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Six Suspects

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Extract

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MURDER

'Murder, like all art, generates interpretation and resists explanation.'

Michelle de Kretser, *The Hamilton Case*



1
The Bare Truth

Arun Advani's column, 25 March

SIX GUNS AND A MURDER

Not all deaths are equal. There's a caste system even in murder. The stabbing of an impoverished rickshaw-puller is nothing more than a statistic, buried in the inside pages of the newspaper. But the murder of a celebrity instantly becomes headline news. Because the rich and famous rarely get murdered. They lead five-star lives and, unless they overdose on cocaine or meet with a freak accident, generally die a five-star death at a nice grey age, having augmented both lineage and lucre.

That is why the murder of Vivek 'Vicky' Rai, the thirty-two-year-old owner of the Rai Group of Industries and son of the Home Minister of Uttar Pradesh, has been dominating the news for the past two days.

In my long and chequered career as an investigative journalist I have carried out many exposés, from corruption in high places to pesticides in cola bottles. My revelations have brought down governments and closed down multinationals. In the process, I have seen human greed, malice and depravity at very close quarters. But nothing has revolted me more than the saga of Vicky Rai. He was the poster boy for sleaze in this

country. For over a decade I tracked his life and crimes, like a moth drawn irresistibly to the flame. It was a morbid fascination, akin to watching a horror film. You know something terrible is going to transpire, and so you sit transfixed, holding your breath, waiting for the inevitable to happen. I received dire warnings and death threats. Attempts were made to get me fired from this paper. I survived. Vicky Rai didn't.

By now the facts of his murder are as well known as the latest twists in the soap operas on TV. He was shot dead last Sunday at 12.05 a.m. by an unknown assailant at his farmhouse in Mehrauli, on the outskirts of Delhi. According to the forensic report, he died of a single lacerating wound to his heart made by a bullet fired at point-blank range. The bullet pierced his chest, passed cleanly through his heart, exited from his back and became lodged in the wooden bar. Death is believed to have been instantaneous.

Vicky Rai had enemies, for sure. There were many who hated his arrogance, his playboy lifestyle, his utter contempt for the law. He built an industrial empire from scratch. And no one can build an industrial empire in India without cutting corners. Readers of this column will recall my reports detailing how Vicky Rai engaged in insider trading at the stock market, defrauded investors of their dividends, bribed officials and cheated on his corporate tax. Still, he didn't get caught, always managing to exploit some loophole or other to stay out of reach of the law.

It was an art he had perfected at a very young age. He was only seventeen the first time he was hauled up in court. A friend of his father had given him a swanky new BMW, the five series, on his birthday. He took it out for a spin with three of his buddies. They had a noisy and boisterous celebration at a hip pub. While driving back at three a.m. through thick fog, Vicky Rai mowed down six homeless vagrants who were sleeping on a pavement. He was stopped at a police checkpoint and found to be completely sozzled. A case of rash and negligent driving was lodged against him. But by the time the case came to trial,

all family members of the deceased had been purchased. No witnesses could recall seeing a BMW that night. All they could remember was a truck, with Gujarat licence plates. Vicky Rai received a lecture from the judge on the dangers of drink-driving and a full acquittal.

Three years later, he was in court again charged with hunting and killing two black bucks in a wildlife sanctuary in Rajasthan. He professed he didn't know they were a protected species. He thought it funny that a country that could not protect brides from being burnt for dowry and young girls from being picked up for prostitution should prosecute people for killing deer. But the law is the law. So he was arrested and had to stay in jail for two weeks before he managed to obtain bail. We all know what happened next. The only eye witness, Kishore – the forest ranger who was driving the open jeep – died six months later in mysterious circumstances. The case dragged on for a couple of years but ended, predictably, in Vicky Rai's acquittal.

Given these antecedents, it was surely only a matter of time before he graduated to open murder. It happened seven years ago, on a hot summer night, at Mango, the trendy restaurant on the Delhi–Jaipur highway, where he was throwing a big bash to celebrate his twenty-fifth birthday. The party began at nine p.m. and carried on well past midnight. A live band was belting out the latest hits, imported liquor was flowing and Vicky Rai's guests – an assortment of senior government officials, socialites, current and former girlfriends, a few people from the film industry and a couple of sports celebrities – were having a good time. Vicky had a drink too many. At around two a.m. he staggered to the bar and asked for another shot of tequila from the bartender, a pretty young woman dressed in a white T-shirt and denim jeans. She was Ruby Gill, a doctoral student at Delhi University who worked part-time at Mango to support her family.

'I'm sorry, I can't give you another drink, Sir. The bar is now closed,' she told him.

'I know, sweetie.' He flashed his best smile. 'But I want just one last drink and then we can all go home.'

'I am sorry, Sir. The bar is closed. We have to follow regulations,' she said, rather firmly this time.

'F**k your regulations,' Vicky snarled at her. 'Don't you know who I am?'

'No, Sir, and I don't care. The rules are the same for everyone. You will not get another drink.'

Vicky Rai flew into a rage. 'You bloody bitch!' he screamed and whipped out a revolver from his suit pocket. 'This will teach you a lesson!' He fired at her twice, shooting her in the face and the neck, in the presence of at least fifty guests. Ruby Gill dropped dead and Mango descended into bedlam. A friend of Vicky's reportedly grabbed his arm, led him out to his Mercedes and drove him away from the restaurant. Fifteen days later, Vicky Rai was arrested in Lucknow, brought before a magistrate, and managed yet again to obtain bail.

A murder over the mere refusal of a drink shook the conscience of the nation. The combination of Vicky Rai's notoriety and Ruby Gill's beauty ensured that the case stayed in the headlines for weeks to come. Then summer passed into autumn, and we moved on to new stories. When the case finally came to trial, the ballistics report said that the two bullets had been fired from two different guns. The murder weapon had inexplicably 'disappeared' from the police strong-room where it was being stored. Six witnesses, who claimed they had seen Vicky Rai pull the gun, retracted their statements. After a trial lasting five years, Vicky Rai received a full acquittal just over a month ago, on 15 February. To celebrate the verdict he threw a party at his Mehrauli farmhouse. And that is where he met his end.

Some will call this poetic justice. But the police call it an IPC Section 302 crime – culpable homicide amounting to murder – and have launched a nationwide search for the killer. The Police Commissioner is personally supervising the investi-

gation, spurred, no doubt, by anxiety that the promised sinecure of the Lieutenant Governorship of Delhi (reported six weeks ago in this column) will vanish into thin air should he fail to crack this case.

His diligence has yielded good results. My sources tell me that six suspects are being held on suspicion of murdering Vicky Rai. Apparently Sub-Inspector Vijay Yadav was on traffic-control duty at the farmhouse when the killing occurred. He immediately sealed off the premises and ordered the frisking of each and every one of the three-hundred-odd guests, waiters, gate-crashers and hangers-on there at the time. The place was practically bristling with weaponry. During the search, six individuals were discovered to have guns in their possession, and were detained. I am sure they must have protested. After all, simply carrying a gun is not an offence, provided you have an arms licence. But when you take a gun to a party at which the host gets shot, you automatically become a suspect.

The suspects are a motley lot, a curious mélange of the bad, the beautiful and the ugly. There is Mohan Kumar, the former Chief Secretary of Uttar Pradesh, whose reputation for corruption and womanizing is unparalleled in the annals of the Indian Administrative Service. The second is a dim-witted American who claims to be a Hollywood producer. Spicing up the mix is the well-known actress Shabnam Saxena, with whom Vicky Rai was infatuated, if the gossip in the film magazines is to be believed. There is even a jet-black, five-foot-nothing tribal from some dusty village in Jharkhand who is being interrogated at arm's length for fear that he might be one of the dreaded Naxalites who infest that state. Suspect number five is an unemployed graduate named Munna with a lucrative sideline as a mobile-phone thief. And completing the line-up is Mr Jagannath Rai himself, the Home Minister of Uttar Pradesh. Vicky Rai's dad. Could a father stoop any lower?

The six guns recovered are equally assorted. There is a British Webley & Scott, an Austrian Glock, a German Walther

PPK, an Italian Beretta, a Chinese Black Star pistol and a locally made improvised revolver known as a *katta*. The police appear to be convinced that the murder weapon is one of these six and are awaiting the ballistics report to match bullet to gun and pinpoint the culprit.

Barkha Das interviewed me yesterday on her TV show. 'You devoted much of your career to exposing the misdeeds of Vicky Rai and castigating him in your column. What do you plan to do now that he is dead?' she asked me.

'Find his killer,' I replied.

'What for?' she wanted to know. 'Aren't you happy Vicky Rai is dead?'

'No,' I said, 'because my crusade was never against Vicky Rai. It was against the system which permits the rich and powerful to believe that they are above the law. Vicky Rai was only a visible symptom of the malaise that has infected our society. If justice is really blind, then Vicky Rai's killer deserves to be brought to account just as much as Vicky Rai did.'

And I say this again to my readers. I am going to track down Vicky Rai's murderer. A true investigative journalist cannot be swayed by his personal prejudices. He must follow the cold logic of reason till the very end, no matter where and who it leads to. He must remain an impartial professional seeking only the bare truth.

Murder may be messy, but truth is messier. Tying up loose ends will be difficult, I know. The life histories of all six suspects will need to be combed. Motives will have to be established. Evidence will need to be collated. And only then will we discover the real culprit.

Which of these six will it be? The bureaucrat or the bimbo? The foreigner or the tribal? The big fish or the small fry?

All I can tell my readers at this point in time is – watch this space.