

KEEPING KARMA

a romantic comedy in one act

SYNOPSIS

It is England in the present day. Tom Ploughman receives a visit from Dharma, a Buddhist monk.

Dharma explains that he works for a Buddhist debt reparation agency called *Keeping Karma* that specialises in resolving debts from previous lives.

Tom can remember fragments from some of his previous lives, and so Dharma's knowledge of one of these incarnations convinces Tom that Dharma is genuine.

Dharma explains how, in 1865, during an earlier incarnation as an Indian farmer, Tom had caused the deaths of a neighbouring farmer and the farmer's water buffalo.

Dharma explains how the workings of the karmic process have led to the current human reincarnations of his Indian neighbour and the water buffalo residing separately in Tom's street, unaware of their past-life connection.

It is Tom's karmic duty to reunite them.

Tom invites these neighbours, John Farmer and Alice Bull, to dinner, and love blossoms.

Four months later, Dharma visits Tom again. Dharma congratulates Tom on his part in reuniting, the now married, John and Alice. Dharma, however, also wishes to speak with Tom about another past-life incident concerning an elephant in Hyderabad.

The 'Hidden Worlds' theme is reflected in the way that hidden influences from previous lives impact on the characters in the present.

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CHARACTERS:

TOM PLOUGHMAN Male.

DHARMA Male. A Buddhist monk.

ALICE BULL Female. A neighbour of Tom.

JOHN FARMER Male. A neighbour of Tom.

TIME: The present day.

SETTING: The living/dining room in the home of Tom Ploughman.

SCENE 1

TOM's living/dining room. In the room there are two chairs and a table on which stands a jug of water and some glasses.

A doorbell rings, and, after a brief pause, TOM enters the room, accompanied by DHARMA, who is carrying a briefcase.

DHARMA: Thank you very much for seeing me, Mr Ploughman.

TOM: Please call me Tom, Mr Dharma. *(Indicates a chair)* Do sit down.

DHARMA: Thank you, Tom. My name is simply Dharma, by the way.

DHARMA sits down on the chair.

TOM: Can I offer you something to drink, Dharma?

DHARMA: Just water, please.

TOM begins to pour water from the jug into a glass.

TOM: You said on the phone that you worked for a Buddhist charity, and that you needed my help. Is it about a new website for your organisation?

TOM hands the glass of water to DHARMA and then sits down on the other chair.

DHARMA: I've seen some of the websites you've designed, Tom, and I think they're excellent, but it's not about that.

TOM: *(Surprised)* Oh. Well, in that case, what can I do for you?

DHARMA: I've come to respectfully request the return of the water buffalo that you borrowed from Mr Arjun Patel of Darjeeling, India.

TOM: I think you must be mistaken, Dharma. I visited Darjeeling some years ago, but I didn't borrow a water buffalo. *(Jokingly)* I was travelling by air, and I wouldn't have been allowed to take it on the plane.

DHARMA smiles, then takes a piece of paper from his briefcase and looks at it.

DHARMA: It happened in 1865.

TOM: That was over 150 years ago.

DHARMA: The incident occurred during one of your previous lives. You were an Indian farmer in Darjeeling, and Mr Patel was one of your neighbours.

TOM: *(Looking puzzled)* I don't understand.

DHARMA: Perhaps I should explain, Tom. I realise that this may sound very strange, but I work for a Buddhist debt reparation agency. It's called Keeping Karma. *(Hands Tom a business card)* We specialise in resolving debts from previous incarnations.

TOM: *(Looking at the business card)* I don't find the idea as strange as you might think, Dharma. *(Looks up at Dharma)* Ever since I was a child, I've retained fragments of memories that seem to come from earlier lives. I haven't talked about it much –

most people in England would think I was mad – but it led me to read a lot about karma and reincarnation.

DHARMA: Ah, that's very helpful. It's probable you've some recollections of being an insurance broker in 1912.

TOM: *(A little suspiciously)* A few.

DHARMA: You made an impulsive decision to diversify into maritime insurance shortly before the maiden voyage of the Titanic.

TOM: *(Thoughtfully – almost to himself)* Insuring an unsinkable liner seemed like a really good idea at the time. *(To Dharma)* Anyway, how did you know about it? I've never told anyone.

DHARMA: It's my job to know these things, Tom.

TOM ponders thoughtfully on DHARMA's words.

TOM: That Titanic business was bad luck. I'm still on the lookout for smart business opportunities, though. I put all my savings into bitcoins last month – they're bound to come good.

DHARMA casts a brief, quizzical glance at TOM.

DHARMA: Can you recall anything of your incarnation in Darjeeling?

TOM: *(Pauses to think)* Not directly, but when I visited the town, several years ago, it seemed strangely familiar. Of course, if I forgot to return a water buffalo to Mr Patel in 1865, both Mr Patel and the water buffalo would be long since dead.

DHARMA consults his notes.

DHARMA: The animal passed away in 1865, in fact, during your experimental attempt to plough a field at night – an endeavour that also cost your own life.

TOM: I don't remember that.

DHARMA consults his notes.

DHARMA: It appears that your father desperately tried to warn you against ploughing a hilltop field in near darkness. You disregarded his advice, however, and left the house with the words: 'sambhavatah galat kya ho sakata hai?'

TOM: What does that mean?

DHARMA: It's Hindi for 'What can possibly go wrong?' In the event, you and Mr Patel's water buffalo fell over the cliff edge, plummeting nearly fifty metres to your deaths.

TOM: Oh dear. *(Pauses to reflect)* Even now, people tell me that I can be a bit hasty. My family in Darjeeling must have been very distressed, and Mr Patel would probably have lost his livelihood.

DHARMA consults his notes once again.

DHARMA: Mr Patel was never to find out about the incident. He died on the very same evening.

TOM: That's a strange coincidence.

DHARMA: He was taking a late evening stroll on a path which ran along the bottom of a cliff. He was apparently crushed by a falling water buffalo.

TOM: Oops, *(Pauses to reflect)* that was most unfortunate. I'd like to make amends, of course, but, after all this time, how can I return a long deceased animal to a long departed owner?

DHARMA: That's the clever thing about reincarnation, Tom. Not only are beings reborn, but their karma links them to those with whom they have unfinished business.

TOM: I think I see what you're getting at. Where's Mr Patel now?

DHARMA stands and walks to the window.

DHARMA: *(Pointing out of the window)* John Farmer at number 24.

TOM: Well, I'll be damned!

TOM stands and walks over to join DHARMA at the window.

TOM: And what about the water buffalo?

DHARMA: *(Pointing out of the window in the other direction)* Alice Bull at number 67.

TOM: Extraordinary! You know, when Alice helped me dig my allotment, I remember her telling me about her fear of heights.

DHARMA: You're friends with both John and Alice, aren't you?

TOM: Yes.

DHARMA: Well, they're both on their own, and each wants to get to know the other, but they're too shy.

TOM removes his mobile phone from his pocket.

TOM: I'll invite them over for dinner next week.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 2

TOM's living/dining room in the evening, one week later. TOM, ALICE and JOHN are sitting at a dining table. They have just finished eating.

ALICE: That was a delicious nut roast, Tom.

JOHN: I agree.

TOM: Thank you. It's a pleasure having you both over for dinner.

JOHN: You know, it's yet another coincidence that both Alice and I are vegetarians.

TOM: Yes, the two of you seem to have a lot in common.

ALICE: *(Jokingly)* Like our phobias about going out after dark, you mean?

TOM: I was also thinking about the work you both do for charities.

JOHN: I was amazed how much money Alice has raised for her animal welfare charity.

ALICE: And I never realised that John ran a scheme which provides help to poor Indian farmers.

JOHN: Did I mention that my charity's just raised enough money to buy a water buffalo for a farmer in Darjeeling? Do you know anything about farming in that area, Tom?

TOM: Er *(Slightly embarrassed pause)*. I visited Darjeeling once. I saw the countryside from the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway.

ALICE: I'd love to travel on the DHR.

JOHN: Those initials tripped off your tongue very easily, Alice. Do you know something about the railway?

ALICE: I'm afraid I'm a bit of an anorak about mountain railways.

JOHN: Me too. There's another coincidence.

TOM: Would you both like some coffee?

ALICE: Yes please.

JOHN: Thanks, Tom.

TOM stands and leaves the room to make coffee.

JOHN: Alice, I hope you don't think me too forward, and I realise we've hardly met but ...

ALICE: *(Interrupting)* I know just what you're going to say, John. It sounds ridiculous, but it feels as if we've known each other for years. It's like when I first met Tom.

JOHN: Oh, are you and he ...?

ALICE: No, not at all. He's a really nice chap, but he tends to rush headlong into things without thinking. I couldn't cope with that. We're friends, but it could never be more.

JOHN: He is a bit impulsive, isn't he? Mind you, I sometimes wish I was less reticent and behaved a bit more like he does.

ALICE: What do you mean?

JOHN: Well, for example, I'm planning a summer holiday in West Bengal. I want to visit the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway and also meet the farmer who's received the new water buffalo. *(With slight anxiety)* If I was Tom, I'd probably disregard the fact that you and I hardly know each other and ask you if you'd like to come with me.

ALICE: I sometimes wish I acted more like Tom, too. I've always looked so carefully before I've leapt, so to speak, that I've never leapt. It's time for a change. If you asked me to come with you to India, I'd follow Tom's example and say yes without a second thought.

JOHN: Will you come with me to India, Alice?

ALICE: Yes, John.

*ALICE and JOHN hold hands and smile at each other.
TOM returns with a tray of coffee.*

JOHN: We're going to Darjeeling, together, Tom. Alice has just leapt without looking.

TOM: It's funny you should say that.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 3

TOM's living/dining room, four months later.

TOM enters the room, accompanied by DHARMA, who is carrying a briefcase.

TOM: It's been four months since we last met, Dharma.

DHARMA: Yes, it's good to see you again, Tom. I was delighted to hear about the wedding of John and Alice. One of the reasons I've called is to congratulate you on your part in that. I gather you were best man.

TOM: Yes, it all worked out very well. It's funny, you know, I'd always imagined that compensating for past-life mistakes would involve some kind of penance, but I've really enjoyed helping John and Alice. They've caused me to look at my own behaviour, too. I'm trying to copy their examples and think more carefully before I act – like I should have done in Darjeeling. I've abandoned bitcoins, by the way. *(Pauses)* You said that congratulating me was one of the reasons you've called. What else is on your mind?

DHARMA: Perhaps we should sit down, Tom.

DHARMA and TOM sit down.

DHARMA: *(Earnestly)* I need to talk to you about another past-life incident, I'm afraid. *(Pauses)* Do you recall anything about an elephant in Hyderabad?

END OF SCENE

END OF PLAY