

A Macabre Story from Canberra with a Lesson

H. R. Pota

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I just finished reading a book on a macabre factual story with characters from Canberra (our present residence) and Newcastle (where I lived for three years during 1982–85). What happened to the persona in this story could happen to any one of us. I must admit, in similar circumstances, I may do even worse. While I hope it might be possible to learn from other people's mistakes but my experience tells me otherwise. I put it to you for you to see if you would have done any better.

First let me quote two short passages from *Joe Cinque's Consolation: A True Story of Death, Grief and the Law*, Helen Garner, Picador, Pan Macmillan, Australia, 2004.

"Mrs Singh returned with a tray and invited me to sit on the sofa. She and I drank tea, but Dr Singh could not seem to settle. He crossed the room to a small table against the wall behind me. I could hear the clink of glass. Still out of my eye-line, he suddenly burst out, 'Is there anything in this for us?'

'What do you mean?' I said.

'Any money? If it should be a best-seller' He came back to the other sofa with a glass of scotch in his hand and sat down, planting his feet on the pale green rug." p. 187

"In early October 1999 Maria Cinque called to tell me she was back from Italy. She gave me a rapid account of the ankle operation she had undergone in a Bologna clinic, another attempt to repair the botched surgery she had had in Australia after the car smash twenty years earlier. The surgeon had found a small piece of bone pressing against a nerve, and removed it: she was hopeful.

I asked after Anthony.

'No good. He come to Italy with me, he come back, Nino kick him out, I don't know where he is. I hope he's gonna get over this and have some sort of life.'" p. 193

This book by Helen Garner is a factual account of the death of a twenty-six year old boy Joe Cinque in Canberra in October 1997. The story has been recreated from the transcripts of the murder trials in The ACT Supreme Court (in Canberra) and extensive interviews with the family and friends of the Cinque family from Newcastle.

This death had attracted my attention in Oct 1997 — not because the crime was committed in Canberra — but because the two persons charged for the murder of Joe were two Indian girls studying Law at the Australian National University, Canberra. The two girls, Anu Singh and Madhavi Rao, were first tried in an aborted joint trial and then they were tried separately in The ACT Supreme Court, presided over by a Judge, but without a jury. Anu Singh was convicted of a lesser charge of manslaughter and sentenced to eight years in jail with an eligibility for parole after four years. i.e., in Oct 2001. Madhavi Rao was found not guilty of all the charges against her.

In brief the known facts of the matter, as told in the book, are as follows.

Joe and Anu Singh lived together in Canberra. Joe was a civil engineer and Anu was studying Law. Madhvi Rao was Anu's friend and was also studying Law at the ANU. On the

weekend of 27 Oct 1997, Anu gave Joe a heavy dose of a sleep inducing drug and then injected him with one or two heavy doses of heroin while he lay unconscious. The overdose killed him. Madhavi Rao had helped Anu procure drugs for this ghastly killing. In addition to Madhavi Rao there were many others who procured heroin and taught Anu Singh how to inject it and how much of it would be sufficient to kill someone.

Why would normal law abiding citizens help Anu to murder her boyfriend Joe? During the trials it came out that Anu was obsessed with her body and she let it be known that she was unhappy about it and that she had an incurable disease and that she was going to commit suicide. Everyone involved thought they were coaching Anu Singh to commit suicide; not murder. Anu Singh was attractive, she had used drugs, she craved attention, she had one serious relationship before, a few flings, and her colleagues had accepted her as a person with serious mental problems. So when Anu was expanding her bizarre murder plot, people just played along without actually being aware of the seriousness of their involvement. They were tickled by Anu Singh and the never to take place suicide but what they ended up with was a murder. Not only Anu Singh's acquaintances but even the judge was persuaded to believe that she had a serious mental disorder and hence a diminished responsibility for the crime. Even after reading Helen Garner's 328 page book one cannot be sure of Anu's motive in killing her boyfriend. Helen Garner portrays Joe as a decent, caring, and intelligent person. He was never a drug user himself. In all this Madhavi Rao was so dominated by Anu Singh that she just did whatever Anu Singh said, and from what the judge ruled, without fully appreciating what Anu Singh was up to. Neither of the girls took the stand and they refused to talk to Helen Garner. So we know absolutely *nothing* about the girls' motive, remorse, or future.

I read about this tragedy when it occurred in Oct 1997 and thought no more of it. The names Anu Singh and Madhavi Rao are obviously Indian but I was somehow convinced that they couldn't be from India, i.e., either their grandparents migrated to Australia or they came to Australia via Fiji or Malaysia or South Africa or some other country to where Indians had migrated a century or two ago. Anu Singh freely lived with boys without marriage and with her parents' knowledge. She was a drug user and she frequented night clubs. The press at first didn't report separately on Madhavi Rao so to an outsider both the girls had a similar life style. To my orthodox mind, it was hard to accept that these girls lived this life with their parents' approval and financial support and that the parents came directly from India.

It turns out that Anu's parents migrated from Punjab and that they both are medical doctors. They lived in Newcastle for about twenty years and now live in Sydney. Madhavi's parents came from Hyderabad; her mother is a medical doctor and father a teacher. They live in Sydney too. Needless to say, I was wrong: they are as Indian as they come. Even though my orthodox mind cannot accept many things, they still occur all around me regularly.

But I didn't start this message to tell you the macabre story of Joe, Anu, and Madhavi. As I was reading this book and feeling the excruciating pain their families must have suffered, I was shocked to read the passages quoted at the beginning of this message.

One can easily imagine what all the press must have written about Anu Singh—her fascination with boys, drugs, and what not—and how it must have felt to her parents to have their only daughter's dirty laundry washed in public and here it is that very Dr Singh, a very wealthy man, trying to squeeze out money from the author of a book on a depressingly tragic story about his daughter killing her boyfriend.

Next we hear Maria Cinque, the mother of Joe, telling Helen Garner that her husband Nino has thrown out their only surviving son Anthony from their house. Picture the situation: their elder son Joe is killed in a morbid situation and their younger and only surviving son transgresses parental authority and is kicked out of the house.

My late maternal grandmother used to repeat again and again that to change an individual's nature is not possible. It would be now at least twenty-five years since I spent any extended period in her company, but even then I considered myself a very wise person and never agreed with her on this point. I used to see so many people around me who were so miserable, and only a little adjustment on their part could turn their hell around to heaven. I refused to accept that they will or should live the way they are. I used to be beyond myself thinking what little change they needed to make for an enormously large return. My grandmother would always listen to this patiently and repeat from her experience what she thought of human nature.

I am now close to my half century, but I am no longer sure of my wisdom and so only now am I willing to listen to the wisdom of my grandmother. People don't change their nature: even saints are born with saintly nature. It would truly be a miracle if we found someone who changed their nature during one lifetime. Sri Aurobindo once said that the coming of so many Divine Incarnations has been like a tiny drop of water on the face of parched and scorching Earth under a blazing summer Sun. That is, even Divine Incarnations couldn't change human nature.

Here we see two families shattered by a common tragedy and yet their approach to life post-tragedy is mundane and it seems in no way any wiser. It's as if this tragedy had never happened to them. It's hard to imagine a tragedy more life shattering than this and yet it hasn't made the ones effected any wiser.

Is there a way out for humanity?