

A Postcard from Kolkata

by [Joe David](#) (July 2024)



Our Kolkata, Ananta Mandal (2005)

Victoria's 15-year-old son had a remarkable knack for spouting innocent witticisms. They would pop out effortlessly at the most unexpected moment. In each case, they achieved their intent, a laugh or a smile. Two became instant hits with his classmates in France and for a month they made the rounds at school. The one the boys loved most was: "I don't know what her problem is exactly but, I'm sure, if I search hard enough, I'll uncover a medical mishap." And the one the girls loved most was: "He acquired his charming repartee by memorizing pithy statements recorded on public bathroom walls."

After she and Ricky relocated to Virginia, following her divorce from Matt, her son abandoned his innocent witticisms. To her horror, almost overnight, he transitioned from a harmless wit to a verbal assassin—a teenage imitation of his father!

She was discussing this with Troy, her fiancé, when unbeknownst to them, Ricky entered the room and interrupted the conversation.

"May I make a suggestion," Ricky said, standing at the doorway, poised and elegant, like an American prince.

Victoria turned, startled by his presence. "Of course."

"Don't you think it's time you two to stop trying to crack open my skull and manage my thought waves with your tiresome righteousness? Haven't you learned yet that trying to modify behavior by applying Pavlovian conditioning techniques is passé?"

"So it is," Vicky said, humoring him. She then patted the seat next to her on the sofa. "Come, sit here, and let's talk about it like adults."

"Later, mother. This isn't a convenient time for me. Now I

must prepare for my finals.”

After he left, she wondered where he learned such disrespect. It certainly wasn't at school, and it certainly wasn't from her. Could it be from his father? But how could that be? As an international journalist, Matt was rarely in one place long enough for even a brief phone conversation.

Quite by accident, while putting away Ricky's newly laundered shirts, she found the answer. On her son's desk was a scrapbook that contained clippings of Matt's articles. She didn't need to read them to know the content. It didn't matter what the subject was—a crisis in the Middle East, a *coup d'état* led by an African dictator, or a dinner party at *L'Elysee*. In each article, he always punctuated his contempt for western values with his choice metaphors or analogies. It was Matt's way of attacking everything Vicky held dear.

Several times, after discovering the scrapbook, Victoria wanted to talk to her son openly about his father. But each time she had considered it, her son found some way of sidetracking the conversation. Tonight, though, she wasn't going to allow that to occur. After she and her son watched Matt's BBC television interview, she immediately initiated a conversation.

“You are probably wondering why I divorced your father,” she said after turning off the television.

“It *briefly* crossed my mind.”

Victoria paused and searched for the right words. “Well, the reason was ...” She stopped. She didn't know how to phrase it gently. “It's ... because ...” She stopped again.

He was eying her amused. “Well, mother, I am waiting ...”

This time she released it without hesitation. “It's because he isn't a very nice man.”

"You mean like a cuddly teddy bear?"

"No, son. Like an honest and decent human being."

"Oh, mother," he laughed, "you really are amusing sometimes."

She knew her son's style. He wanted to avoid listening to any negative remarks about his father by turning the conversation against her. Instead of permitting Ricky to succeed, she again took hold of the conversation. "For the record," she said, "the point I want to make is simply this. You mustn't believe everything you hear and read. Some people just aren't motivated by truth."

"You mean, father, of course?" he asked.

"That's right, your father."

"Aren't you carrying your feline hatred toward him a bit *too* far?"

"Hate isn't a word I would use to describe my feelings."

"What then is it?" He then added sarcastically, "His lack of *honesty and decency*?"

"That's right."

"Is this going to be another one of your sanctimonious moments?"

She again ignored his attempt to sidetrack the conversation. "Others are saying the same thing," she said unruffled by his attitude, "and I am sure they would be saying more if they knew about the payoffs."

"Payoffs?"

"That's right, Ricky. *Payoffs*! It seems your father isn't as noble as you believe. He has been known to accept huge bribes from questionable sources for slanting his news reports."

"Oh mother, this time you have really snapped," he said. "Father is a renowned and respected political journalist unlike the other hacks in his profession." He then added proudly, ready to fight, and use every poison dart he had to defend his view. "My father is a man in the know, a man with vast expertise and unquestionable integrity."

"I recommend you give close attention to what he says and writes. You might discover beneath all his glib and noble 'truths' he harbors questionable political motives."

"That's an excellent idea, mother. The next time he speaks I will pull out my dictionary and check each word for *double entendres*." He rose. "Now I must go to my room. I have studying to do." He then left swiftly.

As she watched Ricky leave, she wondered if he would ever accept the truth about his father. After years of worshiping him, she knew it would not be easy—and it could even be profoundly painful. Awakening her teenage son to the truth about his father would not be easy.

Matt was an untouchable in her son's eyes—famous and glamorous, a global centurion out to create a new world order. How could anyone—even a man of substance like her fiancé—compete with Matt? In Ricky's mind, Troy was a mere surgeon, a man dedicated to saving lives, nothing more. Matt, on the other hand, was a man of substance, a man who was changing the world with *exciting* new ideas.

Until now, she thought she was free of Matt's influence, and she could enjoy a healthy future. Ricky would have a new father whom he could emulate, and Matt would fade into the darkness. Sadly, that was the dream. The reality was different.

That evening when she was alone with Troy, she couldn't hold back any longer. Her concern for her son's well-being sprung loose with tears. She collapsed into Troy's arms, the

wonderfully safe arms of a surgeon, and she took from him the strength she needed.

"What am I going to do?" she asked Troy.

"I can't help you, Victoria. That is something you must decide."

"I must go to him," she said, after drying her tears. "Somehow I must break that unhealthy father and son bond."

Ricky deliberately left the bedroom door open while he was packing. It was his way to set the scene for a verbal shoot-out. When she entered, he was carefully selecting from his vast collection of clothes only those he deemed suitable to pack—mostly gifts from his father—silk ties and shirts from Thailand, a Savile Row suit from England, and a vicuna jacket from Peru—all of which he placed carefully into a Gucci suitcase, an extravagant present from his mother.

"Where are you going?"

"To father."

"Isn't he's in Beirut?"

"No, mother, he's in New York. He's taping a CBS news special on Lebanon."

"How do you know that?"

"He called me."

"When?"

"Well, the truth of the matter is, mother, we have been in touch for several months."

She remembered several of her son's mysterious phone calls, which ended abruptly whenever she entered the room, Matt's frequent postcards and letters to her son from around the

world, and her son's large scrapbook of his father's syndicated articles.

She wondered if Ricky told Matt about Troy. Was Matt returning to the States abruptly in the middle of a major crisis in Lebanon just to claim his son before Victoria's pending marriage to Troy? She didn't put it past Matt. He thrived on creating crises, and this one was perfect for getting even with Victoria for walking out on him.

Yet, despite his flaws, Vicky sometimes deeply missed Matt.

There were too many wonderful moments together mixed with love to forget –the pampering at a ryokan inn in Kyoto, the morning swim at Punta del Este, the reception at Buckingham Palace, and especially the safari in Tanzania. Those were merely a few of the many moments they knew together, sealed with love and devotion. But that all ended abruptly when she overheard his conversation with Mohamed two years ago. She was in the bedroom, napping, when she was awakened by Mohamed's raucous voice in the sitting room.

"You're asking *too much!*" Mohamed shrieked. "You're being impossibly greedy. I can never agree to that. *Never!*"

"You slaughter hundreds of Christians and steal their rich diamond mines," Matt said. "And you call me greedy. To the world, you are a crazed dictator. A murderer and a thief."

"How dare you..." His voice was dangerously threatening, a killer's voice.

"Save the outrage, Mohamed," Matt said, "If you don't do something right away, worse names than that will be hurled at you when the world learns about your *huge* Swiss accounts. No, my friend, you need me. With my international news connections, I can tell the world *exactly* what they need to know to adore you. But that won't be cheap. I will need money, lots of it, to gain my publishers' support."

"*And they call me a crook!*" Mohamed laughed with an inhuman blast of satanic outrage.

"Is it a deal?"

"Yes," he responded reluctantly, "it's a deal?" He then added with a warning: "But you *better* deliver!"

"Don't worry about that. I'll deliver," he said. "Now for the angle," he began in a businesslike tone, "Let's give the slaughter a religious slant. Most of the world is drugged on religion, so if we sell it as a religious war that *will* help cleanse your name. In fact, with the right spin offs, it might even win you sainthood."

After Mohamed left, Matt entered the bedroom. Victoria was sitting up, waiting.

"Did you have a good nap?" he asked.

"I would've, if I weren't awakened by Mohamed."

Matt became uncomfortable. "I suppose you overheard everything?"

"Enough," she said. "I thought we were invited to Megève to ski. If I knew you were going to work, I would've asked Sir Beacon for his guest list before agreeing to join you."

"But you understand?"

"No, Matt. I don't understand," she said. "Tell me so I will."

"I'm a journalist, Vicky, and I write stories for a living."

"It sounds to me as though you're going to make a lot on that story."

He approached her, then fondled her seductively. "It takes money to keep my pretty princess happy."

She pulled away. "Not that kind of money."

He didn't like being judged. He turned offensive. His nasty side began to push itself across his handsome face, hardening his normally soft features. "Stop acting so virtuous, Vicky," he said with controlled anger. "This is how money is made in the real world. Bury your Virginia provincialism and accept it."

"Provincialism!" she exploded. "You call my disapproval of theft and murder, provincialism? My God Matt, your readers and viewers would really love hearing you tell them that The noble, the virtuous Matthew Richard Reynolds calls decency, *provincialism*." She slid further away from him, then rose from the bed. "*You disgust me!*"

"Vicky. I'm only doing it for you—so that you and I can have a little nest egg for Ricky."

"Sorry, Matt, I'm not buying that." She pulled out a suitcase and threw her clothes into it.

"Are you leaving me?" he asked, shocked.

"You want me to stay with you knowing what I know now—that this good life that you offer me is built on duplicity and murder? No, Matt. I can't do that. That would make me a co-conspirator. No matter how hard you try you can't get me to sink that low!" She then added bitterly. "I'm just *too* provincial for your *sophisticated* lifestyle."

For a moment, he stared at her sadly, obviously remembering their wonderful times together. His expression unexpectedly softened into pain. "I really meant it, Vicky. I'm only doing it for you."

"Are you, Matt? Then show me."

"Name it. It's yours."

"Kill your story on Mohamed."

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

He reached out for her and pulled her close. "It's deal," he smiled happily.

Three weeks later, while in the beauty parlor catching up on her reading, to her shock, she read in seven different news publications Matt's syndicated story on Mohamed. Furious, she stormed out of the beauty shop, her hair still stringy and wet from the wash, and barged into their Paris apartment. She didn't say a word to him, she simply dropped the publications on his desk. Her look and the publications said the rest.

"Vicky, I had no choice" he said. "There were bills to pay, and pressure from my editors ..."

"Matt, are you aware of what other journalists are saying about your 'purification' stories of that murdering thief?"

"You know the business. You know how nasty journalists can get toward competition."

"In this case, they would have good reason. This time, Matt, it is goodbye!"

She could see his ego swell, fill the room and crush her with its toxic presence. She knew what he was thinking. She knew him too well to miss the point. His oracles from Mt. Olympus were lead stories around the world. How dare she, a mere mortal, judge him?

"I should've known that your 'sweet and virtuous soul, like season'd timber, would never give'," he said, quoting George Herbert's poem "Virtue." He aimed it with the skill of a professional assassin—to *the core*! Then, he pivoted and departed unemotionally.

When she left Matt and returned to Virginia, Victoria vowed she would shield her son from his father's influences. She would use all her strength to build an impenetrable wall around Ricky, a wall of honesty and decency that Matt could never raze.

Sadly, she realized she had failed.

Despite the distance between father and son, Matt had successfully turned Ricky into his own image.

As Ricky packed, she watched feeling helpless at stopping him. What could she gain by imposing her will on him—more disrespect and maybe even a runaway whom she might never see again?

"How long will you be gone?" she asked, after resigning to his decision.

"I'm not returning."

Her world fell apart. *"Not returning?"*

"Father thinks it would be best for me to enroll in Rosey. This way he can visit with me between assignments in Geneva."

"But I have custody of you. He has no right to make such a decision."

"A mere legal technicality which we are willing to challenge in court."

She collapsed into the chair and stared silently at this stranger she called her son. A legal technicality, she thought. His entire life could be ruined by his association with that man, and he dismisses it by referring to it as a legal technicality.

Damn that man!

"Is this what you really want?" she finally asked.

He nodded.

"You know I have custody, and I could stop you."

"True," he said, "and you may even be successful. But would you win in the end?"

Yes, she thought. Would she win in the end? How cunning of Matt to plan his chess move so close to her upcoming Greenbrier wedding to Todd. With that one unexpected move, Matt stole her son and her possibility of a happy marriage to Troy.

Damn that man! Damn, damn, DAMN HIM!

"Very well," she said, rising from the chair. "For now, you may go to your father for the summer. We can discuss the details later."

"Yes, mother, later" he said, smiling. "Let's haggle over the details later."

Her pain was unbearable. How eagerly he was willing to commit psychological suicide, she thought after leaving his room.

Troy and Victoria watched the plane leave, and even after it was out of sight, she prayed it would circle and return. Once her son had accustomed himself to the extraordinary pleasures of his father's life, it would be impossible for her to reach him again. She wanted to stop him, turn to the court, and hold her son close to her in legal bondage. But she knew that would never work. She had to release Ricky. He had to learn on his own the importance of those values that she tried to teach him. It was a gamble, but it was a gamble which she had to make.

She called Ricky often, sometimes even talking to him at length. She must never close the door to communication; instead, she must use every opportunity available to remain in touch. One day he might grow weary of his father's life and

decide to return to Virginia. When that moment came, if it came, she wanted him to know that he would always be welcome home again.

During his first month abroad, he gave no indication of changing. Attending star-studded events in glamorous and famous venues was very exciting for a fifteen-year-old. Every day was new and spectacular. It was heart-breaking for her to guess what Matt was thinking, as he seduced his son with worldly excess.

She could see Matt gloat over his success at hurting her so deeply, while he relaxed in his favorite leather armchair in his Paris apartment smoking his heavy-scented Cuban cigar between swigs of cognac.

Damn that man!

Victoria had delayed her marriage to Troy. There were moments she was willing to give up the man whom she deeply needed, if it would improve her relationship with her son. But she knew such a decision would be foolish. Why should she delay her marriage to Troy because her son lacked the wisdom to appreciate such a man? By all standards, Troy was the best possible man for her son to have as a father. His dedication to the Hippocratic Oath gave him a nobility which one day her son might learn to appreciate.

She and Troy decided to set the wedding date for early September. Although she wanted to share her plans with Ricky, she rejected the idea. She believed if she said anything while he was securely under Matt's influence, she could lose her son for good. Matt would somehow use it against her. All she could do, whenever she talked to Ricky, was to guide him gently by helping him understand his new experiences.

When Ricky told her about meeting the President of Tunduru, she responded innocently. "Is he the same man who brutally massacred those farmers in order to steal their land?"

"The land wasn't stolen, mother," he said, correcting her. "It was expropriated, and it will be used by others for the greater good."

"Oh, yes, of course, I forgot. Expropriated," she said, "for the *greater good*."

"That's right," he said. "Unlike what others are saying, father and I both found him quite charming and very sensitive to the needs of the Tundurians. I agree with father. Times are changing, mother. It is urgent that we put an end to so much land hoarding by rich, private interests. Needless to say," Ricky added, "father covered the story and defended the President's decision to expropriate the land with a sound defense. You will be reading all about it in the *London Times Express* next week."

In Rio, Ricky watched a group of poor children from Rio's favela circle several tourists and demand from them money. While the gang was distracting the tourists with menacing behavior, one boy snatched a woman's purse and ran with it across the busy avenue dodging cars. Before he could make it across the avenue and disappear on the beach he was hit by a speeding motorist.

"It was like a scene in the movies, mother. The kind you just stare at in disbelief," Ricky said, upset. "The impact of the hit was so powerful that it tossed the boy over the roof of the car and into another lane of rush-hour traffic. The crowd of people on the Avenue were shrieking in horror as other cars ran over the boy, leaving him behind unrecognizably crushed." He then added with enormous pain, almost breaking in tears. "It was incredible, absolutely incredible!"

"I know, son. You are discovering what all travelers discover. The world isn't always as beautiful as postcards suggest."

Ricky didn't seem to hear. His thoughts were locked on what he had seen. "Father was standing next to me and saw it

happening, but he never once alluded to it in his article on Brazil. His piece was upbeat. It was a story about the country's glorious carnival spirit and the emergence of a new Brazil, which the President's wealth redistribution program promised to recreate." He paused for a moment before repeating in disbelief, "He never once mentioned the boy's death? *Not once!*"

When they returned to Paris, after his brief visit to Latin America, Ricky's voice was light and gay again. "I am so happy to be back in Paris. France has none of Brazil's social problems—except, of course, those caused by the Algerians. Father tells me they'll cut your throat for a franc. Thank God France has a strong and wise young President. The rest of the world could learn from him. You'll be reading all about it in father's article on the rioting in Nanterre." He paused, and he became pensive. "You know, mother, I wonder what father was thinking when he wrote the article. His argument supporting the French President's actions and his elitist views contradicts those he made in his article on Tunduru and Brazil. I really must ask father to clarify why."

Ricky's voice grew heavy when he talked about a trip to Pakistan, and it turned to horror when he talked about the butchered face of a woman, when her niqāb accidentally slipped away while eating. "Father says honor is very important in Muslim countries, and the woman probably got what she deserved for disgracing her husband." He paused in thought. "Tell me, mother. What could that woman have possibly done to end up with a scarred face with no nose?"

"I have no idea, son. None that I could think of could possibly justify such butchering of another human."

Kolkata, though, was the turning point. When she talked to him about his visit, he hung up. When she called a second time, he didn't answer. She knew then that it was time to go abroad and to be with him. She suspected his experiences were beginning

to collect and leave their mark.

The decision to travel to Geneva was made urgent when she read his postcard from Kolkata, mailed from Singapore, dated a week earlier. "Today, mother, I saw something I will never forget. I saw a man," he wrote. "He was dressed elegantly with British good taste, standing in front of the Oberoi Grand Hotel. He was staring ahead in horror as a legless and armless man rolled past him. His look of horror was more poignant than hundreds of words could ever convey. I don't think I'll ever forget that look. When I read father's article on India in defense of eugenics, it clarified everything for me."

In a few days, he would be attending Le Rosey in Switzerland which she decided to permit. This would be the perfect time for a visit. She suspected his experiences was reshaping his thinking, and he was ready to listen to her when she spoke.

She had just completed an early dinner with Troy before her evening flight to Geneva when Troy unexpectedly pointed toward the French doors behind her. Curiously, she turned. Ricky stood at the doorway, tall, handsomely dressed, with the elegance of a European aristocrat. His Gucci suitcase rested next to him, scarred from custom stickers and luggage handlers, and it gave him the smart look of a world traveler. His boyish innocence was gone. Replacing it was the maturity of someone who had seen it all—the squalor, the luxury, the intrigue, *the truth*.

"I'm home," Ricky said to Troy and his mother. "The summer holiday is over."

[Table of Contents](#)

Joe David is the author of numerous articles and six books,

including [*The Infidels*](#). “A Postcard from Kolkata” is from a collection of short stories and a novella from his book entitled *As Best We Can*. For more information about the author, visit www.bfat.com.

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