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## Time and Tide

On the eve of 'Time and Tide', his travelling exhibition in India, Malavika Sangghvi pens a letter to her old team mate Karan Kapoor

Malavika Sangghvi



Dear Karan,

It is midnight as I write to you. Like many others this evening, I too was incredibly moved to see your outstanding exhibition Time and Tide, of portraits of Anglo Indians and people from Goa, which will travel across the country. It was a particularly poignant for me as five of these portraits are of people I had been present when you had shot at the Cheshire Home in Mumbai back in the early eighties.

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It had been for an assignment for a Sunday paper. I had been inspired by the writings of Tom Wolfe and Hunter Thompson, who employed a deeply subjective perspective to tell stories of rare insight and startling brilliance.

As my chosen photographer on assignment, you could have opted to come by on the last day to shoot the 'subjects' I'd interviewed. That you chose to accompany me on each of day of the week was in itself an indication of your sensitivity and calibre.

And what people we had met!

Violet, like a damaged flower, who engaged us with her cutting wit and her flashes of anger at how her life had turned out; William 'the handy man' whose tenuous hold on life and love was through the caged bird he kept beside him at all times; Stanley Peter, in his dark suit and bow tie, dressed unknowingly like the undertaker whose knock he so ardently awaited, and beautiful high-born Millicent Blanche Jones, whose eyes at 80 still reflected the shock and horror at how lonely and bereft her life had turned out.

Imagine my own shock to meet them all today, after 36 years, these gentle, wounded men and women and to realise that I still heard their voices and still felt their urgent pain and reproach for what life had done to them.

Imagine how it felt to realise that time and tide had waited for no one Karan, not the people on the walls of the gallery, nor you and I.

We were meeting after decades. In the first five minutes of our greeting, we spoke about our own personal losses and grief in telegraphese, just happy to see each other alive and still standing after all that time and tide had done to us.

The Cheshire Home had not been the only assignment we'd embarked on together. On assignment for a British newspaper in the 1980s, we had traveled through parched fields and dusty villages in Madhya Pradesh, where we investigated the phenomena of right wing harassment of Christian missionaries. We had visited leprosy homes, orphanages for abandoned children and hospices for the aged, which they ran.

It was at one of these, a home for mentally-challenged young women on the outskirts of Bhopal where I recall how your blonde and good looking presence made one young woman who had not spoken for years cry out in joy "Bombay Diamond!" mistakenly referring to the Bombay Dyeing campaign you had modelled for.



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So many memories: at a leprosy colony where we had been invited to partake of a feast in celebration of two young members getting married, our stomachs churning from the sadness of seeing hundreds of men and women with their scars and deformities, I had whispered inquiring if you really would be able to eat from the thalis placed before us. "I'd avoid the ladies fingers," you'd said.

Of course it was dark, politically-incorrect humour and both of us knew that it in no way took away from your palpable commitment and compassion for your subjects as you stood in the blazing afternoon heat day after day photographing them.

There was that very glamorous story we undertook about the royal family in Jaipur and its fight, for an international glossy for which we met the Maharajah and Rajmata at their palaces; there were the portraits you shot of waiters, nurses, bus conductors and candy floss sellers for my ongoing column 'Ordinary extraordinary people'.

There was that full-page feature we'd done on the visit of the Afropop band Osibisa for a Sunday broadsheet, where we'd been caught up in the giddy excitement as the city experienced its first international gig.

Through it all, I remember how gentle, kind and gallant you'd been, travelling together for hours through dusty villages, spending nights at flea-bitten hotels and inns, passing entire days in each other's company, there was never a hint of inappropriate word or deed by you. I was already betroth elsewhere, we were a team of professionals – photographer and writer – nothing more nothing less. The story was all we cared for.

So you can imagine how all these memories came rushing back this evening when I saw the haunting, pain-filled eyes of Violet, Stanley, William and Blanche and I recalled that through the ups and downs of my own life, I had not even managed to save a copy of the article I had once so passionately immersed myself in 36 years ago – and that time and tide had waited for none of us Karan, neither you, me or the people we'd once encountered.

Which is why I am so grateful to you that you have managed to preserve some of the memories and that they stare back not only telling us who they once were, but who we once were too.

For in the end, that is all we can do, isn't it? Bear witness in the hope that somebody somewhere hears the unspoken words and feels the inexpressible pain of those who deserved better, much better.

With every good wish and in memory of Violet, Blanche Stanley and William.

Yours sincerely etc,

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(This columnist believes in the art of letter writing)

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