

## 14: The photograph in the newspaper

THE WEEKEND EVAPORATED in a haze of social engagements following the exhibition. Abraham accompanied Lakshmi to most of them. At first he was reluctant, but he came to enjoy the discussions that flowed from what had quickly become known as his Facing Questions Speech, or, the *FQ Spiel* as Lakshmi jokingly called it. Friends and colleagues of Lakshmi's would engage in lively debate on the pros and cons of having one's destiny predicted. Abraham would watch, listen and occasionally interject, as if the person they were talking about, the one who had been told that he would die in a few weeks, was someone other than himself. He became adept at deflecting direct questions.

'Life is a mystery,' he said to anyone who asked if he really believed in all that fortune-telling stuff.

*The Sunday Times* carried a favourable review of the exhibition. It quoted extensively from Abraham's speech. However, Abraham was embarrassed by the headline, 'Australian photographer announces his death day at exhibition opening'. His embarrassment was not only for himself but also for Lakshmi. The column, with centimetres dedicated to him, represented space away from the exhibit.

'It all contributes to the general debate,' said Lakshmi as she read through the review.

On Monday morning the photograph of Horizon appeared on page five of *The Times*. Below the picture, in large bold type, was the heading: 'DOES ANYONE KNOW HIM?' Abraham and Lakshmi

studied the picture in silence. Abraham held the paper. His hands trembled. He tried to conceal his shock from Lakshmi. It wasn't that he hadn't expected to see the picture. It was just that the picture published in the newspaper had taken on a very different dimension from the picture in the gallery. In the gallery the picture was an abstraction. It was a shock to see, but it was somehow removed from the reality of Abraham's encounter. In the newspaper the grainy quality, together with the bold heading, added an authority and a sense of foreboding.

Abraham calmed himself with the thought that at least Shalini had kept her promise and not connected his name with the man in the picture. Nor was there any mention of the picture having been pulled from Lakshmi's exhibition. The accompanying text simply mentioned that the young man who now lay comatose in a Melbourne hospital had been photographed in Colombo and was believed to have spent some time in Mumbai before travelling to Australia.

'I owe Shalini big time,' said Lakshmi. 'She's sacrificed the opportunity for a bigger story with this one.'

'Perhaps she senses the best is yet to come,' replied Abraham.

At midday Angela arrived. She wore some newly purchased Indian clothes – baggy mauve trousers and a flowing white silk shirt. Her Canon digital camera was slung comfortably over her shoulder. Shiva ushered her into the living room where Lakshmi and Abraham greeted her.

'What an amazing view,' Angela said as she stared out across Chowpatty Beach. She was breezy and exuberant. Her presence in Lakshmi's apartment lent immediate relief to the burden of Abraham's quest.

'Please, you can put your camera on the table,' said Lakshmi as Shiva offered cool drinks.

'I'm never without it. It's my best friend and my security blanket. Even if I don't ... Oh my God!' Angela yelled. She stared

at the paper on the table. It had been left open at page five.

‘This can’t be ... It is! I don’t believe this.’ Angela picked up the paper and inspected it closely. ‘This is Jo, that really weird guy I met here in Mumbai. This is utterly incredible – I mean, who would have thought ...’

Angela looked from the paper to Abraham and then to Lakshmi. The three of them regarded each other in stunned silence, as if they had they just been exposed to a deadly secret. In Lakshmi’s living room, flooded with ocean views, the three of them stood – a triad of bewilderment. Whatever conversation might have flowed was now irrevocably changed by the photograph in the newspaper.

‘Are you telling us that you know him?’ Abraham had a thousand questions he wanted to fire at Angela, but he sensed her shock. He held back as Angela continued studying the newspaper photograph and asking questions.

‘Is this the guy you mentioned in your speech?’

Abraham nodded. ‘This is him. You’re looking at the picture that was withdrawn from the exhibition.’

‘So you actually saw him get knocked down by a car?’

Again Abraham nodded.

Angela took a deep breath, but no words formed. Instead, she seemed to gasp for air. She sat down, sipped the mango juice that Shiva had brought, and took another breath.

‘This is incredible. I had no idea. I mean ...’

She suddenly looked up at Abraham and Lakshmi. ‘Did you invite me here knowing that I knew him? Is this some sort of game?’

‘No, of course not,’ said Abraham. ‘How could we have known? I’m ... we are as shocked as you are. In fact I’m not sure how many more shocks I can take. Please Angela, let’s take this slowly. Why don’t you tell us what you know about this fellow?’

The three of them sat around the table. The image that had been banished from the exhibition was now part of this intimate gathering of secrets.

Shiva replenished the drinks and brought out a plate of fried fish with chilli. Angela began to tell what she knew.

‘Like I said, his name is Jo. I never learnt his other name. I asked once but he could avoid questions without making it seem as if he had avoided them. We met at India Gate just before Christmas. I was with some friends and we all decided to go to the Taj for a drink. He tagged along. It’s strange, really, now that I think about it. He was one of those people who left you with a feeling that something awful might happen to them. Some people are like that aren’t they?’

Angela was talking more to herself than to Abraham and Lakshmi.

‘The amazing thing is that when I told him that I’d been working at Café Obscura in Melbourne, he told me he knew of it. I mean, he’d never been to Melbourne or even Australia, at least that’s what he told me. But he knew about the café and said that he wanted to go there. Perhaps he found it on the net or something.’

‘He never made it inside the café, not unless he went there before I met him,’ said Abraham. He told her about the ten dollars that fell to the ground, about the unintelligible word that the man uttered and about the car that hit him. He also told her how he came to be named Horizon. But he said nothing about the blue plastic bag that he had retrieved from the scene of the accident.

Angela sat motionless. She continued staring at the newspaper. ‘I didn’t believe he would actually make it to Australia, he seemed so ...’ Angela hesitated. ‘I’m not sure ... so dysfunctional, I guess. Yet somehow he managed to get around. I think he’s the sort of person who would always have someone looking out for him. There was something about him that repelled me, something that made me not want to travel with him. But there was a weird kind of attraction too.’

Abraham listened intently. ‘Do you know where he was from or where he was staying in Mumbai?’

‘He spoke English with a slight American accent but then sometimes he sounded very English. I figured he’d learnt English at one of those International schools. He also spoke Hindi, which was impressive. I had no idea where he was staying in Mumbai, but he was always hanging around the Taj. He dressed like a dero, but he seemed to have money. Do you know a coffee costs twice as much at the Taj as it does at Obscura?’

‘What did he talk about?’

‘It was hard to work out whether he was talking crap or deep philosophical stuff. I remember him saying something about everybody experiencing places according to their own reality. Other people we were with thought he was on drugs or something. I always thought there was more to it than that, but I was never able to find out. I mean, some things he said were interesting. I even wrote them into my travel journal, thinking they might make sense to me one day. Once we saw a fire truck racing past and he said that everything is reduced to ashes in the end. He said that several times. He was incredibly judgemental about everything. He heard I was into photography and he said that photography is a way of avoiding the present and that the camera was an instrument of death and colonisation. He said photographs undermine our memory. I mean, that’s something worth discussing, but you could never have a discussion with him. He would quickly switch the subject. And he was full of fucking contradictions.’ Angela paused, stared at Lakshmi and apologised.

‘No need to apologise to me,’ said Lakshmi. ‘Speak your mind. That’s what’s important, isn’t it?’

‘What sort of contradictions?’ asked Abraham.

‘When I took a picture of him standing outside the Taj, he insisted on looking at it straight away, and he begged me to give him a copy. He said he would cherish it. I had it printed and gave it to him, but he didn’t even look at it. He put it straight into his plastic bag. That was really weird, that bag. He’d clutch it like his

life depended on it. I don't think I ever saw him let go of it.'

'You never got to see what else he kept in that bag?'

'You couldn't get near it. It became a bit of a joke among some of us. We would make outrageous guesses as to what he had in there. There was a German woman at the Taj who asked him outright if she could look into his bag. He went berserk, not physically, but verbally. He accused her of violating his space and of trying to steal his property. We all thought he was mad – I wouldn't mind betting that his brain was definitely scrambled.'

'If it wasn't before, it probably is now,' said Abraham as he stood up and walked towards the window.

Angela looked again at the newspaper photograph. 'Whoever took this picture seems to have captured something about him.'

Abraham squinted through the window onto a group of children playing cricket on the beach. Then he turned back to Angela. 'Did he say anything about being in Sri Lanka?'

'Not in any great detail, no. I knew he'd spent time there but, like I said, he gave very little away.'

Angela paused for a moment and looked again at the newspaper photograph. 'I told him that if he spruced himself up a bit he might land a job at Café Obscura. As soon as I'd said that, I regretted it. I even sent an email to the Obscura warning them he might turn up. It must have been awful seeing him get hit like that ... I saw a really bad car accident once and I was horrified that I couldn't stop looking. I looked for a long time but I think I was so shocked that I really didn't see anything. I would make a hopeless witness. Maybe that's why I'm into photography. It's a substitute for my bad memory. Perhaps Jo was right. Photographs do undermine our memory. If we didn't have them our memories might be a lot sharper.'

Abraham looked again towards the distant cricket game that now resembled a shadow dance in the afternoon sun. 'As I said in my speech, it was the day of my fiftieth birthday and it happened

just moments after I'd been to have my future predicted. The driver and the passenger in the car were killed, but somehow this fellow Jo survived. For how long – who can tell?'

'What a way to spend your birthday. I've seen that spiritual healing place but I've never felt tempted to go in. I'm even less inclined now, given the sort of stuff she predicts. I'd much rather not know what's around the corner. Still, it's better than how my dad spent his fiftieth.'

'And how was that?' asked Lakshmi as she got up to close the blinds and turn up the ceiling fan.

Angela looked up from the newspaper picture. 'He died one month before his birthday. Just dropped down dead of a heart attack. He was fit, a good swimmer, and careful with his diet.'

'That's so terrible, Angela. How long ago was that?'

'Two years back. I was nineteen. Life is short. I felt like I was just getting to know him. I was really pissed off at him. That's why I'm travelling. He could never afford it but he wanted me to have the experience. In a way I'm honouring my memory of him.'

Angela fiddled with her camera on the table. 'It's strange how you can spend such little time with someone but they leave a lasting impression. I've met hundreds of people on my travels. Some of them became travelling companions for a couple of weeks or even months. But this guy wasn't even in my life for a week. In that short time I opened up a lot about my own life. I told him about how much I missed my father and how my mother's new partner is a hopeless unemployed drunk who takes her money and abuses her. I realise that my talking to him was one of those "confide in a stranger" moments.' Angela imitated quotation marks in the air.

'You know what I mean? It's when you feel that it's OK to reveal something confidential to someone because you know you will never see that person again. Isn't that how it works? Mind you, the sharing was all one way. He always managed to avoid the personal questions. It made me feel vulnerable in the end. It's not a good

feeling, is it? I did ask him once about his parents – what they did, where they lived. He told me they were dead. And he said it in such a way as if to say *end of story*.’

Abraham moved back to the table. ‘I’ve seen the contents of his blue bag,’ he said. ‘It’s because of what I discovered in that bag that I have become so obsessed with Horizon, or Jo, as you call him.’

Abraham pulled out the picture of Jo outside the Taj that Angela had taken. ‘This wasn’t the only photograph in his possession,’ he said. He then showed her the picture of himself taken twenty years before.

Angela looked bewildered. She drew short breaths as if about to say something, but each time no words would form. Finally she found enough air to speak. ‘This is like some TV mystery show, except no one would believe it. This is truly bizarre. Are you telling me Jo knew you?’

‘I’m telling you that I have no idea. I know I have broken the law in keeping the blue plastic bag. The police would call it interfering with the evidence, or something. Believe me, I have never done anything like that before. But remember, this was just moments after my death day had been predicted. Whatever it was that compelled me to pick up that bag has now set me on this bizarre path. I have no idea where it will lead, but I am trying to get on with my life as normal, and I am grateful to you for speaking so clearly about your memory of this fellow.’

Abraham tried hard to disguise his desire to know more and to suppress the creeping anxiety that comes from not being able to fit all the pieces together. He wanted the conversation to flow easily. He wanted to convey a sense of normality so he asked Angela questions about her photography and her travel plans. He said that he thought her father would be very proud of her and he spoke briefly about his own plans for London.

Finally Lakshmi intervened. ‘If you like, Angela, you are welcome to stay here. Abraham will be moving on to London soon so

my spare room will be available. And I could use some assistance in the gallery.’

Angela was clearly delighted by the offer. Abraham was shocked. Not because of Lakshmi’s generosity, but because of her words, ‘Abraham will be moving on.’ He knew she was right. He had done what he had set out to do. He had opened the exhibition and he had slept in the hotel where Jo might have stayed. He knew he had to move on. But hearing Lakshmi’s words at this time came as a jolt.

Their conversation didn’t stray from the boy in the newspaper for too long. ‘Did you see his tattoo?’ Abraham asked.

‘I did. One day he wore a white shirt and something was seeping through. It was a real mess. I didn’t know it was a tattoo but he showed it to me. That’s one thing he did talk about. He told me he had it done in Sri Lanka by a good friend. He told me the tattoo was meant to be an elephant. He said it had once been a beautiful tattoo and he wore it with pride but because of terrible things that had happened he wanted it removed. I remember him saying he wanted to obliterate his belonging, whatever that means. We tried to get him to say more but he wouldn’t. I suggested he get it seen to in case it became infected. He laughed and said that it now looked like a print in the darkroom that was still taking shape but had not yet been fixed. I’m not sure why he used photographic analogies – perhaps to annoy me, or maybe to impress me – I don’t know. My friends thought he was just a fucked-up junkie who was into self-harm.’

Abraham remembered thinking exactly the same thing about the tattoo resembling an emerging photographic print. As he listened to Angela’s words he held himself perfectly still, as if waiting for an echo to rebound. How many more coincidences awaited him?

‘Did he say why an elephant?’

Angela shrugged her shoulders.



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