

A Nose for a Story

by Frank Brennan

'ARE YOU OK MISS?' asked the taxi driver. He could see in his mirror that the American lady sitting in the back seat, was having a hard time keeping down her expensive lunch.

'No, I am not! What is that *awful* smell?' the woman asked.

The taxi driver smiled to himself. He often had to explain the smell to wealthy foreigners after he had driven them a kilometre or so away from their hotel. It was not something their sensitive city noses were used to.

'It's just the sewage, Miss. The pipes from the toilets are old and the weather is hot in India,' he explained. 'There are many people in Bombay – the pipes get very full.'

The taxi driver almost felt sorry for his passenger. She was middle-aged but had a pretty face and shiny dark hair, though her teeth were too big for his taste. Yet he could see as he closed the windows and switched on the air-conditioning that many men would find her attractive. But he had long since learned to distance himself from the delights of his lady passengers. He thought of himself as a professional, like a doctor. He was above such things.

'Don't worry Miss; there are no more big sewage pipes in the village where we are going,' he added, helpfully. 'Thank God for that!' said the woman, who was now beginning to wish she had not asked for the windows to be left open in the first place.

'No, they use cesspits – big holes in the ground where they put all their –'

'Thank you, driver,' the woman said quickly. 'There's no need to go into details. I can imagine.'

Desiree Malpen, in fact, had one of the best imaginations in her business. She was a senior journalist for the *National Diary*, a publication which was proud of being America's 'number one magazine for lovers of the truth'. Other journalists who wrote for more serious newspapers disagreed. They said that the *National Diary* loved scandal and dirt and didn't care how much it changed the truth in its stories. The journalists were right. Lots of pictures and lots of scandal – that was the *National Diary's* recipe for success – and Desiree was one of the magazine's top writers.

The taxi drove on a long way outside the city until the road became rougher. Finally it stopped by a small group of houses off the side of the road.

'This is the place, Miss. It's the house to the left,' said the driver. He pointed to a house that was slightly larger than the rest and still had some white paint on its walls.

'But it's so small!' Desiree said in surprise.

'Best house in the village, Miss. The family has been there many, many years,' said the driver with some pride, as if he knew the famous writer who had lived there, though he had never met her in his life.

This was the house of the late Nyree Singh, the former society beauty and writer, whose highly praised novels had been made into several films and who had won the Nobel Prize – or was it the Pulitzer? Desiree wasn't sure. She had never read any of her books. She knew, however, that

Nyree Singh had been killed two months ago in a car crash just outside Bombay. Some people said she had been driving to the house of an Indian film star – a *married* film star. Desiree felt sure that the crash had been no accident. It wouldn't be the first time that such 'accidents' had been arranged. Perhaps there was a jealous wife involved . . . or maybe an angry relative who could not stand the scandal or embarrassment to the family name? She had a nose for a story and when Desiree Malpen smelled a story there would be a story.

And if there were no facts behind the story she would think of some.

She looked at the window of the house. A figure was moving. There was somebody still living in Nyree Singh's house. But who?

Desiree took a few close-up pictures of the house – she always liked to take her own photographs. They gave a personal touch to her stories and made her some extra money.

'That's fine. Take me back to the hotel now, driver. I'll come back sometime and take a closer look. And driver . . .'

'Yes, Miss?'

'Next time I ask you to open the windows for some fresh air, don't!' Desiree said decisively.

While Desiree was going back to her hotel in the taxi, Gopal Singh was looking at the old brown photograph of his younger sister, Nyree. It sat on the table next to the sweet-smelling flowers he replaced daily. She looked as he

would always remember her – a beautiful young woman whose intelligence shone far beyond her own country. She was only forty-five when she died in that car accident, still beautiful and with so much still to give. She had been respected by artists and politicians all over the world. Yes, he was proud of his sister.

But she used to get so angry!

He laughed. It was easier to laugh now. Oh, the times they had argued over the company she sometimes kept. Gopal had not always liked the people she mixed with. Still, they had always been there for each other. Neither of them had married. She was married to her work. He had always looked after her, though he would never have admitted it to his proud brilliant sister who, in many ways, had been a child still. She was too idealistic, only interested in those who shared her ideals. She would argue her opinions with anybody, but her beauty sometimes attracted lovers as well as thinkers. She could not be trusted to look after herself and who else was there? They were the only

ones left of their family. Only he had known Nyree: only he had understood her ways, her needs – perhaps more than she did herself.

And now she was gone.

People seemed to want her even more since her death. But it was still Gopal who looked after her memory and her work. He kept away all the journalists and other people who wanted ? part of his sister to take away with them. She had given them her work, her wonderful books. Why should they want the part of her that was left to him, the part that was his sister? She had put her life into her work. Wasn't that enough for them?

Gopal had always been there for her. Even when she had mixed with the most famous people in India, she had always come back to her faithful brother and their peaceful little home in the village. Always.

Now there was a growing number of curious eyes, cars that stopped and looked, tapping on the windows, notes through the door. What did they want? Didn't they know she was dead?

But he would stay. He would end his days in the house that held his memories wrapped in the sweet smell of flowers.

What else could he want?

The *Excelsior* hotel was famous for its quality and luxury. It was *the* place to stay at if you were at all important or wanted to be thought of as being important. It was always full of foreign journalists. Whenever they were working in Bombay, foreign journalists always chose the *Excelsior*. Its attraction to journalists was obvious: it was a good place for both valuable information and scandal. Who knows what famous guests might say after too much wine at dinner? And there were always keen listening ears to catch every foolish word or careless whisper. This would later be served up to the world as a tasty dish of scandal in magazines like the *National Diary*. There were always plenty of readers hungry for details of the lives of famous people, especially if those details were interesting and personal.

That was why Desiree Malpen was staying there.

That evening at the hotel, Desiree sat at her table in the lounge looking at the setting sun through the windows. She was pleased with herself. She kept a glass of white wine with her but drank very little of it. This was what she always did. It meant that she could refuse offers of drinks from interested men while keeping a clear head herself. She was very good at listening to people who first drank too much and then said too much. On the few occasions when the conversation went from the boring to the exciting, she could reach into her handbag and switch on her tiny tape recorder – a very useful machine indeed.

Desiree was there to interview one of India's top film directors, Raj Patel. He was about to make a film based on *Indian Summer*, Nyree Singh's last novel. The Indian film industry, centred in Bombay, was becoming popular in the West, where it was sometimes known as 'Bollywood'. Desiree had no interest at all in Indian films or their directors, but her boss had told her that she might find

out more about Nyree Singh and her film star lover. If anybody knew him, Patel did.

She recognised Patel coming towards her. He was quite old, well over sixty – Desiree preferred younger men – and was dressed in an expensive white suit. He was smiling and holding a gin and tonic. Desiree knew that older men were attracted to her. It was useful, though it could be risky if she stayed too long and they became too interested. She could see already that Patel's eyes were attracted by the necklace that sat above the low neckline of her dress. But she could handle herself all right. This guy would be no problem, she could tell. Patel came up to her and smiled. 'Miss Malpen, if I'm not mistaken . . . ?'

Desiree held out her hand as she welcomed him. She was expecting a handshake but Patel took it and gave it a kiss instead. It felt wet.

'They didn't tell me you were so handsome, Mr Patel!' 'You know how to please an old man, Miss Malpen,' Patel said as he laughed. 'But I was surprised when your magazine said it was interested in my latest film production. In fact, I'm pleased that the West is finally taking an interest in Indian cinema.'

'The whole world knows that you beat Hollywood in getting the rights to film Nyree Singh's last novel, *Indian Summer*. Naturally, everybody wants to know about it, especially since Nyree Singh's death,' said Desiree as she switched on her tape recorder.

'Well, I've always wanted to film Nyree's novels. I think it's best that her work should be filmed by Indians in India.'

'I hear that Nyree had quite an interest in Indian films . . . and in film stars. Is that right, Mr Patel?'

And so the conversation went on. Raj Patel wanted to talk about his new film but Desiree wanted to talk about Nyree Singh and kept trying to get him to give away details of her involvement with one of his stars. Throughout it all, Patel simply smiled, drank his gin and tonic and kept trying to return to the subject of his film. But Desiree was determined and the subject always went back to Nyree's personal life. Finally he stood up.

'Will you excuse me for a few moments, Miss Malpen? I won't be long.' He had a phone call to make that he didn't want her to know about. And he left.

Desiree waited and sipped her wine. She was annoyed that the old fool hadn't told her about anything apart from his boring film. He was back half an hour later. He seemed to be a little drunk. Desiree tried not to appear annoyed.

'Ah, yes, Miss Malpen – you were interested in Nyree Singh.' Patel's voice was louder than before and not as clear. 'And who can blame you? By the way, that is a most beautiful necklace you are wearing, my dear.'

'You were saying about Nyree Singh . . . ' Desiree reminded him.

'Ah yes, Nyree . . . She was a remarkable woman – a woman who could have told the world a lot about the famous people she knew. I knew her well.'

Desiree's eyes opened wider. Nyree Singh's secrecy and hatred of publicity had been well known. 'Really? And did she tell you about . . . her secrets?'

'Not at all.'

Desiree almost got very angry but decided that silence was the best approach. She was right.

'But,' he continued, leaning over towards Desiree, 'she once told me, as her friend, that she kept a diary. "If the world only knew the secrets that I have written in this diary" she said to me, "they would be shocked."'

'Shocked?' said Desiree.

Patel looked at her with a concerned expression. 'If that diary were shown to the world, I tell you, there would be scandal. Scandal! Some people would be in serious trouble, I tell you! It's a good job her brother keeps it safe, or there would be a lot of respectable public figures who would be

'She has a brother?'

'Oh, yes. Her older brother, Gopal – her only relation. He was like a father to her. Yes, he has all her things, including that diary. It's safe in his hands. He's just a lonely old man who lives with his memories of his sister. He'll probably get rid of it sooner or later.'

'Get rid of it? thought Desiree. 'Not if I can help it?'

While Desiree was deep in conversation with Patel, Professor Cyril Whitelaw was enjoying a cool glass of iced lemon tea in his small but comfortable room at the *Excelsior*. He was celebrating his first day in India by reading *Indian Summer*, the last novel by Nyree Singh, for the sixth time. He would have to know her works in detail if he was to write a great book about this secretive author's life. His publishers were paying for everything and expected results.

He hoped to see the house where she had spent so many years of her life very soon. Who knows what he might find there? Perhaps – and this was his secret hope – he might find some unpublished writings! The thought made him shake with excitement.

Whitelaw put down *Indian Summer* and his lemon tea and got up from his chair. He then played one of his favourite games – looking in the mirror and imagining his face on the back cover of his important future book: *Nyree Singh – Secretive Star*, the book that would finally make his name as an expert on serious modern literature. The thin face that looked back at him was that of a man of late middle age, with pale red hair and glasses. Its skin was pink from the heat and was already showing the first signs of sunburn. It needed a shave.

He decided to clean himself up and dress for dinner. After that he would have a drink in the hotel lounge. 'You never know,' he thought, 'there might be someone out there who knew her!'

Twenty minutes later he walked into the lounge of the *Excelsior*, where nobody knew Professor Cyril Whitelaw. At least, not yet.

'My dear Miss Malpen ...' began Patel. 'Call me Desiree, please.'

'Of course ... Desiree. May I please introduce my brightest star, my finest actor and leading man, Ravi Narayan. He's going to star in my new film – *Indian Summer*. I've always wanted to make a film of my favourite book by my dear friend Nyree Singh – and now I am.'

'You naughty man, Raj!' said Desiree, giving Patel a playful tap on the wrist. 'You didn't tell me we had another good-looking man in the hotel! Why, he's almost as handsome as you!'

Patel laughed. They all did. It was a game Desiree was good at playing with older men. But this other man was not a day over forty and yes, he was handsome. But where had she seen him before?

Ravi Narayan smiled with white film-star teeth and said how pleased he was to meet her. The voice was familiar, too. That was when Desiree remembered him. His handsome face had been the only thing that had kept her awake through viewings of Patel's boring films. Her editor had insisted she watch them as preparation for this interview. She was glad she had decided to put on her best perfume after all. Perhaps it had been worth it. Now there was another link with Nyree Singh – perhaps he had been her film star boyfriend!

'I thought that Hollywood was interested in filming that book, Raj. I don't mean to be rude but why are *you* making it and not them?' It was a fair question and Desiree was curious to know the answer.

'It's all thanks to Nyree's brother. He is responsible for all her books now. And he likes my films. He wants the film made in India by Indians. By *this* Indian!' Patel pointed to himself and laughed loudly. They all laughed.

Their conversation was being listened to by a very interested figure with pale red hair and glasses who was sitting by the bar not far away, unnoticed by them, busily writing in a notebook. It was Professor Whitelaw.

'Yes indeed. I've known him for years,' continued Patel. 'He's spent his life looking after his sister. He still lives in their old house in the village. Goodness knows, Nyree had enough money to buy a palace but she insisted on staying there. She said it kept her feet on the ground. But it was Gopal who did that, if you ask me. He is getting old now, though, and his health is getting worse but he won't move from the place,' said Patel.

'So *he* decides what happens to her books?' asked Desiree.

'Yes. There must be lots of unpublished stuff there. Including that diary I mentioned. I'd love to have a look but Gopal won't let anyone near – he's no fool,' said Patel as he gave her a knowing look.

'Neither am I,' thought Desiree, who was already making plans to visit Gopal the next day. She was determined to get that diary one way or another.

'But there I go talking about an old man,' went on Patel, when you have handsome Ravi to entertain you. Did I mention he was to star in my next film?'

Handsome Ravi talked about himself for the next hour or two, long after Whitelaw was gone. It soon became clear that Ravi had never even met Nyree Singh. And he didn't seem to notice Desiree's necklace at all.

The next morning, Gopal Singh was looking at the rising sun from his bedroom window. He was glad he had agreed to let his old friend Raj film *Indian Summer*. Nyree had always said that foreigners should film her books because only they could see India with a fresh eye. He had always told her that was nonsense.

They had argued about it but what, in the end, could he say? They were not his books and that was that. But now he was responsible. He would do what was best. At last.

The previous night, Raj had told him on the phone that a silly journalist from that awful *National Diary* magazine wanted to see him. Raj, as Gopal well knew, had always liked attractive women – his marriage never changed that – but even he knew trouble when he saw it. And Desiree Malpen was trouble. No doubt about that. She was not interested in Indian films. That was for sure. So Raj had, with Gopal's permission, made up a story about a diary full of scandals about important people. Raj had been a good actor in his youth so, while he was talking to Desiree, he

had pretended to be drunk and to be talking too much – he was good at that kind of thing. And she had believed every word, just as he had expected her to!

Of course, Raj and Gopal both knew that Nyree had never kept a diary in her life. He remembered Gopal once telling him about Nyree's little box of secrets, so he had quickly thought of the plan. They had realised that the filming of *Indian Summer* would attract interest outside India and not all of it welcome. Desiree Malpen was a good example. Raj told Gopal he could either send her away or he could carry out the joke. If she was more interested in scandal than his films she should not get any pity. Gopal laughed and told him to go ahead.

Good old Raj!

Desiree had also got up early that morning. Ravi Narayan had proved to be as good a talker as she was a listener. Perhaps better. Old Patel had smiled as he allowed his star to talk and talk and talk. Her cassette had soon finished and she hadn't got another. She had hoped to catch more details about Nyree Singh and her diary. Oh yes, there had been a lot mentioned – famous names, important names from all over the place – when Ravi took a breath and allowed Patel to talk for a while. This had not been often enough to please her, but by then her interest had been awakened. She was sure there was a story – and a big one, too. And as for Nyree's death in that so-called car accident! Had it *really* been an accident? There was the smell of scandal there, she just knew it!

She had phoned Nyree's brother and told him she wanted to get out quickly to see him. She was sure that old Gopal, or whatever his name was, would be as helpful as Patel had been, especially if he was a lonely old man. How could he refuse an attractive woman like her?

The diary would be hers. She was sure of it. Even if she had to steal it.

She decided she would wear a yellow trouser suit that would allow her to move freely around the place – she wanted to have a good look around when she got there. She looked great in the trouser suit and her appearance usually helped her get what she wanted. That and lots of nice perfume, of course. One had to smell nice.

Five minutes later she was on her way in a taxi. She had all the windows closed.

Later that morning Gopal Singh went out to change the flowers for fresh ones from the garden. The house needed the sweet smell. It had not been joined to the sewage system – it was an old house and still had no modern pipes. Waste was collected every month from a cesspit some distance away in the large garden. The cesspit was about two metres wide and over one metre deep and by the end of the month – as it was now – it smelled awful. But he was used to it.

As he walked down the garden he saw a man approaching, a middle-aged European man with glasses and pale red hair.

‘Mr Singh?’ said the man. ‘May I have a word with you? It’s about your sister.’

Gopal was always polite to visitors – if he liked the look of them. This man didn’t look as if he meant any harm. He decided to speak with him.

Professor Whitelaw introduced himself and they were soon sitting in the house, drinking tea next to the new flowers. Whitelaw explained about his plans for a book about Nyree.

‘It will be mostly about her work, you understand,’ he said, rather nervously.

‘Not about my sister’s private life, I hope? Nyree was a very private person and I want that to be respected, even now,’ Gopal said firmly.

‘I would never mention anything without your permission, sir,’ the professor said. ‘This will be the kind of book students of serious literature will read, I assure you.’

Gopal felt happier when he heard this. Nyree had always attracted both students and teachers of literature. And there had to be a book sooner or later – it was bound to happen. When he heard Whitelaw tell him about his plans to write a book that would celebrate her work rather than the details of her private life, he knew that it would probably be the first of many.

Gopal also knew that he was getting older and might not be able to control the things that were written about Nyree. If he insisted on having a considerable degree of control over the finished book, he could make sure that what was written was the truth and not the rubbish that *some* would like to publish about her. Besides, Whitelaw seemed to be honest.

‘And what kind of information about my sister are you looking for, Professor Whitelaw?’ Gopal asked.

‘I’m particularly interested in any unpublished work you might have – any notes, unfinished novels, letters . . . diaries, perhaps?’

Diaries! Gopal wondered if this was another of Raj’s Jokes. But Raj had made no mention of this man.

Then there was a knock at the door. Gopal opened it. There was an attractive woman in a yellow trouser suit standing there. She was smiling and carried a handbag. He could smell her perfume. This must be the woman from the *National Diary*. Gopal smiled and let her in.

Desiree thought the old man was smiling for a different reason. ‘He’s attracted to me,’ she thought to herself. ‘I knew he would be!’

Gopal introduced Whitelaw and Desiree's heart sank when she saw him. She was not glad to hear of his plans for a book – he would be as interested in scandal as she was. Maybe she could take his mind off the diary. She put on her sweetest voice, but Whitelaw did not react as she had hoped. He didn't look once as she leaned over while reaching for some tea. She might just as well have been his mother. No luck there. At least the old man seemed to be giving her his attention.

She explained, still in her sweetest voice, why she was there. She said that she wanted to describe the human side of Nyree Singh in her magazine, the side that would show the world what a wonderful person they had lost. Was there anything that he could show her readers? Letters? A diary, perhaps?

Gopal smiled.

'Come, let us all walk together in the garden. Then we can talk,' he said.

Gopal picked up an old metal box from a table, the kind with a lid and a lock, and carried it with him. He led them past the flowers by his sister's photograph and out to the garden path. There was an unpleasant smell.

At first the smell was not too bad. Then, as they went on, it got stronger.

'My sister was a secretive woman,' said Gopal. 'She knew many important people, many famous people. But she never said anything about her private conversations with them to me or to anyone. She respected her friends – even her enemies – and would never repeat to anyone what they said to her.'

As they walked the smell became almost too much. Desiree's face was turning pale and Professor Whitelaw, too, was looking very uncomfortable. Gopal went on.

'This box contains the only real secrets my sister ever kept from me. I once promised her I would never open it and I never have, even though I have the key' He stopped and looked at his two guests, who were both trying their best not to be sick.

'This cesspit, which you see in the ground in front of us, is to be emptied tomorrow. It contains the sewage from the past month...'

They could see it in front of them. It was almost full, and the smell rose from it like an evil ghost.

Then Gopal did an extraordinary thing: he threw the box into the cesspit. It went through the air and landed in the middle. Desiree and Whitelaw looked on helplessly while the box sank slowly to the bottom, leaving only a few bubbles in the brown liquid.

'If you really wish to know the secrets in that box, they are yours. I will be at the *Excelsior* this afternoon. In fact, my good friend Mr Raj Patel will be arriving to take me there at any moment. The person who brings me the box may collect the key from me in the lounge of the hotel at four o'clock this afternoon – just in time for tea. Goodbye for now, my friends. It was a delight meeting you both. Perhaps we shall meet again...'

And Gopal walked down the garden path and left them there. Their eyes went from him to the cesspit and then to each other. Both of them wanted the

box and what was in it, and there it lay, separated from them by deep, bubbling brown sewage.

Raj Patel and Gopal sat drinking tea in the *Excelsior* lounge at three forty-five that afternoon. Music from a string quartet was playing. As they laughed together a third person came to join them.

It was Professor Whitelaw.

'I'm sorry Mr Singh, but I just couldn't do it. Not for anything. I'm afraid I have rather a weak stomach. Still, I don't suppose anything in that box would have made much difference to a book about Miss Singh as a writer. . .'

Gopal smiled. 'Quite right. Think nothing of it, Professor Whitelaw. I hope you did not mind my little test of your . . . er . . . intentions! I can see you are a man with high standards. Now do sit down and join us for tea. Let me introduce you to my good friend, Mr Raj Patel; he is a very fine maker of Indian films.'

For the next ten minutes they all chatted about Whitelaw's ideas for his book, and Raj Patel's plans for *Indian Summer*, starring Ravi Narayan.

It was almost four o'clock when Desiree Malpen arrived with an old metal box in her hands. She was wearing a loose blue dress and smelled of strong perfume. But there was another smell mixed in with it, a bitter unpleasant smell which defeated all the efforts of the perfume to hide it. Her hair was still wet as though she had just come out of the shower. She smiled but it was an angry smile. She placed the box in the middle of the table, almost knocking over the vase of roses.

'Well, Mr Singh, here it is. I got it out. None of those taxi drivers would do it so I did it myself – ruined my clothes and had to pay for the damned taxi to be cleaned. God knows what they thought when I finally got back here! But here it is. Now are you going to open it?'

'Of course, my dear. At once,' said Gopal. He took a key from his pocket and didn't seem to mind that the box was not entirely clean. He turned the lock with a quick motion of his wrist and held the box out to her.

'Take it; it's yours.'

Desiree took the box and, looking very pleased with herself, opened it. She took out some old pieces of newspaper, which had gone brown and hard with age. She looked at them and stared at Gopal angrily.

'What on earth are these?'

Gopal Singh looked at the old papers.

'Cricket reports! We both loved cricket, but I hate reading results of matches I haven't seen – and Nyree loved collecting them. She was a sweet old thing, don't you think?'