

## Lancelot College - A Trilogy of Short Stories

### Part Three: The Diary.

Although the difficulty in recruiting the first pupils for the new school had been a disappointment, the success and growth of Lancelot College, Bombay surpassed all expectations.

The first pupils who attended the school on the invitation of the children from the church enjoyed the new culture so much that they in turn rapidly invited their friends. More teachers were soon required as more and more children left their slum each day and came to school to learn to read and write and to add up. They also played cricket and soccer and learnt to respect and care for one another. They received at least one balanced meal per day and a volunteer doctor came once a week to keep the children in good health.

One evening, after Abishek had finished his homework and gone to bed, Peter fell asleep reading the Bible. During his sleep he had a memorable dream in which children of all religions and castes were joining hands and singing together in the new school hall. There were hundreds of children, some even from other nations with black or white skin.

Over the next three years, more and more parents from across Chembur heard about the success of the school. By now the curriculum was taught in Hindi, and Marathi and English and the grades in the National Examinations were outstanding.

It was at that time that Peter Lightbody's dream became reality. Parents from upper castes and from other districts applied to send their offspring to Lancelot College. In this caring and encouraging environment, the children were able to co-exist happily irrespective of their age, caste, gender, race or religion.

For just a brief few months Peter Lightbody was entirely content. From the outside, at least, he felt that the landscape of his existence matched the map he was using to navigate by. And he was clever enough and wise enough to understand that this joyful success was neither down to him alone, and nor was it ever to be said that the multicultural, tolerant atmosphere of the school was a product of Western Imperialism. For these reasons he deliberately employed a strong team of almost exclusively Indian women and men.

In the church things were also going well. It too was growing larger and it was at this time that Peter first sowed the seed of the idea of the church and the school one day working together to start an orphanage for the most neglected children of the city.

Abishek was now twelve and turning out to be a really good soccer player. He could read and write all three languages and he was very popular with his peers. He had settled in to his home with his uncle and no-one ever raised the issue of finding somewhere else for him to live.

Then, however, at the beginning of the school's fourth year, it suddenly felt as if a war had broken out.

It began with the men who created the gangs of orphaned children who begged around the city. These men gathered the children from the street, locked them in a camp and forced them to go begging or selling and then collected all of the money from them. In return, the children were given at best a dirty mat to sleep on and an inadequate amount of food and drink. Perfectly healthy children were often maimed since blind children or children with missing limbs could fetch much more money than healthy-looking children. This was the hell on earth from which Abishek had been plucked.

Right now, some of these men in the Chembur district had heard about the idea of the orphanage and were beginning to worry that their profits could fall if any of their children ran away and started living in the orphanage and attending the school. In response they started

smashing windows, breaking in to steal equipment and they even snatched one or two children on their way to school and threatened to kill them if they ever tried to return to the College.

Next came some Hindu fundamentalists who travelled from New Bombay to protest loudly outside the school during lessons. They shouted that the school was brainwashing Hindu children with Christianity. The white devil must go back to England, they chanted, or, face execution.

Then came the eunuchs. All over Bombay there were groups of eunuchs – men who had been deliberately castrated as young boys – who walked around the city in groups, wearing long orange dresses and women’s make up, who went into shops and extorted money from shopkeepers. Their reputation put fear even in to the police, so when they began turning up outside the school and threatened the children with abduction, the pupils were extremely frightened. If their parents dared to challenge the eunuchs, they would follow them to their homes, take whatever valuables they felt like taking and leave by pronouncing an offensive, scary curse over the family’s home.

The pressure on Peter Lightbody was really too much for any normal human being to bear. He began to feel dizzy and to have sleepless nights. Mr Chacko said that this was all down to spiritual warfare. The devil didn’t like the church and the school fighting against the evils of the city and so now the devil was fighting back.

‘The only answer is prayer and to press on!’ he concluded, shaking his head from side to side.

Others asserted that the school had disturbed the balance of ying and yang. Still others maintained that the children did not need an education since the good ones were bound to be reincarnated into a higher caste in the next life. Another group said that the attacks on the school had been thoroughly predictable because of course everything in Bombay revolved around money. ‘Touching their money is like putting chillies in their underpants,’ it was claimed.

Some of the parents said that the Lord Ganesh had allowed all this to happen so that the children would grow stronger together as a community as they learnt, like Gandhi, to walk the road of peace in the midst of adversity. And nearly all of the staff said that Peter was close to burn-

out, and irrespective as to whether these events had a divine or secular cause, Peter urgently needed to take a break in order to avoid a personal crisis that was then likely to become a public one.

A post-modernist could have a field day in Bombay. No matter what the event or occurrence, there existed a plethora of equally valid explicatory narratives to choose from.

‘Which one do you think is right, Abishek?’ Peter asked the growing boy.

‘Most certainly a mixture of all of them,’ replied Abishek. ‘Of that I am sure, uncle.’

Peter decided to take a two-week break. Everyone was relieved. He spent most of the daytime reading, resting, thinking and cooking. Nevertheless, at night, he still found it very difficult to sleep properly.

Abishek had never seen his uncle like this before. Sometimes Abishek woke up in the night and could sense that his uncle was still awake. On a few occasions he got up and went over to his uncle’s bed. He so wanted to console him somehow.

Once, the boy put his hand on the man’s shoulder.

‘God is good,’ he said as he noticed that his uncle was crying.

‘It’s *too* much, Abishek,’ Peter sobbed. Too much pressure from *every* angle. It’s overwhelming. When you are older, you will understand.’

‘God is good,’ repeated the growing boy and he tried to comfort the caring, unhappy man as best he knew how.

For Peter, these nights were excruciating. On certainly three occasions Peter was ready to deny all that he was, all that he had and all that he had achieved in order, if only for a few moments, to escape the overwhelming pressure. To make that Faustian exchange of freedom for imprisonment, youth for age, egoism for altruism, life’s poetry for its prose. He knew full well that this would mean that his heart was not truly satisfied with God and that it would lead to an ever increasing desire for an ever diminishing pleasure.

At the end of two weeks Peter went back to the College and the war continued for another six months. Then came the monsoon, and it was as if the thick rains literally washed away the child gang leaders, the Hindu fundamentalists and the eunuchs. All in one go.

‘I know that you don’t like the monsoon season, Mr Lightbody,’ said the school caretaker, ‘but at least it is washing away all the rubbish.’

During the summer vacation Peter met with his planning and implementation team, together with some leaders from the church, to discuss how they might one day go about setting up an orphanage. The vision included the possibility of pupils already at the school boarding in the orphanage if their parents were sick or expired, as well as children coming to the orphanage for refuge first and then starting school second. In this second model, existing pupils could also help the orphanage children integrate into the school community more quickly. The plan was agreed. The church would help mainly with the recruitment and signposting of needy children.

A second planning team was formed, funds were raised and a building was found not far from the school that used to be used for lepers.

During these first four years Lancelot College had grown from its original 20 pupils to a staggering 1600 pupils and 120 staff. It was now at full capacity. Yet the school had maintained its unusually wide range of inter-caste, multi-faith intake and most of the administrative, pastoral and medical structures had almost kept pace with the rapid growth. This was the first year in which a group of senior students took their university entrance examinations. When you consider the background of many of the students, the grades were remarkable. With the help of Mr Lightbody’s connections in the UK, some of the pupils even went on to study medicine, law and PPE at Oxford and Cambridge.

The truth was, the pupils from Lancelot College Bombay were far more than simply intelligent young people with outstanding grades. They had caught hold of the vision of a better world where democracy was enhanced by honourable leadership, where wealth was created in

order to be shared, and where diversity was embraced as an enrichment. It was no surprise, therefore, that these young adults went on to be doctors, lawyers, diplomats, teachers and managers all around the world. Wherever and whenever you came across an alumnus of Lancelot College Bombay, you felt as if you had encountered something conclusively genuine and world of so many counterfeits.

Meanwhile the refurbished orphanage was now ready to be opened and some church members had already found the first group of children who urgently and desperately needed a caring home. They had been found in a large shed near Borivoli, just north of Bombay.

‘Would you like to come with me, Jaiveer?’ Peter asked the 18-year-old young man.

‘Yes, very much so,’ he replied.

They took the train from Victoria Station.

If you are not from Bombay, no matter how many times you travel on these overcrowded monsters, you will still be amazed at the experience.

You think today for once that you are going to get a seat, but you won’t.

You will hope not to get your nose stuck into the fenugreek-smelling armpit of the sweating man squashed up against you, but you will.

You will hope that at least a few of the 20 small fans half hanging from the roof will be functioning, but they won’t.

You will hope very much not to have your ticket inspected because this means you will get your wallet stolen, but you will.

The carriages are so full that many men literally hold on to the door handrail and hang outside the train as it rumbles over the rails, and the children who can’t afford tickets also ride outside, often on the roof. Every week children travelling by train in Bombay die by falling on to the track.

Although Peter had been on the train regularly for years, he still had the experience here, more than anywhere else, of what it felt like to be a member of an ethnic minority. People stared directly at you, made comments to their neighbours about you, smiled ironically at your clothing and judged you as embodying all of the eccentric traits of your nationality. Racism runs much deeper in our adult hearts than any of us like to think.

Getting out of the carriage also required more skill than getting in. As the train approaches the station, you have to position yourself somewhere in the middle of the hundred-strong crowd of people about to get off, and then allow the flow of the crowd to carry you off the train just before it actually stops. It is similar to crowd surfing in an oven. If you don't achieve the correct positioning, simply prepare yourself for getting off at the next station.

Peter and Jaiveer got it right and made their way by rickshaw to the large shed. A church member was waiting to greet them. She explained that the nine children, boys and girls aged between ten and fourteen, had been producing clothes for the European market with sewing machines. They were all friends. They received no pay, but they were allowed to sleep on the floor in the shed and they were given some rice and water each day. They had no change of clothes and no toilet or washing facilities. Apparently, the boss had been killed by a gang about a week ago but the children did not know. Terrified, they had carried on working and run out of food and water. A neighbour had heard a noise in the shed and found them in there by chance.

Peter wept.

He had never seen anything quite as bad as this in real life. He talked with the children and then planned with the church member how to get them to the orphanage.

Peter and Jaiveer went back home. On the way, Peter, as he is so often did with his pupils, drew an important life lesson from what they had just witnessed.

'This experience should teach you, Jaiveer, that it is what you believe that determines what you do. The children *believed* that they were locked in the shed and that their boss was alive, so

they stayed trapped in the shed. Yet all the time the shed door was unlocked and their boss was dead, so they could have escaped at any time.'

Jaiveer saw it differently. If the children had left the shed, then the woman wouldn't have found them. So believing a lie saved their life and led them to safety. He was confused because his teachers were always right. Had Mr Lightbody got it wrong? He shrugged his shoulders and moved his head from side to side.

It was about one year after this first group of children had been found that Abishek became very ill.

One afternoon, after he had been helping after school to look after some sick children in the orphanage, he went home and began to feel very unwell. At first he had a high fever, vomiting and diarrhoea. Peter looked after him and they both decided that he must have caught something from one of the children in the orphanage. Abishek went to bed, desperately exhausted.

Over the next few days he got worse. He still had a very high fever and he couldn't even hold down water. Peter called the doctor who gave him some tablets and said that he would recover in the next few days. But he didn't. Peter prayed. Abishek got worse. Peter lifted the boy's listless body on to his own bed while he slept on the mattress on the floor. The church prayed and many also fasted for two days.

'Why is it?' Peter asked his friend Mr Chacko, 'that we see healings at church but God doesn't want to heal Abishek? Look at him. He has lost so much weight and looks like death.'

'God is good,' replied Mr Chacko, looking at what appeared to be a greenish hue in the boy's skin and a distinct yellow tint in the whites of his eyes. 'God will have a higher purpose in this sickness. We can only see things from our perspective. We see through a glass, darkly, my dear brother.'

The doctor came back again. It was time to get the boy into hospital.

'His body is not fighting back. It's as if he has given up, as if his immune system has failed,' said the doctor, honestly.



In the hospital the doctors did many different tests and concluded that Abishek had picked up a lethal virus that had gone into his liver and his kidneys. His kidneys were failing and there were no dialysis machines available in those days in Bombay. The boy would die within days.

Peter stayed at the side of his bed, sometimes in despair and sometimes numb, as if he had been injected with an anaesthesia for his emotions.

During the daytime, Jaiveer and a few friends from school joined him.

A doctor whom Peter hadn't seen before came in and introduced himself as Dr Majid Khan, a kidney specialist.

'Mr Lightbody, I am so very sorry. There is now only one chance left for Abishek, but it is a very small one and I do not want to get your hopes up too high.'

'Please carry on,' said the teacher, staring at the doctor's rugged face.

'There is a relatively new procedure where we can substitute one or both kidneys with a healthy one from another patient. Abishek would be able to live, even on one healthy kidney. We have to find a compatible donor within the next forty-eight hours. But Bombay is a big city and many people die every day. Since you are his next of kin, I would need you to sign some paperwork. There are considerable risks. I have only done this operation twice before.'

Peter agreed and the doctor sent a fax to all the hospitals in the area to begin the search for a compatible healthy organ.

The next day was Sunday and Peter went to church. The sermon was based on a well-known, though rather mysterious Bible verse from John's Gospel: 'Unless a grain of wheat fall to the ground and die, it cannot produce fruit.'

Peter went back to the hospital after church, now certain that Abishek was not going to make it.

He held the boy's weak hand while tears filled his eyes.

'Uncle, I am going to die, yes?'

Peter couldn't manage a reply.

'Uncle, is it *really true* that God can forgive all our wrongdoings, no matter how bad they are?'

Peter paused.

'Y-e-s,' stammered Peter, looking intently into the boy's eyes.

'Then I want to pray before I die. *Dear God, please forgive me for all the bad things I have done. Thank you for Uncle Peter. He has been a good father to me. Everything I have, comes from his hand. Forgive me for when I have done bad things to him. Help him to lead to school and the orphanage very well. Keep all of the children healthy and safe and getting good grades. Amen.*'

Dr Khan came in.

'Can I talk to you for a moment, privately?'

Peter followed him out of the room.

'So far, no news. You love the boy, I can see. If we tested you and you were compatible, would you be willing to donate him one of your kidneys?'

Peter couldn't believe that he hadn't thought of this earlier at church. *His* kidney was the seed that had to die. He simply had to be willing to make the substitution.

'Yes, of course,' he said, suddenly full of faith and hope.

They made the tests and Peter was compatible. The chances were very good indeed. The doctors explained to Abishek what was going to happen. He couldn't believe it.

They moved Peter and Abishek to adjacent operating theatres and began the dual operation. As they removed Peter's kidney there were sudden, dramatic complications. His heart went into arrest and they were not able to resuscitate him. He expired at 17:23 hours on Sunday, 3<sup>rd</sup> May.

An hour later Dr Khan's team had successfully transplanted Peter's kidney into Abishek's abdomen and believed the operation to be a success.

When Abishek woke up, he asked how Peter was. He hoped that the tragic news was only a dream from which he would awake. But it was reality. The boy was devastated.

Peter's funeral had to be held very quickly because of the extreme heat. Abishek was not well enough to attend, but he was actually very relieved about that. He would never have survived the heartbreak.

However, when Abishek was fully recovered and out of hospital, the school and the orphanage held a special *Celebration and Thanksgiving Service* for Peter Lightbody's dedicated life. Ex-pupils returned from the four corners of the world to pay tribute to their inspiring headmaster, and current pupils and staff read anecdotes by which they would always remember him. Jaiveer ended the celebration with a prayer poem he had written, and, with trembling hands and tears streaming down his face, he read the words: 'You will not leave this land until your work in the Lord is finished.'

Two years after this thanksgiving service, 18-year-old Abishek was still living in the home he had shared with Peter. The neighbours had kept a close eye on his domestic and educational welfare. Everyone had agreed that to move him into the orphanage or into another family would have completely destabilised his fragile emotional state.

It was a sunny day and the sky was a clear, deep blue. In his boredom he decided to tidy up the home. Peter's things, even his bed, had not been touched since the day he died.

As Abishek was sorting through the box of books left by the man who died in Peter's first apartment, he found at the bottom the Rs.2,000 that he had given back to his uncle for the toys on the day they met and a red book wrapped in a white handkerchief. He unwrapped it. On the front, printed in bold letters stood the word 'DIARY'. Inside the front cover was the name, *Richard Crouch*, and the name of his school, *Lancelot College*.

Abishek took the diary over to the small table and sat down to read it. The early entries about school teachers were very funny, he thought. He smiled as he related to many of the humorous comments.

The entries about God and the boy's disappointing relationship with his father he found fascinating, though he began to feel guilty that he was prying without permission into someone else's life.

But the next section of dark and detailed entries deeply disturbed him.

*What is going on here?*

*Why did Uncle Peter have this boy's diary?*

After just a few explicit pages, Abishek had worked it out.

He was absolutely sure.

He stopped reading and flicked to the end of the boy's entries, where, in April 1975, there was a different handwriting. The text was written in the turquoise ink of Uncle Peter's fountain pen, and it was certainly his handwriting too. The date had been scribbled out and changed to Sunday, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1980. His uncle's phosphorous entry consisted of a confession, an apology, and a plea for forgiveness.

As Abishek read, certain moments of their life together began now to make sense. It was as if two inconsistent images were becoming one. And in this single, clear image, Abishek could understand better who he was too.

He began to cry, sobbing deeply, and his tears fell down on to the words below, smudging the ink and making the words illegible. He closed the red diary, wrapped it back up in the white handkerchief and placed it on the table next to the Bible.

He got up and lay down on Peter's bed with his head on the pillow and his hands clasped together under his head. The morning sun shone brilliantly through the door of the slum dwelling and he observed momentarily the shiny dust dancing in the rays of light. His moist eyes followed the rays to where they fell on a poster hanging on the wall opposite the bed. It was a photograph of a father holding his son's hand, and underneath stood the words:

*'And these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.'*