete.

It wasn’t to be an easy winding down sort of morning because Karen was still pondering the revelations of the last few days, and had questions.

“I’m not sure about your ideas of the system or the automatic way we live. I think we do have lots of choices and can make decisions for ourselves.”

We were having toast and marmalade for breakfast. “Let me tell you a story,” I offered. It’s better sometimes to tell something in a story format because then it can be recalled more readily than just conversation. A story has a beginning, middle and end, and the moral or purpose of the story means it hangs on a structure that is more organised and memorable than just words in conversation.

“Imagine that you’re going on holiday for a week and have decided to go to Edinburgh. You get the train to Leeds, and from there you need a north bound train. You accidentally get on a train going south and don’t realise until the first station, Doncaster. In your confusion the train sets off before you can get off and you continue southwards. You have feelings of embarrassment and anger and frustration, as each minute takes you away from your intended destination. And then you have to think about your ticket; get an-

other back as far as Leeds because then your original ticket will be valid. All in all it's pretty annoying.

“Another thought strikes you. There is no reason why it has to be Edinburgh; you haven't got anyone in particular to meet, and you haven't pre-booked hotels or anything. You could as easily continue south until you find somewhere you might want to visit; there's Wales, London, the south coast, amongst others. And it will be easier. You will have to get another ticket, but you would also have to get another ticket in any case if you want to return to Leeds.

“In the end, the ticket inspector forces you into a decision and to avoid explanations and embarrassment you simply buy a ticket to London.

“And so we come to choices. I put two more slices of bread in the toaster and put the kettle on before continuing.

“You are now going south instead of north and you have convinced yourself that it is OK. You cannot now go to Edinburgh, and there were reasons why you chose to go there in the first place. Now those reasons are pushed to the back of your mind and you are determined to make the best of this journey. Can you make decisions? Of course you can; you can have tea or coffee, get off at Peterborough or keep going on to London. You can do anything as long as you carry on southwards but you cannot make decisions about the north.

“So, you see, you have the freedom to make limited decisions, but not to make decisions about anything you want to. And in the Indian system this is also true. As long as you continue on the path the system has decided for you, you can make small decisions but you cannot choose to leave the path. You can make some limited choices on clothes, for instance, but you cannot wear a mini skirt. You can eat out in restaurants but you are not expected to drink. You can have a career but will ultimately be waiting to get pregnant and provide a son.

“We fool ourselves into thinking we are free when we are clearly not. And if you switch into British mode, you can wear the mini skirt and you can have a drink with your meal, but then you will be travelling north, not south! And

then, you will be an outcast, rejected by the system and left to fend for yourself.

“So, will you marry me?” I simply asked. This wasn’t a serious intention of mine, just a question about how much Karen was an Indian or not, and whether she wanted to switch completely in to British mode, or be comfortable in Indian mode, or indeed, keep flitting from one to the other and ultimately fall between two stools and lose everything.

Part Eleven

Karen left my flat at 12.23pm in order to get to her lectures on time. She left her overnight case behind and said she would collect it later. December was a month of exams for her and she made it clear that she would be very busy. That meant no more long weekends, and even probably even no overnight stays.

I thought I would feel a bit empty after all the action of the weekend, but strangely, I felt relieved and easy after the door had closed behind her. I turned on the television and watched the snooker for a while, and reflected on all the revelations of the last few days. Basically, I summed it up like this:

We all have our moral, ethical and societal codes that have been fed to us from birth by our parents, teachers, friends and communities. As we grow up, so does this force of values, until by the time we are in early adulthood, the forces have become powerful, like an express train. Then we start to make the big decisions in life; career, marriage, family and so on. The decisions are based on the collective of our values and although we think we are making decisions for ourselves, actually we are driven in a certain direction, and make the decisions we are expected to make. As individuals we really have very little to with it. We do have a small amount of freedom, however, like choosing to drink tea or coffee, matters that are not really of any concern to the express train that is driving us.

The complicating factor for Karen and for me is that we are driven by two express trains, because we have an Indian code of values and a British one.

Both are inevitable but different. For example, the Indian code does not allow for frivolous relationships between the sexes; if you get involved with someone there is an expectation that it must lead somewhere. The British code says that for a relationship to lead somewhere both people need to create an understanding by having a long process of dates and experiences together. In the Indian system marriage comes first and everything else can be sorted out afterwards, whilst in the British system marriage is the last piece of a complicated jigsaw puzzle.

For me and for Karen, there is a choice to be made; which system do we want to follow? But an even bigger question raises its head here; is it possible to choose one, or are they both wound around each other alive and twisting like two snakes. For the sake of argument, assuming we can choose, Karen then has four choices:

1 She can choose to adopt the Indian code with no reference to anything else. In this case she will marry me and become my wife.

2 She can choose the British code with no reference to anything else. In this case she will want to get to know me better and will never want to marry me because of my drinking habits, my odd spiritualism, and often my bloody mindedness.

3 She can continue to jump from one speeding express train to the other and that must lead to destruction in the end. Imagine jumping when you're in your seventies; you will eventually slip and be crushed. She already knows the pain of this choice.

4 She can reject both the Indian and the British codes. What comes after that is then anybody's guess.

In the snooker match there is a seventeen year old Belgian newcomer to the professional game who has just knocked out the number one seed. It was totally unexpected and has woken millions of people up from their afternoon naps on their sofas. I think he will go on to become a regular feature in world snooker. I hope so. Anyway, it's time for a wake me up glass of wine, to fortify and invigorate me to greater things, like a bit of shopping. I need

some bananas, and for that matter lots of other stuff that I suddenly realise is absent from my cupboards. It does always amaze me how much time and effort is required to keep the body going. Really, if you think about it, we spend nearly all our time on the body. We have to shop, then cook, then eat, wash up, visit the toilet every so often. Then the body starts to smell and we have to wash it, shave it, and groom it. We have to get money which we rapidly spend on a never ending carousel of this nature, and keep up our addictions, to booze, drugs, chocolate cakes and that keeps doctors in business, as well as gyms, and the whole ridiculous cycle of modern life. Ah! I feel better for that bit of indignation. The wine has done its job; I'm awake, and ready to go out.

Part Twelve

Karen came to see me on Wednesday. She was dressed like a student, which of course, she was. Wearing a backpack, presumably filled with books and other student related items, she looked a bit tired. We kissed and felt each other up, like animals in the wild that have to keep sniffing each other for reassurance. That thought made me smile but I didn't share the mirth with Karen. She unloaded her over stuffed mind and told me all sorts of things from her busy day which I let in one ear and straight out of the other one. I wasn't listening but I was marvelling at how much I wanted her just there and then. I had to desist, however, because she was clearly not in the mood, yet.

I made her a cup of tea and also offered her some Madeira cake that I had bought specially for her. She rattled on for a while with brief gaps to stuff her mouth with cake and eventually slowed off to a calmer, pedestrian rate, and then came to a stuttering end, and silence. After a short break to 'powder her nose' she came back into the living room, perfumed and powdered and we made love on the carpet, after failing to get to the bedroom despite several determined efforts.

She fancied a pizza, and had I known, I would have got one in. Instead I did something I haven't done for years; ordered a takeaway which I was reliably informed would arrive in about thirty minutes. That gave us plenty of time

for more frolics of the sexual kind. She really was lovely, and following triangle after triangle of pizza, her little belly was finally full to the top, and we could return to each others bodies, although it's a bit like swimming after eating a meal, you should rest for a while and then do it a bit slower.

For the rest of the evening we listened to the radio, Hindi songs again, which are fantastic at times. Her resolve not to stay overnight whilst her exams were on, melted away and she didn't even mention going home to her own flat. I liked that and felt that she saw my flat as somehow hers as well. There was no serious talk about anything and we went to bed at about ten. Despite my efforts, she couldn't keep her eyes open, and she fell asleep. I was glad I had had her on the living room floor earlier; otherwise I might have felt disappointed.

Part Thirteen

On Thursday morning, I stuck to my routine of early morning tea and news but Karen surprised me; she emerged from the bedroom at six thirty, and said she had to be off by eight, to get to college. She was very organised and businesslike and went into the kitchen to clatter and clunk in there, emerging twenty minutes later with breakfast of eggs and toast for us both. I was very impressed and she cleared up and washed all the plates and cups before she left! I felt I could get used to this, but knew deep inside that I had always been pretty self reliant and would always get involved, or in the way, depending on your perspective of the matter.

The rest of the day was a bit of nothing really; I just watched television, drank wine and beer, and was glad that I wasn't out in the cold wind and rain. Karen came in at about five although we hadn't agreed any plans. It made me feel that we were becoming a real couple. She was weighed down again with coursework but told me that she had already got her first assessment module for her university application, to be completed and returned within 21 days. Whilst she sorted herself out in the bathroom and then rattled around in the kitchen, I had a look at her module.

“You’ll have to help me with it,” she said as she returned with a sandwich and a cup of tea.

“Well, I could,” I said, “but I’m not going to because it’s something you have to do yourself. It’s your assessment; an assessment of you.”

She looked at me oddly, but didn’t say anything.

The module was really straightforward and simple. It assessed study skills, time management and organisational skills. Things included were a sheet asking about daily routines, and as long as you didn’t write things like: wake up at 11am, go to pub at 1pm, and sleep until suppertime, you couldn’t really fail it. There were also weekly activity charts and basic stuff like that. As long as you wrote down what they wanted to hear, it was easy.

“I will help you with explaining what they’re after,” I offered as a compensation for my earlier refusal.

“OK,” she simply replied, and carried on with her sandwich.

After she had finished with the needs of her belly, she settled down and then said:

“I’ve been thinking about all that stuff we talked about at the weekend, you know, Indian code, British code and expected behaviour, and all that. So, what’s the solution?”

I went through the four choices, listed earlier, and let her digest the information.

“So, if I choose the Indian code, you’re saying we have to get married because the force of the Indian express train will drive us to that solution, but if I choose the British code, I would never marry you?”

“Absolutely.” I replied confidently.

“That doesn’t make sense to me.”

“Let me explain. The Indian code sees marriage as a starting point. Love and stuff like that come later as you get to know your partner. In that case it will be too late, because by the time you realise what a real bum I am, you will be married to me. I can carry on being a bum because that’s allowed; you’ll just have to come to terms with it. But if you choose the British code, you’ll find out all about me first and wouldn’t touch me with a bargepole, let alone want to live with me. And there is the choice.”

“Unless,” she added, “I drop both the Indian and the British code, and then develop a new code of my own.”

“True! But you won’t be able to do it because you already have two codes inside you. How can you dismantle those? They have been planted in to you every day from the day you were born. They are you. You are them!”

“Well it’s pointless then.” She said indignantly.

“No it’s not. There is a way. Because both you and I have two codes we can look out for each other. If we decide to follow the Indian code, for example, every time one of us switches into British code the other one can spot it and save the situation. Of course, if we choose the British code there is no point because we won’t be together in any case. Even then, you still have to choose a code otherwise you will continue to fail, falling between two stools and eventually destroying yourself. I ended with a dramatic flourish.”

“So, really, you are saying that unless I marry you, I am doomed.” She asked.

“Well not exactly. You could marry another person who is Indian. On the other hand, there are plenty of people out there just like us who are enjoying themselves and walking to their doom happy and ignorant. You could just do that and walk to your doom happily.”

I continued:

“You see, your problem is that you still think you are the driver of your own train. You are not, and neither am I. We are all victims of an over-reaching

system, and it is the system that drives us. It's just that we are unlucky to have two systems embedded in us. If we do not choose one system we are certainly doomed. It is our choice. Look what unhappiness you've had in your life so far. Was all that your fault? No it wasn't. I was the constant leaping from one system to the other and back again that led you to make contradictory and difficult choices. And it has left you here, washed up next to me, another victim of the two systems."

Part Fourteen

Friday morning. Karen said on waking up at the same time as me; 4.30am:

"So it's all pointless then; going to college, getting qualifications. It's pointless because I have no real choices in any case."

"Well," I began; "tell me who told you there was a point. There is no point in anything really because we are all driven by bigger forces; but if you do become qualified and a counsellor, you might earn more money and be able to live a more comfortable life. It's like the prisoner who works in the prison kitchen; he gets a few more privileges than the prisoner who obstinately refuses to cooperate. But they are both still in prison. That's all there is to it."

We got up then and she made the tea whilst I turned on the television for the news.

"Is that why you don't work any more?" She asked, returning with the tea.

"Partly, yes," I replied.

"So what should I do? Shall I just sit here next to you? Shall we just sit here forever?"

“We could, I said. It’s not a bad life. I eat well, drink well, strays like you let me make love to them, and there’s lots of football and snooker, and stuff to watch. And if you don’t like sports we could compromise and find stuff that you like to watch. But I don’t think you’re ready to be like me yet. You need to do your course, you need to talk to other people, mix and be mixed up by society. Eventually, when you’ve had enough, I will still be here.”