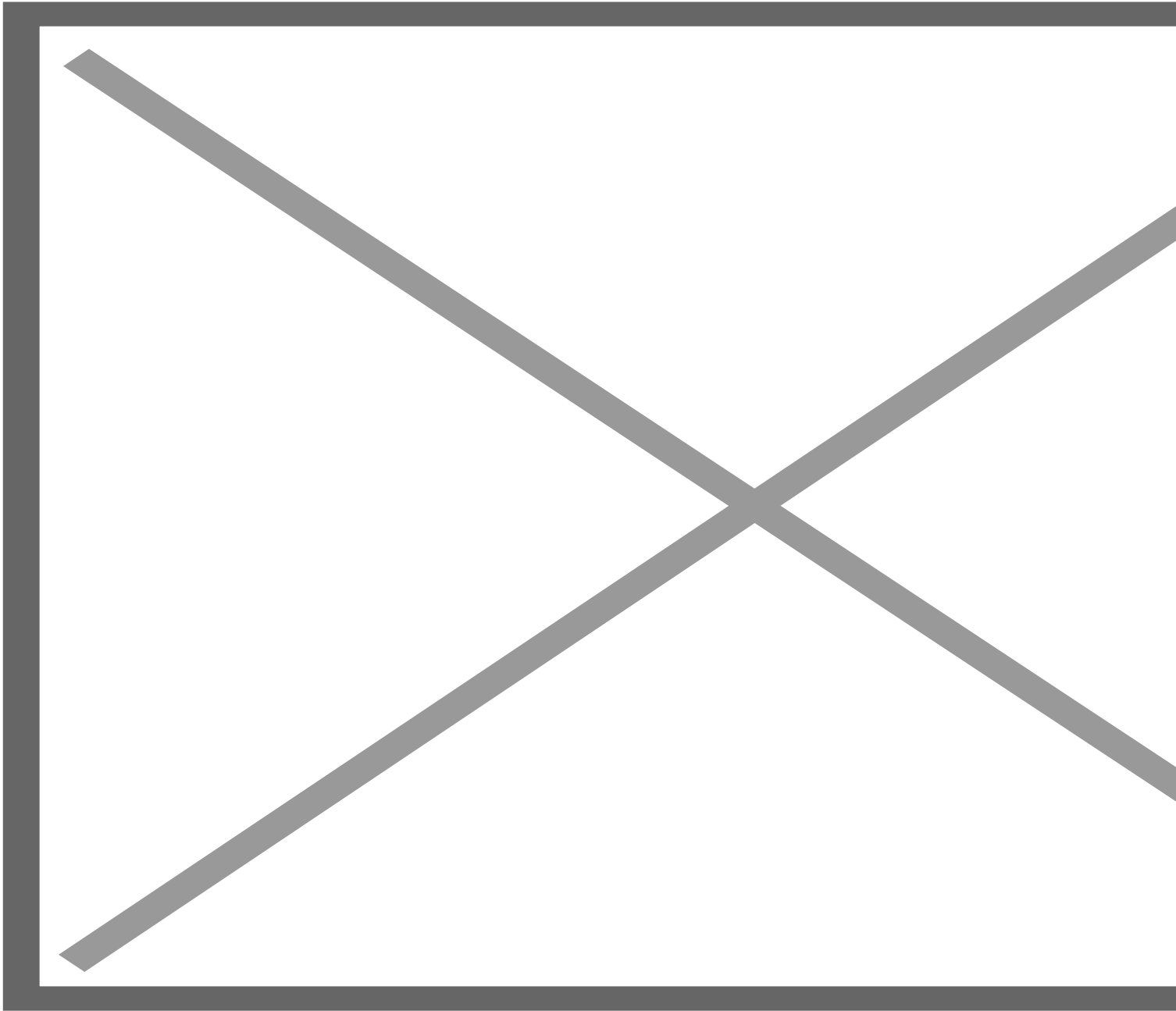


Karmic *Beef*

The second season of the Netflix anthology series imagines a way out of the cycle of poisonous envy.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [August 2026](#) issue
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Oscar Isaac and Carrie Mulligan in the second season of *Beef* (Courtesy of Netflix)

“Comparison is the thief of joy,” Lindsay (Carey Mulligan) says to her husband Josh (Oscar Isaac) in the second season of *Beef* (created by Lee Sung Jin; streaming on Netflix). They are contemplating dreams to open a bed and breakfast where musicians can stay in residence and guests can rekindle their creative passions. This vision rekindles Lindsay and Josh’s romance and hope for the future. When a friend tells them they should check out another such venture that has recently opened, Lindsay is wary. Maybe it is better not to compare their own dreams to someone else’s reality?

She has reason to be wary. Josh is the general manager at a country club for the uber wealthy, and Lindsay is a part-time interior designer and event planner for the club. They spend their days catering to the whims of the clients, who pretend to treat them like friends so that all of them can ignore the fact that they are glorified servants. Their lives are lived in proximity to and comparison with luxury that remains forever out of reach but just close enough to make their otherwise comfortable lives feel shabby.

The poison of comparison has robbed them of joy for so long that their marriage has become a festering wound, sepsis running through the veins of everything they touch. Rediscovering their dream to build something meaningful and artistic of their own is a reprieve from years of rage-fueled antagonism. The fact that neither of them can follow Lindsay’s wise advice is a moment of grace deferred that sets in motion a cascading sequence of events that lead to a shocking ending.

Beef is an anthology show in which each season follows a new cast of characters in a new story centered around a beef—a deep-seated feud fueled by resentment, pride, and anger. The toxic recriminations and despair at the heart of Josh and Lindsay’s marriage are, in many ways, the conflict that drives the season. But things spiral into something even more complex when a young couple—Ashley (Cailee Spaeny) and Austin (Charles Melton)—witness Lindsay and Josh in one of their knock-down marital brawls. Ashley and Austin are low-level service employees at the country club, and Josh is their boss.

Initially, the younger couple is unsure how to handle such a situation. But it doesn’t take long for them to realize that they might be able to use the recording they made of the fight to their own advantage. Their backs against the wall, Josh and Lindsay do what wounded people so often do: they try to infect Ashley and Austin’s young love with their own toxicity. At one point Lindsay tells Austin that his relationship with Ashley isn’t very mature. This is a low blow to deflect from her own shame, but Ashley and Austin *are* naïve about love. With very little practice weathering any of the storms of life, they are vulnerable to Lindsay and Josh’s sniping attacks. When medical bills, work worries, and identity crises start piling up, they have nothing to fall back on. Their platitudes about love turn out to be little more than co-dependence and anxiety. Before long, the two couples are mired in a cycle of passive-aggressive vengeance and one-upmanship.

Blackmail and workplace retaliation, it turns out, are small potatoes compared to what’s coming for all of them. When the country club is sold to Chairwoman Park (Youn Yuh-jung), a wealthy, corrupt South Korean businesswoman, their petty games to manipulate each other become entangled with much more dangerous forces. No one is aware of what the others are doing, and with every malicious move to get the upper hand, they raise the stakes to life and death levels, binding their fates together.

The first season of *Beef* had an overtly Christian subplot, with one of the main characters returning to the Korean evangelicalism of his youth. It also had a more implicit Christian focus on forgiveness as the means of ending the beef that drove the story. Season two, on the other hand, has an implicit Buddhist focus that emerges subtly in the way that Ashley and Austin start to mirror and match Lindsay and Josh, like a karmic cycle condensed to one lifetime. These themes are made explicit in the final moments of the season, when the characters are framed inside a Buddhist mandala, literally moving in circles through their own repeated patterns of desire and suffering.

Forgiveness, of course, is also a Buddhist virtue, and the ability to forgive is key to escaping the circle of suffering. But the focus in season two is less on healing interpersonal harms and more on relinquishing the very desires—for wealth, status, importance, originality, and maybe even to be loved more or better than anyone else—that trap our characters in the hells of their own making.

As the season reached its intense crescendo, I kept thinking about how many of our pop culture scripts are focused on the bad behavior of the very wealthy. These stories are very good at detailing how wealth warps the souls of those it ensnares, but very few can imagine a way out of the prison. *Beef* is a rare exception. The path out of the circle is as simple and as difficult as the Buddha taught thousands of years ago. Which is to say, Lindsay had it right: Comparison is the thief of joy. It takes nothing less than an extreme act of renunciation to evade its clutches.