

ONE CITY ONE STORY

Karma

Rishi Reddi

2013





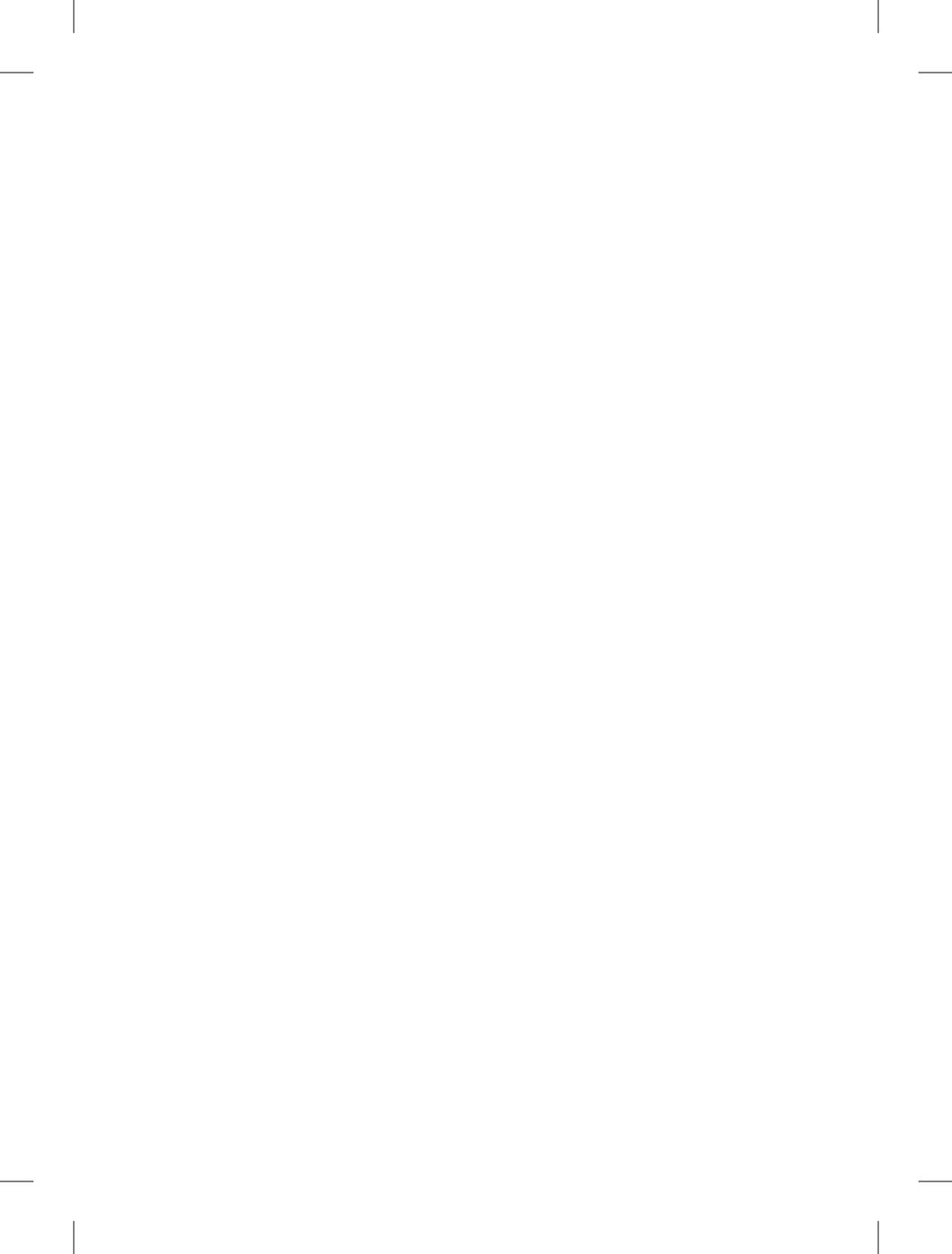
Dear Reader,

It's been my great honor to serve Boston as mayor for the past twenty years. One of my goals during my tenure has been to foster literacy and a love of reading among our city's residents of all ages. As part of this initiative, I am pleased to support the efforts of the Boston Book Festival to encourage reading for pleasure among the adults of our city. One City One Story brings literature to our residents where they live, work, and play, and it encourages us all to engage not only with a great story, but also with each other. 2013 marks the fourth year for this innovative and ambitious program, and the second year that the story will be available in both English and Spanish printed editions. As always the story is freely available both in print and online, including in several additional languages.

I hope that you enjoy the Boston setting and thoughtful message of local author Rishi Reddi's "Karma," and I encourage you to participate in the conversation.

Happy reading.

Mayor Thomas Menino



Introduction

The Boston Book Festival presents the fourth annual One City One Story program, a project that aims to promote literature among the teens and adults of our city and to create community around a shared reading experience.

Our goal is to make a short story available to all free of charge. By distributing 30,000 printed copies of Rishi Reddi's "Karma" in both English and Spanish, and by providing audio files, downloads, and additional translations on our website, we aim to ignite discussions that reveal the many perspectives and viewpoints of Boston residents. This year we are pleased to have Dunkin' Donuts as a partner in our efforts; thanks to their support, copies of the story will be available at many Dunkin' locations in Greater Boston—please visit our website for a list of locations.

We hope you will read, enjoy, and discuss "Karma" at local meet-ups, library events, and on our website. If you are inspired by this story to discuss it or even write your own, check out the One City One Story discussion questions and writing contest on our website.

Visit www.bostonbookfest.org/1c1s to learn more.

We hope you will join us at the Boston Book Festival on October 19th to meet Rishi Reddi and take part in a Town Hall-style discussion of the story.

ONE CITY ONE STORY: READ. THINK. SHARE.



Karma

Shankar Balareddy, unemployed professor and former convenience store clerk, and Prakash Balareddy, successful cardiologist, were as unlike each other as any two brothers could be. In the old Indian way, they lived together in a luxurious house in suburban Boston, with their respective wives. Yet the home was not entirely traditional—Prakash was the head of the household although Shankar was the older brother. Prakash owned the house and the car, and had a lucrative career. They had lived like this for almost a year before things changed one evening.

When Prakash came home from the hospital that night, Shankar had cooked a typically delicious meal: eggplant with peanut gravy, fish curry, and tomato rasam. Shankar's wife, Neha, put Prakash's son to sleep in the crib, and set the table with the second best china. Prakash sat down at the dining table with the authority appropriate for the breadwinner of the household. Prakash's wife, Malini, complimented the food. Lady, the German shepherd, lay with her head on her paws, content to be near them all.

But Shankar knew something was wrong. His brother did not look at him, although they sat directly across from each other. Prakash chewed fiercely and refolded his dinner napkin twice. His mood affected everyone around him; it had been that way since they were children. Dinner conversation stopped. When Prakash finally spoke, everyone flinched slightly, as if his voice were too loud.

“Shankar,” Prakash said, looking at the food on his plate. He had long ago given up calling his older brother by the respectful title, Annaya. “I have been thinking. I have decided that it is time for you to go from here. You and Neha should move into your own home.”

Malini jerked her head up to look at her husband.

Neha stared at a candlestick on the table.

But Shankar met his brother’s eye, looked at him slowly, and blinked as if he did not understand.

“But he has only just lost his job,” Malini said.

“He has been irresponsible,” Prakash said. “How can he argue with someone at the convenience store when he is the check-out clerk? Perhaps one could excuse it, but he was similarly rude to that customer in the taxi.” Prakash wiped his mouth with his napkin. He cleared his throat and pushed back his chair.

“Besides,” he said, addressing his brother, “I won’t let you go just like that.” Prakash snapped his fingers. “I will give you some money to start—\$5,000, shall we say?”

“Prakash! I don’t agree!” Malini said.

“It will be good for you.” Prakash spoke to his brother only.

“What about the baby? Who will take care of him?” Malini said. Neha glanced at her.

“I think you will learn how to live in this country,” Prakash continued. He stretched his arms across the table and his voice boomed. “How can you depend on me always? If you need support I will be here, but you should learn how to be independent.”

“As you say, Prakash,” Neha responded. Although she spoke softly, there was nothing meek in her voice.

Shankar could only look away. He suddenly felt small. He was aware of his brother’s broad shoulders and long legs. In front of Prakash’s clean-shaven, handsome face, his own moustache must have looked silly. Five thousand dollars to get rid of a brother! Economics—this was the way that the powerful always took advantage of the weak. Hadn’t the British occupation of India started with one minor trading post in Surat?

The following day, Prakash retained a real estate agent to find Shankar a place to live. The second day, he leased a one-bedroom apartment in Arlington, on a street off Massachusetts Avenue. The

real estate agent even found a used sofa, kitchen table, and bed frame to furnish it.

On the third day, their suitcases, some old cooking utensils that Malini would not need, and the extra wooden chairs from the basement were loaded up in Prakash's Range Rover, and Shankar and Neha were deposited on the threshold of their new life in the United States.



Shankar was a graduate in colonial history from one of southern India's best universities. Then his brother, in deference to their dying mother's wishes, sponsored him for a green card application. Of course Shankar moved to the United States. Who would not, if given the opportunity? In Boston he had been a taxi driver, then a convenience store clerk, but in his heart of hearts, he wanted to be a chef. Today, the fourth day after his brother asked him to leave his home, he was none of those things. He waited in line to file a claim for unemployment insurance at the Massachusetts Division of Employment and Training office, behind a large man with a bald head and double chin. From time to time the man looked around and shuffled his feet. Two women sat at desks in the front. There were few people behind Shankar: a young mother with her little girl, and a man with gray stubble who smelled slightly of perspiration; he wore a shirt with a monogram of his name, "Leo."

Shankar heard a series of computer-generated beeps, a woman's exclamation, then the banging of desk drawers.

"Can't believe these clerks." The bald man turned and looked down at Shankar. "Wish they'd put in an honest day's work."

"Leo" stepped forward and peered over the counter before returning to the line. The little girl tugged on her mother's arm.

"What's happened?" Shankar asked the large man.

"Computer's down. Second time this week. Now they've switched to the paper claims. Sometimes they do it on purpose so they can go home early. I'm not leaving, though."

Shankar opened his mouth to say that the computer trouble was no fault of the women, but the large man had bad breath, so Shankar

avoided the discussion and turned away to look through the large panel of windows at the sunny May morning.

He could see the traffic on Cambridge Street: the cars and men and women in suits hurrying to their offices, holding paper cups filled with coffee. A dogwood tree was in blossom, and the wind swept one white petal from a branch and carried it away. Shankar imagined the petal in its flight past the stream of cars, floating in the spring sunshine, travelling to other parts of the city under the perfect blue sky. What was he doing in this line? He wandered past the dark-haired woman and her daughter, past the water fountain on the left, through the glass doors into the chilly New England morning sunlight.

He was familiar with downtown Boston because he and Neha had traveled these roads with Prakash and Malini when they first moved here. Since he left Prakash's home in Lexington, he had been trying not to think about that happier time. Boston had been an adventure then. Now, looking at the same streets, he was caught by the coldness of the residents, the speed of their lives. He remembered the familiar warmth and slowness of Hyderabad, the leisurely pace of people shuffling by in chappals in the hot sun.

When Shankar was on Bowdoin Street, walking toward the State House, he saw a man sitting on the sidewalk. The man leaned against the cement wall of a building with his legs splayed wide and his bedroll beside him. He wore a frayed gray T-shirt and stared at a shoebox placed between his legs. A young woman dressed in a blue suit and high heels walked by. She stopped to talk with an acquaintance, a tall man with straight features and a newspaper tucked under his arm. When they said their good-byes she stepped back, onto the homeless man's shoebox.

From a short distance away, Shankar saw the scene unfold. The woman was startled; she tripped, then kicked the box again as she tried to regain her balance. The box turned over, spilling bills and change around the sidewalk. "Oh!" she called out. The homeless man did not react. With the patience of a child building sandcastles at the beach, he placed his "Sober Veteran" sign next to him and picked up the money. The woman never met his eye. She did not put a coin in the box. She looked at him for only a moment, then she was on her way, adjusting her sunglasses, clutching her black briefcase to her side.

Shankar found two quarters in his pocket and crossed the road. He looked at the man's face as he stooped to put them in.

"God bless you," the man said.

Shankar smiled in response. He rose quickly and continued on, crossing Charles Street to reach the Public Garden. He sat on a bench next to the pond, watching the swans and the children who ran along the sidewalk. The sun was warm on his shoulders. Mothers walked past, pushing strollers. Business executives crowded the benches during lunch hour. The world was a sad, unjust place, he thought. It sometimes felt like an illusion; what was real existed under the surface of the blue sky and the green grass and the happy or tearful faces of children. He often did not understand why certain things happened to him, but he had always been able to rely on his family. Now, he could not even do that.

His stomach turned when he remembered the argument in the convenience store. The man had been tall, about fifty years old. He wore a monogrammed white shirt and a thin gold necklace. Shankar remembered that because few men in America wore jewelry. The man had bought a can of Coke and a six-pack of beer, one of the more expensive brands. When Shankar told him the price, he handed him a fifty-dollar bill. Shankar gave him the correct amount of change—he still remembered it was \$40.07, but the man thought that he was cheating him out of \$2.00.

They quarreled. Shankar was humiliated. Did this man think him so cheap that he would steal \$2.00? Did he look that desperate? Shankar raised his voice. He yelled. He felt the blood rushing to his head. The man asked him for his name, which he copied on a piece of paper. He did not even ask Shankar to spell it. Shankar thought that was odd. He was fired the next day. Now, even his brother was fed up with him.

Did Prakash finally hate him? Shankar's mind stretched back to the long list of complaints that his brother had against him. They had not been truly friendly since they were boys, since their father died. Prakash had almost given up his medical education for Shankar, the older brother who could not focus on his studies. Their mother had said there was not enough money for them both to be in school. Prakash could not marry the first girl whom he had chosen because Shankar,

unemployed even then, wasn't married yet. Tradition dictated that the older brother must marry first. Their mother always followed tradition. Perhaps Prakash was right; their mother always loved Shankar best.

When the sunshine no longer filtered through the willow trees, he asked a passerby what time it was. He jumped up to catch the subway to Harvard Square, and then a bus to Arlington.

Neha was waiting for him, watching TV. He could smell their dinner on the stove.

"I am sorry," he said. "I did not realize the time. It is the changing light. The days are so long now."

She got up and placed the rice and dal on the table. He put his hand on her shoulder, but she did not look at him.

"Are you angry with me?" he asked in Telugu.

"No." She smiled.

"The computers were down at the employment office, so I did not file the unemployment claim. I did not find any work, either." He was glad to speak to her openly.

"Everything will happen at the right time."

She served him before serving herself, rice and lentils and mango pickle, a modest meal prepared in a kitchen not yet fully stocked. They sat at the small table, not looking at each other, but feeling that they were close. It was at times like this, when Shankar felt that he had failed to provide Neha with the life she deserved, that he remembered the first time he saw her. It was at a temple in the outskirts of Hyderabad, when she rang the bell after her prayers. He was sitting, as he often did, on the low marble wall of the temple. Sometimes he would spend a whole day like that, observing people who walked past. He was at first struck by her beauty, which perhaps only he could see; she was dark-skinned and only five feet tall. But her eyes were gentle and lively and above all, kind, like those of the cows that wandered near the temple gate. She had brought a bag of sweets, which she gave to the children of the beggars sitting on the ground outside the wall.

He put his hand on hers as it lay in her lap.

When Neha finally spoke, it was in a low voice. "I have taken a job," she said softly.

Shankar took his hand away.

She stopped eating and leaned back in her chair, looking at him intently. Perhaps she was searching for hidden displeasure, but he had none for her. Was this not caused by his own deficiency?

“It is filling grocery bags at the market.” She reached for him under the table. Shankar clasped her hand again, and squeezed it very tight, so he would not lose her.

Lying in bed that night, he remembered something that had happened in his youth—a foolish act. He was walking in the forest with his brother when he saw two lovebirds on the branch of a tree, cooing and nuzzling in the shade. Because Prakash urged him to—there was no explanation for it other than that—Shankar aimed his sling and shot at them, and gave a yelp when one of the birds fell to the ground. Shankar was a religious man, and in his heart he feared that Fate would visit the same destiny on him. He had not known that lovebirds mate for life.



When he woke in the morning, he sat up with a jolt, thinking Neha had already left. Then he heard the water running in the bathroom. It was important to him to leave the house early; he must start his day at the same time she did.

It was the third morning he had woken up in this room. Each morning he had been newly disappointed. A battered wooden dresser and nightstand stood close by. The plaster had chipped from the ceiling in the far corner. The hot water faucet in the bathroom sink spun around uselessly.

How different from Prakash’s home, where the bathrooms were lemon-scented and the wood floors shone as if covered by a film of water. Even with Lady’s thick fur, the living room smelled only of the flowers that Malini placed on the side table.

“Are you getting up so early?” Neha stood in the doorway, already dressed in her work clothes.

“I want to start early,” Shankar said. “The line at the unemployment office was so slow.”

“In that case, breakfast will be ready soon.”

Shankar thought she was pleased.

The Star Market grocery store was open twenty-four hours a day and Neha’s shift started at six o’clock. They boarded the bus on Massachusetts Avenue, and Neha got off at Porter Square. Shankar continued on, catching the T at Harvard Square to the Park Street stop.

He had been full of hope when he waved goodbye to Neha from the bus, but when Shankar saw the homeless people on the Common, his sadness returned. The early morning breeze swept debris through the streets. The sky was gray and heavy, the streets were empty, and a faint smell of urine hung in the air. He recognized the “Sober Veteran” lying on a bench near the fountain, his shoebox under his head. Shankar stood in front of the closed door to the office of the Division of Employment and Training and heard a clock chime the half hour. Six-thirty. It would be two and a half hours until the office opened. Why had he not foreseen this?

He had too many thoughts in his head, too many misgivings and too many questions to sit quietly and wait for the office to open. He turned and began to walk, and in two hours had traveled from Staniford Street to the North End, then to the Aquarium and to the Financial District. The streets began to fill with people. The walk had been good for him; his mind had cleared.

Then, in the shadow of the skyscraper at 100 Federal Street, he saw a bird. It was a still, olive-green spot on the sidewalk. If Shankar had not been looking directly at the place where it sat, he would have missed it altogether. He walked closer, until he was standing next to it. The bird’s eyes were closed and it was shivering slightly.

People with jobs scurried around him. A seagull circled overhead. A man in blue jeans brushed his shoulder. Shankar bent down on one knee and saw a pair of black pumps barely step clear of the tiny creature. The bird had black streaks on its wings, and its closed eyes were circled in white. The feathers were puffed outward, as if to protect itself. When Shankar drew near, it opened its eyes for a moment and closed them again, as if exhausted. The bird was comforted by his presence, Shankar imagined. It needed help.

He gently cupped his hand under the bird and lifted it up. It was unresisting, fragile; the tip of its beak was broken. He remembered the hospital where, three months ago, he and Prakash had taken Lady to have a tumor removed from her hind leg. The drive had been about forty minutes from Lexington. There had been a T stop close to the hospital—the ride could not be that long. There, this sad bird could get help.

Shankar walked back to the Common. The “Sober Veteran” had woken up, and was sitting on his bench with his bedroll and shoebox beside him. Shankar did not know if he would recognize him from yesterday, but he reached inside his pocket and brought out a five-dollar bill.

“I’ll give you this in exchange for your shoebox.”

The fellow looked up at him from under the rim of his baseball cap. “I ain’t a fool, boy. I got at least five dollars in there myself.”

“Just the box. Take your money out and keep my five dollars.”

The man looked at him suspiciously for a moment. Then he removed his baseball cap, emptied the contents of the box into it, and handed the box to Shankar.

Shankar put the bird inside, slowly. At the T stop he asked the man behind the counter for directions and boarded the train to Angell Memorial Animal Hospital.



Only two people were in the waiting room at the animal hospital: a man with a red parrot and an elderly woman with a tired-looking Pomeranian. Shankar told the receptionist that his bird needed help immediately, and she put him at the head of the line. Soon, an attendant led Shankar into the examination room.

The veterinarian was dressed in a white coat, like the one Prakash wore at the hospital. When Shankar entered the room he extended his hand. “Timothy Creswell,” he said. He was a slight man with a beard and blond-gray hair. His voice was so quiet, and his fingers were so gentle when he held the bird, that Shankar liked him immediately.

“What happened to this little fellow?” Creswell asked, as he lifted the bird out of the box. “Where did you find him?”

“On the sidewalk. In the middle of downtown. There were no trees nearby. I don’t know why he would be there.”

The veterinarian nodded. “This little guy is a ruby-crowned kinglet. It was kind of you to bring him in, most people would just walk by.”

He peered into the bird’s eyes and carefully spread the tiny wings. He examined its head. “There are no broken bones. That’s good. They’re very hard to set in a bird this size.”

Shankar stood by, his arms behind his back. “His beak is broken.”

“We can fix that. We file it down and it grows back as easily as a fingernail.”

“He will live then?”

“Perhaps. He has eye damage. That may mean swelling in the brain, which can be fatal.” Creswell went to a counter in the back of the room and returned with a small syringe. “This is dexamethasone.” He picked up the bird, and it began to shiver again. He gently inserted the tiny needle into the bird’s breast. “It lowers the blood pressure to reduce any swelling.”

“When will we know if he will live?” Shankar asked.

“Probably by tomorrow.”

“And Doctor—” Shankar hesitated. “How should I pay for these services?”

“This type of case is usually handled by the wildlife clinic. Let’s just say it’s on the house.”

Shankar smiled. “In that case, may I know how the bird is doing tomorrow?”

“Certainly. Tell Martha at the front desk. She’ll make a note of it.”



Shankar did not go back to the employment office. After leaving the animal hospital, he had the sudden desire to cook a delicious meal for his wife. On his way home he stopped at an Indian grocery store and bought a complete array of spices, some eggplant, and two types of bitter melon. He spent \$76.95 of the money that Prakash had

given them. He thought his day had gone well; he had saved a bird and stocked their new home with some essentials.

When Neha returned, the bags of spices were sitting on the counter and he was cutting the eggplant. Neha's hair was falling out of its braid and her face glistened with perspiration. She collapsed into a chair in the kitchen.

"How did it go?"

She told him about the young manager who had shown her around the store. A friendly college student was the checkout clerk in her aisle. She was not ashamed, she said, to have gotten this job.

"There will be a time when we do not have to do work like this," he said.

She shook her head, as if dismissing the thought. "And you? Did you file a claim?"

"No. But look—" He waved his hand at the spice-laden counter. "I've bought everything we will need." He spoke enthusiastically, but he caught the glimmer of disappointment in Neha's face. She smiled at him anyway.

"That is good," she said. "It will feel more like a home now." She went to the bedroom, to change her clothes.

He was chopping the onions when the phone rang. Neha answered it in the bedroom and her voice was low and unclear. Someone from the new job, perhaps.

She appeared in the baggy pants and long shirt of a chalwar kamise. "Prakash is on the phone."

Shankar stopped chopping. Neither of them had mentioned his brother's name since they had moved out on Saturday.

"What does he want?"

"He said we left some things there. A suitcase. He wants to know if we can pick it up."

"How? We don't have a car."

"Can't you come talk to him?"

"No. I won't." He shook his head.

"Shankar—"

"Tell him I am busy cooking." His voice grew louder. "Can't he drop it off? He is the one that has the car."

“There is a bus. He wants us to come tonight.”

“How can he call today and command us to pick it up immediately? He is the one always talking about the American way of long-term planning.” He was almost shouting now.

Neha was quiet.

“I will go tomorrow,” he said finally. “Tell him that. Will you come with me?”

She nodded her head. “I’ll tell him that you will call before we come.”

When she returned, she sat with her back to him at the far end of the sofa.

“You are upset?”

“Sometimes you scare me,” she said. She did not turn to look at him.

“Because I am a failure.”

“No. Because you are angry.” Her face was half hidden at this angle, and the light from the window could not reach it. “You were never angry in India. Only after we came here. During the time we lived with Prakash you became more and more angry. You think everyone is against you, but you don’t say anything back. When you do, it comes out like it did when you drove the taxi or worked in the convenience store. But people are not so bad, Shankar, the world is not such an unfair place.”

“I have disappointed you.”

“You have scared me.” She turned and he could see her eyes. “What if you are rude like that to me someday?”

Shankar did not answer. He stood with the knife in his right hand and the left one poised over the onion. Suddenly he did not feel like cooking. He put the eggplant and onion in the fridge, then took out the leftovers from the night before.



Neha was in the shower when he woke up the next morning. He thought immediately of the suitcase he had left behind. It was the blue one with the broken wheel. Even as he left Prakash’s house on

Saturday, and the luggage was piled in the back of the Range Rover, he knew the blue suitcase was not with the others. He had not wanted to go back into the house to get it.

The morning was gray and somber. From his bed, he could see only the thick cover of clouds blocking out the sun. Today he would file for employment insurance, go and meet with his brother. Today he would set everything right.

He and Neha boarded the bus and parted at Porter Square, and he reached downtown at the same time as he had the day before. He was looking forward to the early morning walk and the time it would give him to think. Neha was right. He should not be angry with anyone. He should only work to make their life better, then perhaps his brother would respect him as well. Helping oneself. Isn't that what Mahatma Gandhi taught? He would begin living his own version of that philosophy today. He set a brisk pace for his walk and headed towards the ocean.

At 53 State Street, he saw another bird. Before he could scoop it up, he saw another, lying on its side. Across the street was a third. A seagull swooped down to the sidewalk and pecked at it. Shankar waved his arms and ran towards the gull, forgetting to look for cars on the road, chasing it until it flew off. That day, on the sidewalks of the financial district, Shankar found eleven injured birds, and three more that were close to death. He salvaged some paper bags from a trash can, poked air holes in them and placed the birds inside. In front of the Borders bookstore on School Street, he found a box to carry them all.

By the time the streets had filled with the working crowd, Shankar had forgotten about his earlier resolutions. He found himself on the T, headed for Angell Memorial Hospital again.



“What do we have here?” Dr. Creswell asked, taking the box and putting it on the examination table.

“I found them all this morning. Early.”

“Where?”

“Downtown. All along the streets. You would not imagine—there were so many!”

Creswell slowly took out the first bird. Compared to this man, with his soft ways and his gentle hands, Shankar felt like a fool. How was this veterinarian so successful and yet so kind? His brother was not like that.

Creswell did not look up from his work. “Judging from the time of year it is, and the number of birds you found, I think these are ‘tower kills.’”

Shankar stood with his hands behind his back, looking at him respectfully.

“Hundreds of birds die every year during the migration season, when they travel thousands of miles by night.”

“Why?”

“It’s still a mystery.” Creswell put the bird down and made a notation on a clipboard. “The theory is that on cloudy evenings the birds are forced to fly low, under the cloud cover. They can’t find the moon and stars. They lose their ability for celestial navigation and become disoriented. Whole flocks get confused when they see city lights. Some die quickly when they slam into the sides of buildings and towers. Some spiral slowly down into the lighted area, lose their way, and are trapped among the buildings when daylight returns.”

“I have never heard of this,” Shankar said. “Can we stop it?”

“The animal rights groups are trying to teach people. They say it’s as simple as turning off the lights in skyscrapers at night. I heard there’s going to be a rally about it at the State House on Friday morning.” Creswell had separated the birds into three groups on the examination table. He summarized his findings. “There are fourteen in all. I’ll keep three overnight for observation, but I think we can release them outside the city tomorrow. These six will go to Manomet tomorrow, to the wildlife rehab center. These—” he indicated the last group, “I’m sorry, but four of them have died. This little one is in very bad shape. I think that we will have to euthanize.”

Shankar nodded his head slowly. “I have done some good, haven’t I?”

“Absolutely. If you keep this up, we’ll have to arrange for daily bird runs to the rehab center.” Creswell smiled. “You really should attend that rally Friday. I know some people who would love to meet you.”

“And the one I dropped off yesterday?” Shankar asked.

Creswell washed his hands in the basin. “His swelling was reduced. I’m sending him to the rehab center until his beak grows back. He’ll be perfectly fine in a while.” He turned to go, his hand on the doorknob.

“Dr. Creswell—”

“Yes?”

“I—”

“Would you like us to inform you of how these birds are doing?” Creswell asked.

“Yes, but—”

“But?”

“Would you have any jobs?” Shankar blurted out.

“Any jobs?” Dr. Creswell blinked.

“A job. Just one job. For me.”

Creswell looked at him for a moment. He closed the door. “As a matter of fact, one of my ward attendants just broke her ankle, and won’t be coming in for a while.”

Shankar sucked in his breath.

“It’s not glamorous work. \$7.50 an hour. Cleaning out the cages. Feeding the animals, taking their temperatures, timing when they take a poop.” Creswell smiled.

“It sounds fantastic!”

“I’ve never heard it described that way before. The job is yours. Go upstairs to personnel and fill out the forms. Come in tomorrow and we’ll start work.”

Shankar clapped his hands once, loudly.

“I’m sorry. I know you told me your name yesterday,” Creswell said.

“Shankar Balareddy.” He took Creswell’s hand even though it was not extended, and shook it violently.

“Welcome to Angell Memorial, Shankar.”



“I have found a job,” Shankar declared to Neha as soon as he walked in the door. She had her back to him as she was cooking at the stove.

Her jaw dropped open and she turned. “How? Where?” she asked in Telugu.

“I found a job! I found a job!” he sang to the tune of a popular Hindi song. He picked her up around the hips and spun her around the small living room.

“Put me down!” she screamed playfully.

He told her about everything: his early morning walks, the birds, Dr. Creswell. Neha leaned forward and listened, her eyes alive and her cheeks flushed. He took her face in his hands and kissed her.

The phone rang.

“Don’t answer it.”

“But it may be Prakash.”

“That is why.”

She looked at the clock. “Shankar! The suitcase! Look at the time. The last bus leaves Harvard Square in ten minutes and we will miss it.”

The phone rang again, then was silent.

“Let it be.”

She bent down to look at him. “We promised.”

“What promise?” Shankar stood suddenly. His wife backed away. “Did I promise to jump every time he calls? Did he keep any promise to me?”

Neha leaned against the wall. She spoke softly. “He kept the promise for one year.” She stepped forward slightly, pleading with him. “I do not want to live under his roof for my whole life. A combined family is good, but maybe not in America. How long would you keep me there?”

Shankar said nothing. He did not know that this was how she felt. He sat down slowly.

“I will get the suitcase tomorrow,” he said. “That is my promise to you, not to him. I will go straight from work, so I will not miss the bus.”

They sat down to dinner but they didn’t speak. He had found a job, but he was not happy. His brother had separated them from each other, and he could not eat.



The next morning he found eleven birds. He put them each in a separate small paper bag he had brought for the purpose. Creswell examined each bird patiently. One had died, and another was euthanized. Again, Creswell told him to take part in the State House rally. So few had experienced the consequence of tower kills the way he had. Shankar shook his head. “Crowds of people. I will have to talk to strangers. It is not my type of thing.”

Shankar learned to clean out the cages, and to feed each animal—ferrets, rabbits, dogs, cats, parrots—according to its weight. He learned to monitor when the patients ate and defecated, or behaved unusually, and how to record it all. He learned to cover his shoes when he went into the ward with the “Parvo dogs” and the “URI cats.” He restrained a Saint Bernard while a vaccine was administered. When all these duties were finished, he made heparin syringe flushes for the surgery unit. He liked this duty the most, because it was done in Creswell’s examination room, and they could talk between patient appointments.

“I have not seen such care for animals before. Cardiology and dialysis, even radiation therapy. In India, we do not have such things.”

“We’re lucky to have the best equipment available.” Creswell wiped the examination table with a disinfectant. “But I would guess that Indians respect animals more, ultimately.”

“In my old office we kept a nightingale in a cage who used to sing quite sweetly for us. But the dean believed it was wrong. If we kept birds captive, he thought, we would ourselves be held captive in our next life.”

“What did you do in that old office?”

“I was a professor of colonial history.” Shankar could feel the veterinarian looking at him. He laughed slightly. “Perhaps not a full professor, not yet. I was finishing my master’s thesis. I was looking for a job when my brother thought I should come here. My visa number came up. He is a cardiologist.” Shankar did not add more.

“Would you have come if it weren’t for your brother?”

“I don’t know. In America, I don’t think there is a need for professors of colonial history.” Shankar stared at the small syringe in his hand. “Sometimes, late at night when my wife is asleep, I think I will open my own restaurant.”

“You’re a chef, then.”

“Just a fantasy. I do not have money like that. Only five thousand dollars that will soon be used in rent and groceries.” He thought of his brother’s house and the Range Rover and the diamond ring Malini wore.

“Why not try the bank, maybe the Small Business Administration. That’s what they’re there for.”

“I don’t know if I am that kind of person.” Shankar collected his box of syringes and prepared to go. “Such things seem like they are for dreamers.”

“Exactly,” Creswell said. He opened the door for him.

Shankar walked slowly to the surgery unit to deliver the syringes. Creswell had had an easy life, Shankar thought. He must have a lucky star guiding his path, like his brother, while his own surely fell from the sky years ago. He packed up his things to catch the bus to Lexington.



The bus took Shankar past the convenience store where he used to work. It had been only a week since he had seen this neighborhood, but it felt more like a year.

When Shankar rang the doorbell, his brother answered almost immediately. He was wearing tennis shorts and a matching shirt; his face and neck glistened with sweat. Shankar thought he had been laughing just before he opened the door. When he saw Shankar, the smile disappeared. He held the door closed so Shankar could not see inside.

“I thought you were coming yesterday,” Prakash said.

“I couldn’t.”

“You should have called.”

Shankar had not called on purpose just to irritate his brother, but now that he had succeeded, he was ashamed.

“Won’t you let me in, Thumudu?” he said, addressing his younger brother in the affectionate way.

Prakash looked back, over his shoulder. He opened the door a little wider and Shankar stepped in.

“Wait here,” he commanded. “I will get the suitcase.”

Shankar stood in the foyer. He did not call out to see if Malini was

there. He could not find Lady. From the foyer he could gaze through the windows in the living room to the tennis court and backyard.

Three men were walking off the court. He recognized Ramesh Chundi, a wealthy businessman who used to live in Kansas. The other players were not Indian. One was unfamiliar but when Shankar saw the third, he gasped.

“Who is that man?” he asked when his brother returned with the suitcase.

“Did he see you?”

“No.”

Prakash hesitated. “He is my colleague, Jonathan Curtis. He wants to make me a partner this year.”

“Did he tell you about me? In the store—did he recognize my last name?”

“He asked me if Balareddy was a common name in India. He told me what happened there.”

“Is that why you thought it was time for Neha and me to leave?”

Their eyes met. Prakash did not answer. Later Shankar would think this silence was the worst response he could have received. It meant Prakash knew the depth of his own betrayal.

“Does he know we are brothers?”

“No,” Prakash said.

Prakash opened the door and Shankar stepped outside. The door shut behind him, and he was glad. He would not want Prakash to watch him struggle with the suitcase as he walked down the street.



Early the next morning, Shankar saw a ruby-crowned kinglet fluttering against a window only a foot above the ground at 53 State Street. He scooped it up with both hands, and, seeing it was only disoriented, quickly put it in a paper bag. The bird was immediately calm. How odd, he thought. He had not yet seen a bird that was so confused but still managed to fly.

He was surprised to find no other birds that day, even though he walked the full daily route he had created for himself. Had the migration stopped?

About a block and a half from the employment office, announcing its existence with large block letters, stood a storefront Shankar had passed many times. He walked to it slowly, knowing he was going there, but not wanting to hurry. "Small Business Administration," the sign said. He had not looked inside before. He closed the paper bag and put the kinglet down. He cupped his hands around his face and peered into the window. It was not like the employment office, where the counselors sat at desks with no barriers in between, and where each client could hear the complaints of the one seated next to him.

This office had cubicles and computers and guest chairs in each space. A coffee maker stood in the corner. He had a strange thought that for the past year, only the storefront had existed; the desks and chairs and cubicles had magically appeared just as Dr. Creswell was telling him about it the day before.

The office opened at nine, but it was only eight. He would come back, he told himself. He turned to walk to the Common and the T stop.

A crowd of people had gathered at the State House steps. They held signs and led dogs on leashes. He walked to the top of the hill to watch for just a moment. He passed the homeless people on their benches, many of whom he now recognized. There was a hum of excitement, and two men were setting up a microphone on the sidewalk. "Turn off your light! Help their flight!" one sign said. "So little means so much!" said another. It was the rally that Dr. Creswell had mentioned, and Shankar watched the crowd intently for a few minutes. How fine it was these people were here, he thought, even though he would not join them. Even though it was not his type of thing. The bird stirred in the paper bag as he walked back to the T.

About the Author

Rishi Reddi is the author of *Karma and Other Stories*, winner of the 2008 PEN New England / L.L. Winship prize for fiction. Her short stories have been aired on National Public Radio, performed at New York City's Symphony Space, and published in *Best American Short Stories*, *Harvard Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*, among other journals and collections. Her essays and translations have appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Asian American Literary Review*, and the *Partisan Review*. Her first novel, *West*, is forthcoming.

Reddi has been practicing environmental law for state and federal government for the past twenty years and has served on the boards of Grub Street, Inc. and SAALT, a national nonpartisan organization that serves the South Asian-American community. She has lived in the Boston area for most of her adult life; the city and its suburbs provide the setting for much of her fiction.

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