

Only As Karma Would Have It

by Edward K. Brown II

I

Once upon a time there was a donkey and an elephant. The two were preparing for a competition, so they took polls to figure out what their odds were for winning. Before the campaign, the newspapers compared them to the tortoise and the hare. The donkey complained how this analogy was against the laws of nature: "The hare is faster than the tortoise." The elephant rebutted, "No matter how fast I am, I know that I am going to win."

The race started and the donkey charged ahead. The polls converted; so did the newspapers. As their pseudonyms shifted, the public did not know who was the unlucky hare. Neither the elephant nor the donkey could decide on how their campaign should be run, but it intensified and their ratings increased.

Down the stretch, neck in neck, the two, in all their campaigning, realized they had forgotten who they were.

II

Karma enjoyed beginning his stories with "Once upon a time." He did not believe them. For such tales were imagination, but they interested him. Some were true; some, real. Karma could not differentiate between the two. As his life evolved, he wanted to distinguish the romantic and the factual: the "could be" from the "to be" and how they affected his meaning and direction.

III

The other day Karma telephoned his parents. He dialed nervously. He was thinking about graduation. His classes were not doing well. Usually he talked with, rather he made excuses to his professors ranging from how the family dog just died and having to deal with the first domestic death to waiting for the mail to arrive so that he could deposit his parents check in order to prevent his personal ones from "bouncing."

It was time Karma faced the facts. Corporate interviewers did not want to hear how much he needed a high paying job or else his father would disown him. Besides, most women desire a "real man."

Karma dreamed of becoming a writer; however, he wanted to convince his parents and ask them for support. It was a decision on the consideration of aspires. To avoid a major schism, Karma created a story and found how difficult it was for him to distinguish his life from his parents' wishes. "(I am calling my parents to ask them how they are doing. Now it is true that I am concerned about them, but it is also true that I am concerned with my own situation. This fine line of life, caring, but not caring too much, might break if I am thoughtless. The fatigue. . .)"

The phone rang on the other end.

Karma pondered. He spent most of his time watching the news not knowing that if he wanted to do well at the university he would have to seclude himself from the "distorted" world.

His mother answered and asked him what was happening.

"I don't know! It has been three semesters since I moved off campus so that I could concentrate, graduate and get a professional job."

Karma told the story that most students used to move from the decadent life of the dorm into the vain life of the apartment. To make it appear that he knew what events were going on around campus: "We won the football game and the basketball team is getting re-vamped."

"Oh really," his mother always replied. "It says here that the dropout rate for Business and Engineering majors is increasing. In the *Daily News* it says that some corporations are hiring English majors as managers. Good thing you switched to the Liberal Arts."

Karma's mother knew her son's surroundings well. As a result, his academic career was over romanticized by her— or so he thought. When he graduated his mother wanted him in a three-piece suit with a well paying job.

Eschewing the situation, Karma gave his dissertation on the evolution of the Liberal Arts Student: "Remember the Conservative Fifties with their blazers, Greek letters, pipes and stogie cigars, knit trousers, Oxford shoes and/or loafers... Remember the Radical Sixties and their denim jackets with embroidery, peace pipes and scented cigarettes, faded bellbottoms, fashion shoes and/or year 'round sandals... and today, the Crazy Eighties ranging from the vintage apparel of past folk fads to an assortment of junk punk attire... "

"What about the seventies? You forgot the seventies." "Oh, I never liked polyester. Too much static."

Karma discussed his hypothesis before and his mother always reiterated hers.

"The main purpose of the university is to gain an education." "But it's conformity through non-conformity: constant conformation."

This learned one had become lost in his objective at the university. As a modern student, he wanted those experiences, which he had seen on television and in the movies; he wanted to be a part of the caricatures from the past through the present towards the future. Karma was graduating and he was trying to hold onto his dreams.

His mother knew that. Who was he trying to fool anyhow? She told him that she loved him and reminded him of the suit.

"It's practical."

Karma had been over this before. When he graduated from high school he and his mother went to the mall to purchase him some clothes for college. He rushed to the Levi's section and tried on five different pairs of button-fly jeans. As he 'chismoed his style in the mirror, a voice from the other end of the store summoned him.

"Here, try this on."

Immediately Karma grabbed the double breasted 007 James Bond jacket with fifteen pockets knowing that once away he would be going out.

"Pretty soon you'll be going on job interviews. I think you should have a suit. Oh look! Here is one with a vest!"

"Mom, don't you think I have a bit to grow before I go interviewing? I only weigh 135 pounds."

"That is one more reason why I am not buying that 'Ahoy there!' peacoat thing you found. You never know when an opportunity will arise. Take those and try them on- and try this black one."

Karma looked at it. Either his mother wanted him to become a preacher, or worse: an activist.

"You can wear the suit when you go out on dates and social events. You'll thank me later."

Karma did not know how difficult it was to keep the size of an adolescent. Every semester break his parents said that he looked thin and made sure he ate enough so that all he could do was lie in bed with a remote control in his hands and watch television... .

This regression in his mind took place while his mother read the 1,001 job opportunities for college seniors. He grabbed his stomach.

"What was that I heard?"

"Nothing mom. There was an auto accident out front. Wait while I check it out."

Karma ran into his room and stuffed a pillow up his shirt to keep the intestinal noises to a minimum.

"Okay, I'm back. No-one was hurt."

"That was not what I thought I heard."

"No really, then it must be the static in the connection. Oh yes, and I started to fry some hamburger."

Mentioning the first thing...

"I tried on the suit. It still fits."

Some grease splattered causing Karma to spill some hamburger into the flame.

"You had an interview?"

"(Damn) Well, I have a chance of becoming a writer."

"Technical writer? This static. They make a wonderful salary. Those 'technocrats' never

learned how to write.”

“Not tech-writing, writing.”

“Journalism?”

“Writing.”

“Now listen! You can use your technical writing as your vocation and your writing as your avocation. There can be an equal balance. What use is your suit if you are going to become a bum hoping to get published? Use your brain.”

Here began his mother’s “Once upon a time.” Her idealism, this pragmatism, was her structure for success.

Karma had to decide: tech-writer or writer; fact or fiction; to be or could be— that was the question.

“What *will not* happen is that you leave the university without your degree to become some highfaluting writer.”

“Yes mom.”

“So tell me, what is going on at school?”

The interrogation commenced.

Instinctively Karma began with “Once upon a time during my freshman year... ” and blanketed his mistake by talking about a friend who just began her first semester. He was repeating; most students did: wished they were freshman again. Karma continued wandering...

“I think I’ll prepare my specialty. I’m trying to sell it to the restaurants.”

“What is it?”

“Linguini with baked beans and hamburger. I should add a little garlic and Romano, but tonight I think I will eat it plain.”

“Oh, I will have to taste it. Your father would probably like it... ”

Karma believed he would. When he was home, he rummaged through his father’s closet for that chic vintage. He liked the word “vintage” because it distinguished him from his realities. Besides, his father had a 007 jacket.

“... You always have been eccentric. What happened to similarity? Where did you rebellious kids come from anyhow?”

Questions, questions: questions? Getting around them was Karma’s problem. He felt like he had to answer the extraneous that had shaped his Self. Thus he deleted his pertinent exterior in order to study his pertinent interior. If Karma was to become a writer, he would have to find some answers. So, he went down his partial list.

“(What do I call it? What was the relevance of it? Should have I remembered it? Did I

want to forget it? How shall I phrase it? Oh, the hell with it!) The suburbs! Where else!?!)

Suddenly guilt stricken, Karma remembered his situation. Venturing into himself, he debated whether exchanging the factual for the romantic was worth his time. Excluding his short order chef skills, he knew that he could write, so write he did. It would be Karma against the world!!! Geese, how romantic.

"What are you having for dinner mom."

He placed the phone on the table so not to hear what lovely cuisine they were having...

"Where's dad?"

"He is down stairs flipping the channels with the remote. I'm going to join him later."

That was enough proof for Karma, his parents were doing fine.

"Do you want to talk to him before you eat?"

"Yeah, put him on."

"And let me talk to you when you are finished."

That was she, truth's designer.

IV

Karma's mother yelled into the phone jarring her husband from his thoughts and her son from his senses.

"Heh, hello?"

"Hey dad."

"Hi."

"What's going on?"

"Oh you know, the same old."

His father started the conversations this way to test the mood. He was the speed-reader of the family and the creator of the family's jargon. The "same old" meant that there was something new, but he was not ready to tell anyone. Concisely reserved, he and his son communicated in their standard verse: blunt with no bullshit.

"Is everything okay son?"

Engulfing silence.

During their earlier years the two would play chess. Once after a game, his father told him the tale of the *Seventh Seal*. At the time the topic was beyond Karma, but when he discovered the story, conversations with his father became deathly serious.

Gasping for air, Karma remembered how difficult it was for him to get to his point, to his main objective, to his ulterior motive with his father.

"Well dad, I'm worried about my time spent here at the university."

The topic has been announced. Let the game begin!

"How are your grades?"

Silence.

"I took a test last week and did all right. The professor made some nice comments about my essay. I took a scantron test. I didn't do so well. I think someone erased my answers and marked something else. I studied hard and I know I know the material."

Karma knew these lines well, so did his father. They swapped pawns.

"Yes, yes. Tell me, what else have you been doing. How is your work coming along?"

"The writing is coming along well. I have written some poems and I finished my play. It's an one act and I'm waiting for the critiques. I'm worried. I started a short story. Right now I'm developing length through description. I find it difficult because my words are limited and I don't have the opportunity to converse with many people who have interesting vocabularies. As a consequence I use frequently mono- and disyllable words."

"Yes, yes, yes. Sounds good."

"Oh, and I have been reading a lot of plays and I bought some more, but I don't have the time to read them. It's that job I have."

Karma advanced his queen putting her in a dangerous position.

"Yes, well that is another matter kid."

Silence.

His father did not want to hear the extraneous. He was a polemic potentate. A real deictic.

"Dad, I feel like a failure, a disappointment."

Silence.

Confused, Karma stated his case.

"I have been working, but I don't think I am making any progress. I haven't felt like I have been living- at least not in the world I want."

Silence.

Karma could have continued forever, but he wanted his father to make the next move; he wanted to "play-off" his father's responses.

"Son, we talked before about your writing and you said that you wanted to. Correct?"

Embarrassed, Karma acknowledged and lost another piece— of respect.

"We talked about the romantic truth versus the factual truth, didn't we? And you said how removed the questions were from any truth on that scantron test. Am I correct?"

The course of the game was redirected. Karma recalled *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; they matched blow for blow.

"You have a goal don't you? Because without a goal you are going nowhere. So... "

"... you have to convert the 'could be' to 'to be.' That is the destination."

Stalemate.

The two were standing. Neither spoke, for they were on a similar plane: like father, like son.

"Still there?"

"Yeah."

"Start over and try and try again. Tabula rasa."

"Clean slate?"

"Yep."

This was his father; this was Karma. Their composite relationship was taut ion for ion in a covalent bond. Their verbosity translated into the facts of affinity: destiny. Their observances of truth differed due to their characters: day and age. Therefore, they worked congruous to each other to balance the familial scale.

"I think mom wanted to say something before I got off the phone."

"Okay. You take it easy."

"You too."

"All right, bye."

"Bye."

Silence.

"Hello?"

"Mom, I have to go."

"What did your father say?"

"Oh you know, the same old."

"Right. Don't forget to have the college paper renewed and remember who loves you."

"You too. Bye now."

V

Karma ate and gestated his thoughts. He composed.

"What if I were the id, being that I am young and still experiencing life; my father, the ego, being that he is interested in the formation and the completion of deeds; my mother, the superego, being that she uses the truth as a means of justification for deeds."

Karma belched.

"What if I were to juxtapose my parents, the ego and the super ego, like the animus and the anima, then I would be as complete and I could be."

Karma took a sip from his glass and finished his meal. Finally, with the dire to write, he concluded that the truth is at best perceived through experience. How real that truth is, is due to its cause and effect. In his journal he wrote:

Although I am one person who yields to the extraneous interior of the Self, I must analyze my life as if it were a physics problem even though I already know that $E=mc^2$. Through thought and self-determination I must deal with my complexities squared to find my relative theme.

I must wait and allow my romantic truths to be shaped by Time: the white light, which tries to avoid the factional prism. If I succeed and my work adjoins itself to the realm of the avant-garde, then I, Karma, must not forget who I am.

¹ KARMA is loosely based on his relationship with Ed Brown's father and mother (Edward and Gertrude Brown).