

KARMA by Jenny McLaughlin  
February 2025

George stepped out of the rundown building ignoring its air of decay and neglect. Despite the rumble in his belly he doesn't need much these days and *The Mission* provided enough to get from one day to the next. Detached from the world around him he walked the city streets, one foot in front of the other, his mind numb. He no longer thinks about when his life fell apart. Maybe five years ago, maybe ten. It no longer matters.

On the streets, the only times that matter are night and day. If George does ever recall his earlier life, he remembers how scarce work was when he lost his job; how he tried to stay ahead with odd jobs and government payments and how Centrelink made life harder, not easier. When he finally refused to comply with their endless demands, the meagre dole payments stopped. That was the final straw for his wife, Jean.

'Well?' she had snapped, her voice edged with frustration. 'Are you just going to spend another sitting around doing nothing again?'

George shifted uncomfortably on the couch, his hands clenched tight between his knees. 'I've been into dozens of businesses, Jean. No one's hiring.'

'And what are we supposed to do now, huh? How are we going to pay rent? Buy food? Maybe you are not looking hard enough. Joe next door got a job within a week. You've been six months with nothing but piddly little two-day jobs.'

'You think I don't want to work? You think I like this?'

'I dunno. Maybe you do. Maybe all they see is what I see—a man with no direction, no ambition. A no-hoper.'

'Are you serious, Jean? After everything I've been through, that's what you think of me?'

'What do you want me to think. For weeks my wages have been paying the bills. I'm the one holding this place together! And you know what? I can do it without you!'

'Jean, please stop talking like that. You're treating me like I'm worthless.'

'Maybe that's because you are.'

Silence fell between them, the air heavy with long suppressed emotions.

'I can't do this anymore...' Jean's tone suddenly weary.

Before George could react to his wife's words there was a knock at the door. It was Joe.

Without another word George grabbed his coat and fled, happy to escape his wife's wrath.

'Don't bother coming back!' she screamed into the empty space. George grinned sheepishly at Joe.

Later in the evening when he returned home, George hoped to find Jean in a better mood. But he was never to see her again. On the door mat was a large zip up bag, the kind you store blankets or such things in. Inside he saw his clothes, slippers and a plastic toiletry bag. There was a note on the door.

'Don't try to come in. You're not wanted here.'

He pushed his key into the lock but the door held fast. Jean had pulled the safety bolt across.

KARMA by Jenny McLaughlin  
February 2025

From then on, he was on his own. In those early days he wandered the streets like a sleepwalker not daring to talk with anyone. Within a month he had lost everything except the blanket wrapped around him. The more experienced rough sleepers having helped themselves to his belongings. At first the realisation of what he had lost saddened him, but over the ensuing months then years, memories of home faded. The endless days, and never quite dark nights amidst the roar and the rumble of the city that never slept, had become his reality. Never had he felt so alone and scared

In time he learnt the ways of survival – how to ignore the constant ache of hunger and how to fight the bitter cold by wrapping newspaper sheets around his body at night, the makeshift padding giving an illusion of warmth. But nothing hid the gauntness of his frame. Windy days were the toughest as cold gusts swept off the river, swirling leaves and lunch wrappers across his path and rain was an even greater challenge, soaking through his clothes and shoes. As time went on his fear twisted into a bitterness and anger that began to consume him. He became a shadow, a man hardened by the streets.

No longer was he the carefree fellow he used to be. He cursed the world, striking out at those who brushed to close and swearing at anyone whose stray glance settled on him.

One day, while at *The Mission* he sat alone as usual, hunched over spooning his soup methodically, his mind barely registering its bland flavour. His eyes, always alert to the world around him, scanned the room. They kept returning to a man who at first glance could be mistaken for his brother - his weathered face framed by the same long frizzled grey hair with a similar arched nose. But this man was no double of George. The difference was palpable. This man radiated a serenity George hadn't felt in years. No frown creased his brow. No impatient mutterings twisted his mouth. For the first time in a long while George found himself studying another human being, remembering a time when he, too, had felt satisfied with the world.

Voices from *Café Bella* echoed in his mind: the office workers in their flashy clothes, the kids from the university always joking around.

'Hey Georgio, what's the special of the day?'

His usual response: 'Everything is special in this place, including you, my friends.'

George was not a religious man but that day something in him shifted. He made a silent vow to change, to reclaim even a sliver of the joy he had once known.

Instead of railing against the world he started finding quiet pleasure in observing the stream of humanity in all its variety. Invisible to the busy office workers engrossed in their phones, he steered clear of the inner-city during rush hours, keeping to the small city laneways and back streets. Every day he tried to walk at least one street he had not explored before. Some days his wanderings took him far from the familiar hum of the city. He paid attention to the details – the diverse houses with their distinct front gardens: some unkempt, others carefully

KARMA by Jenny McLaughlin  
February 2025

tended. Each street had its own sound - babies crying, birds calling, the hammering of workmen or the hushed silence of a neighbourhood at rest. Midday he often found himself in one of the large city parks. There, children played, and young people strolled, arms draped around each other. The seasons, once just hot and cold, regained their meaning. He revelled in the crisp air of autumn, the warmth of winter sun, the vibrant hues of spring when the park blossomed in colour.

Although he had rediscovered a quiet contentment, each night brought the same unresolved struggle: finding a safe place to rest, a challenge that never grew easier. If he found a secure dry spot to sleep, despite the hard ground and the damp air, it was never his for long. Each morning, unbeknownst to him, someone would see him curled up in his hideaway and return later in the day to claim it as their own. By the time evening came, with the light slipping away and the shadows creeping across the pavement, the best George could hope for was a dry corner in the park, a fleeting refuge before another restless night began. The sweet scent of freshly mown grass and the laughter of children playing in the sunshine seemed a world away.

Early one morning as he sat on a park bench, watching the passing parade and letting the warmth of the sun soak into his stiff body, a woman walked past him. He had seen her a couple time recently. She was hard to miss. Tall, with auburn curls that caught the sunlight, she sauntered confidently towards the city centre. This time he noticed that she glanced at him as she passed by. A few steps further she hesitated and turned to stare at him. Not that George was looking, but he could sense her eyes studying him. He knew never to catch a glance, for there might lie danger. Always keeping his eyes averted was another habit he had picked up from the streets. He sensed her slowly walking towards him.

Maybe there will be a dollar coming my way, he thought.

She stopped in front of him. George stared at her shoes – bright red, not flash. Good working shoes, he thought, wondering why she had stopped. She wasn't fumbling in her purse for money.

'You're George, aren't you?' she asked, her voice soft almost hesitant. His leant back a little and stared at her smiling face.

Such a beautiful face, he thought as his head bobbed forward and then up again in acknowledgment.

'May I sit down,' she asked.

George imagined a fancy woman like her would be able to smell him a mile off so he shuffled to the end of the bench.

'You don't remember me, do you, George?' she asked.

He turned to look at her and George shook his head. She really was a stunner. How could he not remember her?

KARMA by Jenny McLaughlin  
February 2025

‘I moved back here last month,’ she said. ‘Quite often I walk through the park on the way to work. It took me a little while to recall where I had seen you. You haven’t really changed, but you have obviously fallen on hard times.’

George looked down at his clothes aware how others must see him. He had long stopped thinking about other people and their opinions.

‘I remember when you worked in *Café Bella*. You were always ready with a smile and a light-hearted quip.’

Images flashed into George’s memory. Brian, the cranky boss out the back always hounding the kitchen staff, although he usually left George alone because George with his friendly ways was good for business. One day Brian dropped dead. And just like that they were all out of work.

Not long after that his wife kicked him out. Bewildered George had wandered down the street, humping the weighty bag. Long ago he’d realised whatever was between him and his wife was long dead. He thought initially he might miss the kids, and he did for a while, but they were teenagers and he was no longer their hero. When they moved away, he knew the life he had known was lost forever.

Like before he still he picked up an odd job here and there, but not having a place to live meant he didn’t present well. He had nowhere to wash himself or his clothes. No where to shave. To his surprise he found a sort of freedom living on the streets with no one else to think about. Some people called the tramps bludgers, but most ignored them. To them homeless people were nonentities. Nothing to do with their busy working world.

George looked more closely at his companion but nothing about her was familiar.

‘It was a long time ago for both of us,’ she said, when I was university student. Often, I would come to your café with my friends and you would make us laugh with your funny comments. But in my third year my parents split up. I no longer received an allowance and soon lost touch with those friends. My work in a bookshop didn’t pay much and it wasn’t long before I lost my apartment. I was homeless but determined to graduate because I only had six months to go. Life was very hard and looking back, I remember always being hungry.

‘One freezing morning I walked in your café for a coffee, knowing I could get two for one. You remembered me when you brought over the coffee and you asked after my friends. I felt too ashamed to speak. Memories of those happy times were too painful to think about.

‘A few minutes later you put a plate in front of me - a thick slab of toast smothered in grilled cheese. With a wink you quietly told me to come back any morning after rush hour if I wanted something to eat.’

George looked at the woman again. His vision blurred. His throat tightened. ‘My little waif,’ he whispered. ‘Is it really you? I used to wonder what had happened to you.’

The woman laid her hand on his arm. ‘A little waif. I never knew that was how you thought of me.’ She, too, had tears in her eyes. ‘Would you let me buy you breakfast, George, and we can discover what we’ve both been up to.’

‘Would you really sit with me in a coffee shop?’ George asked unable to keep the surprise from his voice.

KARMA by Jenny McLaughlin  
February 2025

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘I know how very close I came to being lost. It was you who saved me and I have never forgotten.’

Over the next hour at the local café, only George noticed the weird looks from the waiter bringing coffee and sandwiches and the curious onlookers who muttered to their companions as they placed their orders.

What must they be thinking, he wondered while he listened to the woman tell her story. She had graduated that year, thanks to sustenance provided by George most mornings, and her professor had recommended her to big law firm. Soon she was earning more money than she had ever dreamt of.

‘But I never forgot the kindness you showed me. Your actions provided me with a valuable life lesson - to never judge a person until you have heard their story, a dictum so important in my work.

‘A few months ago head office decided to send me down here as the senior partner. Imagine my disappointment when I saw that *Café Bella* was no more. I believe it was fate that took me along a path that brought me past you.’

George smiled warmly and mumbled his congratulations. Long ago he had lost the knack for easy conversations. He had become a listener. A sudden gurgle from his belly made him aware he hadn’t eaten so much in years. He wondered if tonight stomach cramps would keep him awake.

‘George, I have to go soon. Even as boss I must turn up at work sometime. I want you to think about something. We need a new janitor. It comes with its own bedsit and I could arrange for you to have the job.’

George looked up and their eyes met. For years he had lived in the shadows, disconnected from hope. Now he felt a stirring inside – a long-forgotten warmth and he remembered the George from long ago - the man with the ready smile.

‘I don’t want you to say anything now. I know you have been living a different life these past years and maybe you don’t want to give it up. I am sure I’ll see you around somewhere tomorrow or the next day. You can let me know your answer then.’

George said nothing. He kept staring at his ‘little waif’. Maybe, just maybe it wasn’t too late to rebuild. He already knew what his answer would be when next he saw her.

*the end*

*Word Count 2320*