

Karma Cafe

By

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“And yet, the ways we miss our lives are life.”

Randall Jarrell.

Cast: Sally, late thirties.

Michael, early forties.

Jack, late forties.

Fran, late twenties.

Set: The Karma Cafe. Location: Limbo. Time: Eternity.

Notes:

‘ . . . ’ in the middle of a sentence indicates hesitation, searching for the right words, at the end of a sentence indicates trailing off.

} indicates lines said at the same time.

– at the end of a sentence indicates words cut off by next speaker.

Fran sits disconsolately at one of the tables with a cup of coffee. Jack is behind the bar of the Karma Café; he polishes a glass with such loving care it becomes a piece of performance art. (Note: all Jack’s actions/movements should be graceful, calm and peaceful.) Enter Michael, he walks up and takes a seat at the bar.

Jack Michael! I thought you'd be back.

Michael Jack.

Jack Usual?

Michael Make it a double.

Jack [Pours Michael a bourbon.]

Michael I don't know why you stick it here. You should move on.

Jack I like it here. It's where I belong.

Michael So, how's business.

Jack Not bad. Steady trade, you know how it is.

Michael I suppose it helps, being the only place in Limbo with a liquor licence.

Jack We have some nice baked goods, fresh muffins, bagels. Where else can you get a tasty wholesome snack before being reborn?

Michael I have to watch the waistline, want to be trim for my new body.

Jack Look, I keep telling people, it makes no difference, it's all chance, what you get is what you get.

Michael I suppose you're an expert.

Jack As it happens, yes, I am. I've seen them all come and go, but I'm always here. Believe me, I know.

Michael I might have something later.

[Enter Sally who walks up to the bar and looks at the menu.]

It's a bit quiet in here.

Jack I have a feeling things'll pick up in a while.

[Sally stares across at Michael.]

Michael That's what my business partner always used to say.

Sally [To Michael.]
Hey, don't I know you?

Michael Me?

Sally Were you Malone of Malone, Dreck and Malone, attorneys at law?

Michael Yeah, what's it to you?

Sally I was Sally.

Michael No.

Sally Yes.

Michael Never.

Sally Absolutely.

Michael Well I'll be . . . Whatever happened to you?

Sally You mean after I got fired?

Michael Yeah, sorry about that.

Sally I should think so.

Michael It was out of my hands.

Sally Let's not talk about your hands. And that reminds me, you never called like you said you would.

Michael I meant to . . . but . . . you know.

Sally Yeah, I know.

Michael So, what happened?

Sally Breast cancer.

Michael Bummer.

Sally You're not kidding.

Michael I thought, these days they could . . . you know.

Sally Me too.

Michael Yeah, so?

Sally Unfortunately before they found it the tumour had found lots of other bits of me.

Michael Sorry.

Sally Yeah. And I loved my breasts. But they didn't love me back. I always thought they were my best feature, you know?

Michael Absolutely.

Sally But they got me into a lot of trouble, one way and another.

Michael That's the way it goes.

Sally I guess so.

[Pause.]

How'd you get here?

Michael Got run down by a truck.

Sally Ooo.

Michael Yeah, I wouldn't recommend it.

Sally How'd it happen?

Michael It was a Friday night, I wanted to unwind - it had been a tough week - so I'd had a few, you know, crossed the street and *then* I looked.

Sally Could'a happened to anyone.

Michael 'Xactly.

Sally So, what'ya planning? You know, any plans for the next time?

Michael I'm not sure. But, what I do know is, I don't want to be an attorney this time; I want to do something respectable. I was thinking maybe sales: used cars, dot.com shares, stuff like that.

Sally You'd be a natural.

Michael You think so?

Sally You're a born salesman.

Michael How can you tell?

Sally You believe all the crap you spout.

Michael [Coughs.] On the other hand, I thought I might go into medicine, something to benefit mankind. Cosmetic surgery is very appealing.

Sally Yeah, yeah, I can see you doing that too.

Michael And what about you?

Sally All I know is, next time I wanna be a man.

Michael It ain't as easy as I make it look.

Sally You should try being a woman, then tell me what's easy. I had two kids, a husband who ran off with my best friend while I was pregnant, a lousy job in a law firm of sharks, shall I go on?

Michael You can stop there.

Sally Yeah, I think I'll be a man, preferably a gay man.

Michael What?

Sally Yeah, sure. Okay, childhood might be a bit rocky in places, but once you get through that think about it: you get to have sex with someone

who has the same wants, plus you both pull in a decent wage, joint incomes, no kids, if you ask me it's paradise.

Michael Stop it, you almost have me converted. [*beat*] Can I get you a drink?

Sally I thought you'd never offer.

Michael Cosmo still your favourite?

Sally Yep.

Michael Jack, a Cosmopolitan for the lady, make mine a Scotch this time.

Jack Coming up.

Michael [Looking around the bar. Gesturing towards Fran.]

She's very quiet.

Jack She's depressed.

Michael We're all depressed.

[Calling across to Fran.]

Hey, would you like another drink?

Fran No thanks.

Sally She looks lonesome.

Jack Been sitting there for about an hour, hasn't said a word.

Michael She needs bringing out.

[Calling across to Fran.]

Mind if we join you?

Fran If you want.

Sally [Michael and Sally walk over to Fran's table and sit down.]

I'm Sally.

Fran Fran.

[They shake hands.]

Michael Michael. Mind if I make an observation?

Fran What?

Michael You look troubled.

Fran I just can't stand it any more!

Michael It's okay here, it's safe, don't worry. They have some nice baked goods.

Fran But I'm going back again! I can't believe it. I thought I cracked it this time.

Michael Don't tell me, you were really good.

Fran I thought, this time I reached a new level. I thought I wouldn't be here again.

Michael Maybe next time.

Fran I suppose . . .

Michael Look on the bright side. You're way ahead of me already, I can tell.

Fran It's not a competition.

Michael No. 'Course not.

Fran I feel so tired. I don't think I can go through another life. It gets harder every time.

Sally Maybe you should try and relax.

Fran How can you be so stu-

Michael Is that decaff? I bet that's decaff.

Fran Yes.

Michael There! I knew it.

Fran So?

Michael You have that decaff look about you . . . not enough . . . you know, edge.

Fran Edge?

Michael You need to live a little. Have a drink.

Sally Stop bothering her!

Michael I'm not bothering her.

Sally Yes you are.

Michael Let her be the judge of that.

Sally Ignore him, he's harmless.

Michael Thanks a lot.

Sally Mostly.

Michael To listen to her you'd think she was a saint.

Sally What's that supposed to mean?

Michael We all make mistakes, that's what I mean.

Sally Huh.

Michael Nobody's perfect.

Fran I was.

Sally What? }

Michael What? }

Fran Well . . . I know it sounds kind of . . . you know . . . but, yes, I was.

But I still ended up back on the merry-go-round.

Michael Perhaps that's what it's all about. You know, what they say, the journey not the destination, arrival, whatever.

Sally Now he's a philosopher.

Michael I'm just trying to make everybody feel better. All I wanted to do, my whole life, was make people have a good time, me too, of course.

Sally You can't 'make' people -

Michael You know what I mean.

Fran This last time, I reached a whole new spiritual plane. I meditated. I did good deeds. I was kind. People even looked to me for spiritual guidance.

Michael So you thought you'd cracked it.

Fran Yeah, I suppose I did.

Michael Bummer.

Fran So now I'm back where I started. Another life. Round again.

Sally It's not all bad.

Michael Yeah, maybe this time you'll crack it for good.

Fran Do you think so?

Michael Of course I do. You've got a young soul, I can tell.

Sally That's one of his lines.

Michael It's not a line.

Sally Is so. [To Fran.] He said the exact same thing to me in the back of a cab.

Michael That was different. [To Fran.] I can tell these things.

Fran Seems like Nirvana is always just around the corner.

Sally In my experience most things are just around the corner.

Fran I tried fasting. I fasted for a long time. But then, it got so I couldn't decide what was real and what wasn't any more.

Michael That can be tricky.

Fran Yeah. So I stopped.

Michael Very wise, there ain't enough meat on you anyway.

Sally Mike!

Michael Just an observation.

Sally Keep them to yourself.

Fran It's okay.

Sally We're trying to have a serious conversation.

Michael I'm serious.

Fran Another time I tried praying all the time, you know, like trying to synchronise my whole body, the rhythm of my life, with the divine.

Sally } Wow.

Michael} Wow

Fran But it didn't work.

Michael What happened?

Fran It made me sick. I passed out in a rest room while I was on a date and everybody panicked. My boyfriend thought I was pregnant and turned very pale.

Sally Typical!

Michael You're going about it all wrong. You're trying too hard.

Fran But how can you try too hard?

Sally Much as I hate to admit it, he might be right. Maybe you should try and relax more. I know it's easier said than done. Take time to just stop and look at the ocean. Me, I've never been great at anything but so what. I used to let it bother me, but not any more. I've done that, ain't going there again. Take jobs. I've never been that good at it, never the employee of the month. One day I stopped, looked around, and I said to myself: why should you feel inferior? Okay, you may never be the greatest accounts clerk in the universe, but who cares? I learnt to stop comparing myself unfavourably to others. I looked around and thought: they're all a bunch of schmucks and they're holding down a job, getting along, you can too, just stop being so hard on yourself; stop trying to be perfect and be content with being good enough.

Fran I know. I always try too hard. People think I'm too intense. I love too hard. Study too hard. I even cleaned the apartment in a way that people found intimidating. I can't stop myself. It's like I've been programmed to think I'm never good enough.

Sally Now you recognise it you can avoid making the same mistake next time.

Fran Do you really think so?

Sally Yes.

Michael [To Jack.] Can we get another drink over here?

Jack Same all round?

Michael Yep.

Fran But will I remember anything I learnt in my previous life?

Michael Can't say it ever worked for me.

Fran I hope I don't get reincarnated in California again.

Sally What's wrong with California? When I was in Milwaukee I always dreamed of living in California.

Fran It's hard to be spiritual in California.

Michael You kidding me? They got every kind of spirituality you can imagine in California. It's like a shopping mall stuffed full of religious boutiques.

Fran But you can't buy religion.

Michael In California yes. In fact I almost became a minister myself, through mail order.

Sally All those alternatives must get very confusing.

Fran It doesn't matter which one you pick. It's sticking with it's the hard thing.

Sally [Pointedly looking at Michael.]
Yeah, lots of people have trouble staying faithful to one thing.

Jack [Jack arrives at the table with the drinks and serves them.]
Here we are. Cosmopolitan for the lady, coffee – decaff – and a

scotch.

Sally Thanks.

Michael [Jack starts to leave.]

Hey, don't go. Help us out here. What do you reckon to all this spiritual stuff?

Jack Don't ask me.

Michael You must have some opinion, shoot from the hip, come on!

Jack Well. [Thinks.] When I was in Austria there was a game that people used to play with little kids. The kid says to the grown up, "Hier bin I" (Here I am), and the grown up answers, "Da bist du" (There you are). And the kid would usually run around laughing or something like that and before you'd know it they'd be back again, "Hier bin I".

Michael So?

Jack I don't know, I always thought there was something very reassuring about it.

Fran Yes, I can see that.

Jack And, well, it made me think: if there could be a conversation between the world and God, it would sound like that. [Pause.] Does everyone have everything they need?

Michael Thanks Jack. I knew you'd clarify everything.

Sally Stop being sarcastic.

Michael I'm not. Anyway, tell me, what religion d'you think is a sure fire hit?

Sally For God's sake -

Fran In different lives I've been a Muslim, a Catholic, and a Buddhist.

Michael You certainly do shop around.

Fran When you get past the wrapping they're all fundamentally the same. And they're all hard to follow, incredibly hard. The spiritual life is always difficult.

Sally Yeah, I guess you're right. Personally, I never take things to extremes.

Michael If you ask me, it's all a sales job. It's like computer software.

Fran What?

Sally How is religion like computer software?

Michael When they sell it to you they make out it's going to solve all your problems, but once you start using it you find it's a lot harder to work than you thought; and maybe it solves a few things, but it creates a whole lot of new problems you never even knew you had before.

Sally But you wouldn't want to be without your computer.

Michael True. Once you've got it you're stuck with it.

Fran Thanks for the drink.

Michael My pleasure. Here's my card; look me up some time.

Fran Thanks.

Sally My God, is that the time?

Michael Time flies when you're in good company.

Sally I must get going.

Fran Me too.

Michael Yeah, I suppose we all have an appointment to keep.

Fran Let's all go together.

Sally Yeah, good idea.

Michael We're a team.

Fran Maybe we'll meet up in our new lives.

Jack Remember this guys, Nirvana is a state of mind. Until you recognise
it you don't know it's there all along.

Michael Thanks for the tip Jack. And good luck to us all.

Sally Yes, to the future.

Michael The future. }

Fran The future. }

 [They drink up and start to leave the café.]

Michael So long, Jack.

Jack See you later, Mike.

Michael [Laughing.] Oh gee, thanks for the vote of confidence.

Jack Break a leg.

Michael You too.

 [They exit. Jack watches them go with an affectionate look. As he
exits Michael shouts out.]

 Hier bin I'.

Jack Da bist du.

END