

**"Special Karma A Zen Novel of Love and Folly"**  
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**ISBN/EAN13: 1453887210 / 9781453887219**

**EXCERPTS:**

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Iris pushed herself firmly into her practice. When it was her turn to ring the kansho, she did so almost inaudibly.

She reached the dokusan room and sat down before the Roshi, who seemed to be asleep. He inhaled deeply through his broad nostrils like a beast of some kind while slowly opening his eyes. Then he smiled a floating, affirmative crescent smile, and Iris could do nothing but smile back. They sat looking at one another wordlessly for a long time. "Iris," said the Roshi portentously, "What is MU?"

She hesitated.

"MUHH," he growled, and Iris also growled "MUHH," forgetting her circumstances, yet saturated. She looked up, and their eyes met.

"Not bad," the Roshi surprisingly said. "Now I shall give you a new koan. This MU. How much does it weigh? Can you say? SAY!!"

Iris stared. Then she did "MUHH" again, wondering as she did so if there was nothing more to koan study than this. Apparently there was—the Roshi snatched his bell and loudly rang it.

As she bowed deeply, he shouted at her, "Find out, Iris! Find out this question!"

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SESSHIN

The sixth day of nearly unbroken meditation had ended when the Roshi found Iris in the hallway and said, "I should like to speak with you. It's all right?" She followed him into his study.

It was a small room across from the staircase leading up to his quarters. The floor was covered with a thick white rug, and in the center of the room was a low, black, square

table. A dramatic calligraphy hung in a niche; beside it was an arrangement of branches bearing scarlet autumn leaves. Iris was accustomed to seeing the Roshi's study in daylight, when one saw through its windows the lake, mountains, and the long, twisting road that ended just here, just below. But now the windows that belted the study were entirely screened with white shoji. At night, the room looked to Iris unnaturally stark, with the black table placed in the center of it like a tile on a game board.

With a vague sense of unease, Iris sat down at the table.

The Roshi produced a book of photographs which, he said, a student had recently sent him.

It was filled with photographs of nude women, as Iris had somehow known it would be. As the Roshi turned the pages, the photos struck her as remarkably cold, exposing the imperfections of bodies that conveyed an impression of use. The images had about them an atmosphere of crime—so open did these women seem to mishandling. They stood naked in their kitchens or sat awkwardly on couches, nailed by the camera and the unsavory intellect behind it. More than anything, she wished them dressed.

The Roshi seemed not entirely pleased by the images. "This one is really not so bad," he finally said after turning the page once more. It was a young woman with teased brown hair and dangling earrings, straddling a chair backward so that the bentwood back somewhat obscured her own front. The girl wore a wistful smile.

"I should go now," said Iris, getting up.

"Why!" he demanded.

Why? bounced around in her head for several moments.

"Iris," purred the Roshi, and he clasped her hand. Iris felt its dry pressure, remembering the countless times she had admired the simple beauty of his hands. And now she felt nothing, no surge of arousal, but only—as it happened—impatience. She looked down at him, but he was not at all looking at her. With closed eyes, he was savoring the magic of holding her hand against her will. He let it go, and his face became rigid, angry.

She bowed to him until he bowed back, and then she left the room.

Outside his door, she nearly collided with Eliot again. He looked at her with a question that leadened the air between them.

"Did the Roshi want anything?" he finally whispered. Meaning—concerning their jisha work.

"No!" she almost shouted, seared by his presence. She stormed away as though he was the one she hated now, and he watched her dimly, working desperately on his koan.

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And then she fell asleep again, though she knew that in fact she was getting well. Her appetite was tremendous.

That evening, the Roshi visited her. When he came through the door it seemed to Iris that her room might collapse in the wake of his energy—and she remembered her dream. She sat up in bed with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, and the Roshi moved the cushion from the window-table and sat down. “Feeling better?” he inquired.

“What,” she persisted, “is my special karma?”

He made an ironic cheee! noise, shaking his head and laughing at her as though she were some dear old exasperating friend. “Shall I tell you?” he asked.

“Please!”

He took a deep breath and massaged the sides of his skull with his palms, not speaking for several moments. “Do you remember Sandra?” he finally asked.

“Yes, of course. Always by your side.”

The Roshi nodded. “When you came to the monastery, she said, That one will be the next. So.”

Iris stared.

“But you are so stubborn! Why?” he innocently wondered, with a receptive smile. “You’re my teacher,” Iris breathed. “It wouldn’t be appropriate.”

“Appropriate!” He tsked and gave her a baleful look, as though she could be infinitely tiresome.

“It would end badly.” (It seemed fantastic to be saying all of this to God.)

“Perhaps. Perhaps you are right, Iris. But it might be, on the other hand, quite pleasant, quite enjoyable.” He gazed at her for several moments—and then he took her hand and squeezed it. “So,” he said, “it shall not be.”

Then he stood up. Iris watched him shuffle out of her room, the starched obi riding on his wide hips looking tired and tight.

He had, Iris concluded grimly, both a front and a back.

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*On the high mountain, a cloud is cooking rice.*

Iris yawned in her long underwear, shivering slightly, her notebook on her lap. She wrote out her new koan and then drew it; an immense mountain with a vaporous white cloud hovering solicitously overhead, and somewhere in between, a tiny pot of rice cooking over a fire.

In dokusan that evening, the Roshi had disappointed her by telling her the weight of MU—her weight after all. And since she had never guessed it, they had moved on to the cooking cloud koan, which seemed to Iris uncomfortably facile.

This was junior Zen, she thought. The Roshi supplies you with the answers to your koans—or maybe they weren't even the real answers. They certainly weren't hers. And maybe she was a junior monk after all, or a person who had merely bought a ticket to get the briefest taste of an experience—like the people who ride around in Conestoga wagons for half a day.

And maybe now would be the time to get out.

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Iris crept down the stairs to the kitchen and turned on the lights. They flickered in the darkness and came on, fluorescent and faintly buzzing. No wonder Eliot had liked to cook without them. She put an imaginary check mark next to another one of his supposed eccentricities which were actually lucid and exemplary.

It was very late. A moment after turning out her bedroom light, Iris had remembered there was no gomashio for breakfast. Now she stoked the wood stove and browned the sesame seeds, wondering if Eliot would ever have done this—flown out of bed at eleven-thirty to make gomashio. It seemed suddenly all wrong—she was tenzo, the monastery was almost empty, the schedule was dismantled, Eliot was gone. Was it more important to make gomashio, or to honor the ten o'clock lights-out curfew? But was the curfew in effect with only four of them there? Also, being tenzo gave her leeway to do things that were slightly outside the rules, certainly outside the schedule. But this only made things feel out-of-joint and difficult.

She poured the roasted seeds into a suribachi and sat on the floor to grind salt into them. She held the bowl with her feet—as Eliot had shown her. Then she put the gomashio into a container and began to wash up. As she dried the suribachi, a door swung open and the

Roshi shuffled in wearing slippers, like a man who has seen a light left on in his house and wearily rouses himself to turn it off.

“Ah!” he said when he saw Iris, also sleepy in her overalls. “You save my anger. I was thinking, This new tenzo has been negligent.”

“I needed to make gomashio for tomorrow,” Iris offered, feeling it was no explanation whatsoever.

“So late!”

“I forgot to make it earlier. So I—”

“Ah!” And he walked over closer to her and stood planted before her, “We are both awake.”

“We are both foolish,” Iris ventured, immediately wishing she had said anything else.

“Sometimes that is the best way.” He reached for her hand yet again. “Actually, I often stay up late. It is nice, sometimes, to have a companion.”

She drew her hand away. “I don’t want to!” she said furiously, like a child.

“Why!” he insisted, also like a child.

She found herself thinking of the nun in the Zen story, the one who ironed her face to prevent the young monks from being distracted—so that she could stay. But the middle-aged man who stood before her in kimono and slippers was not a novice monk.

“You’re my teacher,” she wearily reminded him. And, in truth, Iris thought, that was all she had ever wanted him to be.