



Karma

a novel by Nancy
Deville



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In memory of Thaddeus and Genevieve



PROLOGUE

Medicine is a system that processes human beings. Rich and poor, stoics, pragmatists, deniers, liars, and hypochondriacs—they all get processed. I thought about this some time after I was raped. Once I had the luxury to think beyond my immediate survival, I realized that what had happened to me was no different than what doctors like me do to patients in hospitals. I was being processed through a system.

It didn't matter that I was wealthy, educated, and American. I could have been one of the poor ignorant gypsies I'd seen at the bazaar in Istanbul. The process was rape/conditioning. Until I was abducted, I thought things like that only happened to poor Eastern women—not to women like me. But I was wrong, and my life changed the instant the rape began. I was reminded of the innocent people whose lives changed when I spoke the words "stage four cancer." What terrified me most was how ill prepared I was to deal with the cruel hijacking of my planned out life. I suppose my terror was no different than the fear of those who are freshly diagnosed as terminally ill.

Fear is primitive. I learned that from my father, a corporate law litigator. His militaristic training that passed for parenting enabled me to get through the stress and fear of four years of medical school and one year of internship. He hammered into me how to keep a cool head during a crisis. *Do not panic. Breathe deeply. Be realistic.* It was unreal, actually, the way I remembered and was able to act on the lessons my father taught me. First of all, having been told my entire life to *accept, accept, accept*, I did not deny what was happening to me. How could I forget my father's credo? He would look at me eye to eye, and only when he saw the light of recognition flash in my eyes would he straighten his spine – rising to the full towering height that had intimidated legions of plaintiffs—and bellow, “Then deal with it.”

When I think about it now, I'm sure that even Dad would have given me credit for “dealing with it.” I could have easily lost it. I knew from medical training that the instant the *fear* signal reached my brainstem that neurons informed the amygdala lodged deeply within my brain's temporal lobe. This primitive ganglion of my limbic system alerted my adrenal medulla to shoot epinephrine into my bloodstream, tripping my blood pressure and heart rate into high gear. I experienced tachypsychia, a neurological phenomenon of time distortion, which slowed events and heightened my perception. My heart rate ripped to its tipping point. Once over 145 BPM I would begin to disassociate. To maintain control, I started survival breathing, what my father called “ream the other guy” breathing. Four counts in. Hold for four. Exhale four.

During the rape, I was hyper-focused on staying alive, on avoiding any movement that would cause the icy cold razor switchblade pressed against my neck to slice through my pulsing carotid artery. I analyzed every possibility to gain an advantage over my attacker, including fighting back as soon as the razor was safely away from my neck. It was a nice try, as Dad would have said, though it gained me nothing but three cracked ribs. Even seriously injured, I had reached in vain for the blade when it lay in the rapist's slack hand as he dozed, his body a dead weight on top of me, his long black hair flopping over my face as he snored, filling my nostrils with the sickening sweet smell of his oily scalp, and the rankly sweet odor of licorice on his breath.

Only those suffering from acute post-traumatic stress can understand how the mere scent of things so benign and seemingly pleasant as candy and flowers can produce hallucinatory torments so profound that reality and sanity spin out of control.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Like many stories, mine will end with conclusions, leaving some frayed ends that will likely fester into more heartbreak and even greater frustration. This again was really no different than what occurs in hospitals. Through various tests, doctors gather as much evidence as they can. They knit together as many bits and pieces of history as they can garner. They reach conclusions. A series of actions, they are the means to an end to heal the patient. Sometimes a patient has no other choice but to come to terms with an end result that is far from optimal. But I have seen with my own eyes the lengths that humans will go to accept. That's the purpose of writing my story down. Memoir or a confession, you must decide. Regardless, this recording of events is part of an effort to heal, despite a less than optimal end result. You see, I'm damaged and feel like an outcast. All I have to cling to now is the hope that Dad was right, that if I could just accept . . . then maybe I could move on with my life.

CHAPTER ONE

A sad-eyed hotel valet snapped his fingers and a TAKSi darted out from a predatory phalanx of cabs. With a slumping gait, the valet lugged my carry-on bag over to the cab and opened the door. I handed him a couple of American dollars and scooted over the lumpy seat, settling my purse on my lap. Inside was my wallet, mobile phone, *Fodor's Istanbul*, toiletries for the plane, my laptop, and a plastic freezer bag containing my father's ashes. Even as a doctor I was still a little surprised that the ashes of a human being were so heavy. It seemed significant to me. The weight.

It was a mere two weeks since his death. The funeral director had tried to sell the idea that a mausoleum internment would be "appropriate for a man of Mr. Fitzgerald's stature." My father had once mentioned that he wanted to be cremated, but wasn't sure where his ashes should go. "Meredith," he grumbled, as his mood was always on a slow boil, "I could lie forever with my grandifloras, floribundas, my polyanthas." But after his death when the house was on the market, I didn't feel right about kneeling in his garden mulching his ashes around the thorny bushes between real estate showings. Besides, I had my own plan.

The TAKSi thumped as the valet hoisted my bag into the trunk, then again when he slammed it closed, rattling the car. He rapped his knuckles smartly on the top of the cab. The driver cranked his neck to look at me, a leer spread over his face. He was childsize. As part of my training in infectious diseases, anthropometric history was of interest—studies that establish the historical record of the overall nutrition of a population by tracking average adult heights. Even though the man was underdeveloped, he had the ubiquitous five o'clock shadow, black caterpillar eyebrows, and Saddam Hussein moustache of the Middle Eastern male. "Where you go, lady?"

"Can you take me around Istanbul and wait for me? I want to go to the Egyptian Spice Bazaar first."

"No problem, lady. I can drive you anywhere, anytime. You can look at carpet too. No need to buy. Just looking." He trained the rearview mirror on me reflecting the hungry eyes of a man who spent his days grasping for intimacy with his fleeting fares. Trying to make an extra shekel, as my fiancé Paul would say.

"How much in American dollars?"

"Not too much. Very good price for you."

In the closed cab his body odor was inching into the back seat. "How much is not too much?"

"No meter for you. Just seventy-five American dollars, whole day."

“I need to be at the airport by four. So okay, I guess.”

“*Very cheap price,*” he pushed, having to get the last haggling word in. “American?”

“Yes.”

“Beautiful girl.” When he didn’t get a rise out of me, he said, “You go back to America?”

“No. India.” *I’ll see some of Istanbul, then to Varanasi, return to LA the following weekend, sleep sixteen hours, and back to the hospital to start my fellowship.*

“Why you go India?” he asked, butting into my thoughts.

“Just visiting.”

“Why you not stay in Istanbul? I make lady very nice tour. Very cheap.”

I pretended not to hear him over the cacophony of honking horns and the grind of hundreds of revving engines. My Indian mother had died of preeclampsia after childbirth. She’d been my age at her death, twenty-seven. Her parents had told my father that death was her karma for marrying against their wishes. Dad had swallowed his hubris and traveled to India to scatter her ashes in the Ganges River . . . just in case.

“Why you not travel with husband?”

I smiled again at the driver’s dog eyes in a way that was intended to shut him up. Kind of a pathetic, spinsterish smile of one who spent her life cooped up behind a blubbering TV set spooning HäagenDazs down her throat. He looked away, drumming his fingers on his steering wheel, then said, “No husband?”

I was not going to open the subject of my engagement up for conversation with the little man. “I’m a doctor,” I replied, hoping to satisfy him. “I was attending a U.N. medical conference at the hotel. ‘Preventing and Treating Infectious Diseases in Developing Countries’.”

“Ahhh,” he breathed, but this information only seemed to ignite a flame of curiosity in his probing eyes. “My wife, she is dead.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Evil eye.”

“Excuse me?”

“My neighbor have evil eye. He angry with me. He kill my wife with very big fever.”

I sat silently looking out the window, feeling a creep of emotion for the man, for his loneliness, his superstitions, and his obsequiousness, as if it were a cluster disease that warranted pity. I opened my bag for the *Fodor's*. There was the sterling Tiffany pillbox Paul had given me containing ten-milligram Valium. Paul, a movie producer, traveled a lot and knew that benzodiazepines provided the best sleep during the disruption of jet lag by slowing down the nervous system. I punched speed dial on my phone to hear his voice, but saw there was *no service*. Regret began like a flu that signals its onslaught with a faint musky throb of lung tissue. Paul wanted to meet me after the conference so we could travel together to India. But no. I always had to show the independent spirit that had made my father so proud. If Paul were with me, the taxi ride would be fun. We'd suppress giggles and eye rolls. Paul would have already mapped out the new section of Istanbul, built on the Asian Continent where Istanbul's financial and business district and five star hotels flourished. When we crossed the Galata Bridge over the Golden Horn inlet of the Bosphorus to the old city on the European continent, he would ignore the driver to fiddle with the GPS on his iPhone to get his bearings. At the end of our tenure in the sad little man's cab, Paul would have tipped him heavily to cleanse us of any guilt associated with our elitism.

Indeed, we had crossed the Galata Bridge and were now in the old city of Istanbul; the black and gunmetal gray Mercedes and Jaguars disappeared, replaced by Kartol station wagons, tinny Fiat Sinhans, Opel Vectras and, surprisingly, American classics from the late fifties and early sixties, one after another. Chevys mostly. Besides the cars, there were elephantine Mercedes Benz buses filled with middle-aged German tourists peering with vague interest from their upper berths. The TAKSi slid along the ancient wall and huge towers as if spoiling for combat. Correspondingly the sky darkened, with rain only moments away. An indifferent wind, a prelude to rain, whistled against the windshield.

We passed a moss-covered fortress. "Prison," the driver said, when I had thought we had settled into a quiet ride. "Many, many American hippie. *Life*," he took his hands off the wheel and crossed his wrists in a pantomime of bondage. "Antiquity smuggling, possession of the Afghani." He toked vociferously on an imaginary joint. "I can sell lady doctor very excellent Hindu Kush Red. I swear on my mother is very, very good shit. Not to worry. You smoke here in my car and" He smacked his palms together as if brushing off dirt. "You take carpet. Very nice carpet, make your house very proud. You no need to buy. Just looking."

"No thanks. Really." I smiled at him, feeling again that sense of responsibility for being a privileged American while this man had to scrape for extra income, however nefariously.

"You visit Topkapi?" he asked, hoisting his skinny body a half a foot off the driver's seat so that he could sling his arm over the backrest, looking at me.

I had seen it with a few other residents the day before. My face must have said it all because the driver laughed, showing off blackened teeth and the inflamed gums of periodontal disease. "Ah, I know," he said patronizingly. "Liberated American woman no like *haram*." I looked away, creeped out that he'd invaded my thoughts. He took both hands off the wheel, making a circle with the fingers of one hand sticking the index finger of his other hand in and out in a sexual gesture. "No men!"

“Watch the traffic!”

The little man plopped back in front of his wheel. Rain fell. Big fat polluted drops over the cold, dank, wet tomb of antiquity. Minarets all over the city began transmitting the melancholy Arabic call to prayer over antiquated loudspeaker systems jarring in their lack of synchronization. When the TAKSi driver defiantly flicked his radio to belly dancing music, a chill crept under my skin. He continued multitasking: flicking his lighter and sucking at his cigarette till the tobacco lit, switching radio stations, jamming his foot on the brake just millimeters before slamming into the car ahead of him. My bag slid off my lap as he turned the wheel sharply, cutting off a dirty Rolls.

“No more *haram*.” The driver belched smoke, not wanting to leave the subject alone. “*Haram* mean forbidden. Atatürk, he father of modern Turkey, he say no more sultan, no more *haram*. Nineteen twentytwo, sultan go away. No more eunuch.” He fluffed them away with flicking fingers. “Eunuch mean, in Turkish, ‘no beard’. Eunuch guard *haram*, like the peacock, only mean, like mad dog.”

“Uh-huh,” I said under my breath, wondering if there was a way that I could switch cabs at this point, but probably not.

The TAKSi nudged its way through the rubblestrewn street, pausing impatiently for a donkey, scattering chickens lured into traffic by mounds of garbage. The driver maneuvered the car through the bustling street, going from a dead stop to flooring the accelerator and miraculously slipping into spaces between cars, a terrifying fraction of space on either side. He hit the brakes to avoid a bus that careened into the next lane—such as it was—narrowly avoiding a collision with a truck hauling two milk cows in its bed—throwing me forward; fortunately I managed to brace myself before my nose met the heavy plastic liner on the back seat. *The Song of God Bhagavad Gita* flew out of my bag onto the floor. I had planned to read it on the plane to India. It seemed about time to learn something about my mother’s faith. I opened the book. Inside I’d slipped a photo of my parents. Dad, young and blond, dressed in a suit, my mother at his side, wearing a sunsetorange sari with a pink blouse. Ray Bans hid her eyes. Her hair, like long strands of black silk, flickered around her smiling mouth, her lips painted cherry red like the bindi placed over her third eye.

I’d gotten over any girlish fantasies about my parents shortly after reaching the age of reason. At least for my father, it wasn’t the kind of soul-mate love little girls romanticize. He’d simply been in lust over the intrigue and drama of a woman who had to break with thousands of years of tradition to marry him. He wasn’t the type of man to stay faithful to one woman. His “little black book” had been more like the Los Angeles telephone directory. My mother’s death was a bitter victory that had saved her from heartbreak. But still, his making the trip to India inspired in me a romantic notion that urged me back to that same holy river to unite them.

The TAKSi fishtailed to a stop. “Okay lady, Egyptian Bazaar. I wait for you.”

I shuffled the book back in my bag and then glanced up at the sound of voices arguing so loudly they penetrated the window. It was a peasant couple with a little girl. The family was grimy, sunbaked, their features blurred by desperation. The woman, hunched and cringing, wore

ballooning pantaloons of flowered cotton fabric, a dingy shawl, and a voluminous fringed scarf over her head. The man was lean and tall. Baggy pants flapped against his calves, in the wind. The girl seemed about six years old. She was blonde, a throwback from some ancient migration. Her cheeks were raw, her mouth blistered. Her hair was gummy and tangled, a few dreadlocks having volunteered. She was barefoot, her face streaked with grime. A sackcloth dress sagged over her fragile frame. She hid behind her mother's legs as the man's balled fist punched the air in front of their faces. This exhibition of hostility regularly occurred in the hospital parking lot, followed inevitably with an E.R. admission and a swarm of cops making an arrest.

But the TAKSi driver was unfazed. He reached over the seat for my bag. "You leave here. No problem."

"Thanks. I'll keep it with me."

Avoiding the potholes, I tiptoed cautiously across the garbage-strewn cobblestones toward the bazaar. Young men hawked knocked-off Gucci purses, key chains and Playboy socks. I mounted a flight of broken concrete stairs following the garish music that squawked from overhead speakers. Heavy drops fell again, racing down the neck of my leather jacket to settle around the waistband of my jeans as clammy reminders that I could have whiled away the afternoon in the hotel tearoom chatting with the other docs.

The hall was gloomy and glitzy. Merchandise crushed down upon the shoppers: frivolous tourist junk, foods, gaudy jewelry, leather goods, carpets and more carpets, and every conceivable souvenir capitalizing on Turkey's history. Thunder reverberated through the maze-like structure off the tall ceilings and stone walls like phony sounds from an old black and white Sheik of Araby movie. Vendors flipped around long-handled squeegees, a kind of show, deftly directing pools of water on the muddy pavement away from their stalls and rushing to place rain buckets. All business as usual, this controlled pandemonium, along with the cacophony of innumerable radios.

One minute everyone is scurrying around making sure the rain didn't do any damage; the next it's all one big tea party, the little boys dashing to and fro wielding delivery trays of hourglass tea glasses and cubes of sugar to placate the soggy tourists.

I got out my mobile phone again, punching in Paul's number, but received only one of those frustrating robotic messages about entering my mail box number. I clicked off and pocketed the phone. A touch of cool flesh brushed against my palm. I jerked my hand away in an involuntary response and was taken aback to see the peasant woman who had been arguing outside. She offered me her little girl's hand. I dug out some coins from my jeans. I was only going to be in Turkey for the weekend and the other docs had advised me to avoid the hassle and stick with dollars. So all I could give the woman was a handful of pennies, quarters, nickels, and dimes. But she refused my money, a look of frustration twisting her drawn features, a hint of a curse on her quivering lips. She wasn't more than eighteen or twenty. Just a girl herself, with tufts of blonde hair escaping her scarf, and gray eyes clouded with emotion. She picked up her daughter and shook her, roughly, like she was offering me a sheaf of wheat at the market. The girl's head flopped on her neck as her mother spat at me in Turkish.

“Calm down,” I said, using my gentle-but-firm doctor tone.

Just then a shopkeeper from a nearby stall caught my eye and gestured to me. “Come, come, just sit here.” He offered a chair. “I have rose oil, very nice from Isparta.”

“Roses?” It seemed so convenient as I’d been thinking of some kind of ritual at the river, something to do with roses since the garden is where my father went to tamp down the intensity of his life. Ironically, he’d died there of a massive stroke.

“Yes, yes, roses,” the man said, beaming.

I flashed a weak semblance of a smile at the peasant woman, feeling apologetically like the ugly, selfish American. But what could I do? If she didn’t want money then I didn’t know what else she wanted from me. I ducked away from my guilt and her accusing eyes and entered the man’s shop, bracing for the overkill sell. The man had a delta of wrinkles on sun-hardened cheeks, his white whiskers defiantly growing in patches like brittle bushes which manage to emerge from blistered earth. He wore a black woolen cap. “This is *gulab*.” The man with the goatee launched immediately into his pitch. “Rose water from hundred petal roses. Oldfashioned roses, gallica, Damascus, moss, centifolia.” His heavy horned-rimmed glasses fell down his nose as he peered above them at me. *Progressive pterygiums*, I diagnosed, examining the thickening of tissue, like blobs of yellowed wax, creeping from the sclera of both eyes onto his irises; if he didn’t have the masses surgically removed, he’d be blind soon.

The man produced four chemist beakers filled with oil. One was the color of burned caramel. “Opium oil from poppy.” The next, a curry color. “Isparta rose.” The next, sunflower yellow. “Mixed roses.” The last, the color of lemonade. “Wild roses.” With a syringelike instrument he extracted drops from each beaker and massaged the oil into my hands. The attar of roses exploded pleasantly. The old man grinned, knowing he’d gotten his hook into me. “In Turkish, *Attar-t Cihangir*. Essence of Jahangir. *Attar* is Arabic. It means scent. *Rosa damascena* the essential oil used to making all fine scents. Its scent is at surface. Just the slightest touch releases fragrance.”

He scurried to gather up a bouquet of pink roses. “Isparta rose,” he announced.

“I don’t know,” I mused out loud. “I’m going to the Ganges River with my father’s ashes. I wanted to take something sentimental.” I realized I’d said too much.

“In Asia, white is the color of mourning,” he replied with feigned sympathy, proffering a white rose to finish me off.

“I can’t take fresh roses with me all the way to India.”

“Not roses; just petals, you see.” He produced a clear plastic container, like a take-out box, and began plucking off white rose petals from a bouquet, filling the container. “I put underneath plastic bag. You go through security at airport then you fill with ice. Keep rose petals fresh.”

I don't know why I stood there while he went on about roses and perfume, all the while stuffing the box with petals, because normally that kind of presumptuous behavior on the part of a salesperson would have launched me out of the door. But I kind of liked the idea. Who knew if I could find white rose petals in India? This way I'd have them with me. I envisioned myself floating on a boat, the Ganges River water the color of parrots, the white petals undulating, finessed by a tender current as my father's ashes filtered down to join with my mother's.

"I'll take them."

The man chortled, "Of course."

Outside, the rain showed no signs of letting up. Finished with the bazaar, I was happy to head to the airport to wait for my flight. An old man hobbled toward me, tugging up his coat. His lower spine had caved in toward his abdomen from the weight of the upper deformity. *Kyphosis*. Probably a congenital anomaly, or caused by tuberculosis, or maybe syphilis. It was kind of cool to see a case of it. He held out a knotty hand. "*Baksheesh*," he spit. I gave him the handful of American coins the peasant woman refused. He limped away from me.

I peered through the drape of water falling from the eaves. Several other beggars were making their way slowly toward me and so I chose to run, landing immediately into a pothole, my toes squishing in my hiking boots. Then to my utter amazement I noticed that the peasant woman, with Herculean strength, was trotting beside me, holding up her girl. I stopped, out of breath, blinking raindrops from my lashes, hiccupping a little incredulous laugh. "What in the world?"

The woman set the girl down. I bent to her, and took her little pointy chin in my hand, tilting her face upward. "Are you hurt?" She smiled halfheartedly, with her mouth shut, like kids do when their parents yell *smile* for photographs. There was nothing wrong with her that a good meal wouldn't cure. I'd take them over to a food vendor in the bazaar. But when I rose to standing, the girl's mother was gone.

The rain, which at first seemed to carry a hint of summer, now seemed more like the temperature of dead winter.

I urged the girl back to the bazaar, out of the downpour, watching her blonde head as it bobbed along in the rain, the way that little girls prance. She burped little squeals and grunts with each step, patrolling my face with traumatized curiosity. Once inside she attempted to bolt, but I followed her into a darkened nook where she crouched into a ball. I snatched up a handful of her dress, and yanked her out. The girl's eyes, caked with dried rheum, filled with tears. She opened her mouth and slipped her thumb in the empty space where her two front baby teeth had once been, sucking with grave intensity.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you again," I called out, when the rose man walked by. "This woman came up to me and left her little girl, just like that."

"Gypsies," he sniffed. "I will call the police. Don't worry. I bring you tea."

“Oh, thank you. Thank you so much,” I said, watching him shuffle nonchalantly in the direction of his stall on loafers with crushed out backs, like slippers.

In just a minute or two, a woman appeared, heavily veiled in a black chador, with only a tiny triangular opening exposing her nose and downcast eyes. She modestly proffered a small gilded china saucer, which held two hourglassshaped glasses of tea, each on a saucer with two rough cubes of white sugar and tiny long-handled spoons. The shrouded woman motioned to the shopkeeper’s stall. The tea was from him.

My teeth were chattering. “Oh, thanks.”

I stirred in the two sugar cubes. I’d have the tea, get the girl situated, then get to the airport where I would change into some dry clothes before the flight. I’d talk to Paul for an hour on the phone, and worry about my phone bill later. The woman handed a sugar cube to the girl, who lodged it where her baby teeth used to be. She held a glass of tea so the girl could slurp it through the cubes. It was a nice moment, the way that happens sometimes, with the three of us, complete strangers, sharing a window of time that was simply about hot tea and sugar, and nothing else.

“I don’t want to be rude, but I have a flight to catch so I’ve got to get this girl to the police as soon as possible.” The woman nodded, eyes downcast, then walked away.

Flaxen eyebrows. Lashes fluttering over downcast eyes. She was way too delicious for that old rose man. The taxi driver said that Turkey outlawed harems. I gulped the rest of the tea, not eager for any images of the repulsive ancient polygamist and his sexy young bride sticking in my head. My core warmed with the tea in my stomach, the heat permeating into my wet extremities. It was the first time since I’d received the call at the hospital that I hadn’t had my father in the back of my mind. It was good. I was turning a corner in my grief. I rummaged in my bag for a handful of hotel bedtime chocolates and poured them into the girl’s cupped palms. She plopped onto the dirt floor of the bazaar and began to methodically unwrap the candy, gumming one as she unwrapped the next.

The shopkeeper was taking a long time and I checked my watch, feeling pressed to get going. “Come on.” I reached my hand down to the girl and she clamored to her feet, clutching my hand with a chocolaty grip.

In that instant—too late for me to scream or form the words that could save myself—I knew that the tea I had just consumed contained choral hydrate, the drug used in a Mickey. Having an empty stomach, the wellabsorbed sedative was taking hold of my consciousness and dragging me down into its dark web. The voices in the bazaar echoed large and small at the same time, as if packaged somewhere in my brain where I couldn’t sort them out. My vision blurred as the bazaar music turned into a high pitchedwhine. The girl’s hand slipped out of mine. I staggered. A firm hand gripped my arm as I looked into the eyes of the black shrouded woman who had brought us the tea. Her eyes were *green*. I stumbled into a delicious free fall as a billow of black fabric enveloped me.

A honeyed voice filtered through the material, “Just let go, darlin’. I got you.”

