

A Note to the Editor

Dear Edward,

After twenty years of chronicling the stories of the Great Magician Zalman and his assistant, the Fabulous Lily, I confess myself to be something of an amateur expert in the art of illusion. A surprise for you I'm sure, considering the content of my stories are so firmly built in unveiling the truth behind the 'magic' as they say.

However now I think of it, it may not be too much of a shock, considering my reluctance in disclosing the heart behind the magician duo, their lives, their relationships. Frankly, it was a difficult subject for me to write about considering the lives that have inspired the creation of Zalman and Lily. Lives too private and hidden behind smoke and trapdoors, as solid as the London fog in winters. In the context of the Wilde trial, I was afraid it was too painfully honest and disillusioning for you or the British public in extension, to digest.

But with the recent events that could herald the end of our world as we know it, no one knows better than me, that there are certain stories that need to be told before it's too late.

So I leave with you my dear friend, a series of letters that will faithfully and accurately account for my first association with the Great Zalman and the person who went on to be Lily. I shall leave this with my solicitor to pass it on to you after my death.

I dare say it may not be what you expected.

*Louis Karnswell
November 1912*

Aman smoothed out the edges of the coarse paper as his eyes quickly surveyed the letter. The portly man behind the table steadily smoked out circles from his tobacco pipe as he waited for him to finish.

"And these letters were specifically entrusted to me?" Aman asked for the third time that day.

The man removed the pipe just a few inches away from his thin lips as he nodded "Yes Mr. Sharma. Mr. Karnswell left no direct descendants to execute his will or instructions for the distribution of his belongings, save this one."

He placed his pince-nez glasses on his little nose and read in a sonorous and pompous tone, "Please entrust this box of letters to Edward Wellington and his forthcoming descendants in the hope that future generations would be kinder to its citizens than we ever had been".

The man looked up from the document to see Aman's uncomprehending frown written all over his face. He sighed "Mr. Sharma, Edward Wellington had no direct descendants and no family as we could find. You are currently the only person who has some familial connection to the man, however...

"Illegitimate? Scandalous?" Aman remarked sourly.

"Yes, yes. Considering Mr. Wellington's sister's... relationship with your great-great grandfather, that makes you the great-great nephew of Edward Wellington and the sole beneficiary of his letterbox." He bent down and placed a wooden box on the table. Aman's interior decorator mind immediately registered the Victorian Coromandel Wood and domed lid. The bronze-gold designs were encrusted with golden round shapes on the lid. Aman ran his hands lightly on the shapes, rough and rusty from age. He traced his fingers on the name inscribed on the box.

"I've heard of these stories. In the letter. The Magician's Code. I read some of them in school I think. The Great Magician Zalman and his companion Lily toured the country from fair to fair using tricks and illusion to solve the mysteries plaguing the fairs." Aman said absent-mindedly.

"Yes, me too. Started off as a ha'penny and was later published in the Private Eye Magazine as a series of magical adventures. Interesting if not redundant considering the other detective stories that came out of the Victorian era." The lawyer commented casually as he rose unsteadily from his chair.

"I'm sure you would find the letters mildly stimulating at the least. If not, the box seems well maintained and would fetch a good sum of money in an antique store." Aman rose hastily as well and grimaced at the lawyer's outstretched sweaty hand. He shook it quickly and walked out with the box under his arm.

Aman placed the box gingerly next to him as he opened the Uber App on his phone. Still fifteen minutes away. He spied an empty chair and table near the small restaurant. He ran his tongue inside his cheek in annoyance and sat on the chair with the box placed on the table.

He placed his palm under his cheek as he looked at the box. After a childhood spent in yearning for a family and a history he could identify himself with, he had come to painful grips with the orphan's lot. And then this. A far-off ancestor from a different era and island had come to life just to let him know that he wasn't a creation of parthenogenesis and actually came from somewhere.

The phone in his pants vibrated. He broke from his reverie to check it.

How did it go? Are you a millionaire now?

Aman grinned at Will's to the point message. *You wish. Just a box of letters. But you might be interested in the content of the letters.*

Since when? The phone pinged again.

Since my great great uncle was the editor of the Magician's Code series. The letters are from the author.

HOLY SHIT. MEET ME AT VAISHNAVI'S. ASAP.

Aman grinned and fired off a quick message about the Uber. He looked up to see a taxi with the license number on the App. He waved his hand to the searching driver as he picked up the box and walked towards the taxi.

Dear Mr. Raffles,

My compliments of the season.

I am not sure if you would remember me from the deluge of well-wishers and admirers who regularly visit you behind the stage. My name is Louis Karswell. When I attended your show last week, my initial intention had been to fondly indulge a friend who had spoken of its fascinating premise. However now I know that I truly have no idea what I was thinking.

Your performance was something out of this world. A shining, dazzling creature of illusion designed to enthrall the audience- young and old, woman or man, optimist or cynic in my case. Your manner both personable and yet mysterious broke way for a hidden delight at every reaction and gasp from the audience- as if it was the first time you had performed that trick, instead of the thousandth.

When I stepped out of the performance, I was speechless for a longer time than I care to admit. However, that speechlessness did allow me to take notice of an advertisement you stuck on the wall. I was too slow to address you at that moment; however, I did take note of the advertisement for a flatmate and would like to offer myself as a candidate.

I am a humble doctor currently working at St Bart's Hospital. Having returned from the Commonwealth War recently has left me with a want for a quiet and uneventful life. As well as what I'm sure is a priority to you, I have no real want to inquire about the secrets and techniques in your performance.

If you find my credentials amenable, I will be available at St Bart's for the rest of the week. Please drop a message at the security office on the ground floor and I will respond at the earliest.

*Yours sincerely,
Louis Karswell
September 1892*

Aman gobbled down his paper dosa as will read the next letter page after the Editor's Note. The letters were bound in a hardbound book, with each letter a page of the book.

"Zalman's real name was Raffles? No wonder he went for the Great Magician title, brutal name to give your child". Will commented as he eagerly read the letters.

“Terry Deary called them Vile Victorians for a reason. I just thought that was ‘cause of the genocide and colonialism.” Aman remarked smartly with his mouth full.

“You’re such a nerd Sharma,” Will commented casually, half grinning at Aman. Aman’s heart skipped a beat at Will’s fond grin and the light in his brown eyes.

Will carefully flipped through the rest of the letters as Aman paid the bill. “The letters don’t seem to be a back and forth. They seem mostly from the author guy. Wonder where Zalman- sorry Raffles’ letters are.”

“He didn’t write many apparently. I did see a cutout newspaper ad, presumably from him since it said, ‘Mr. Raffles seeks a flatmate.’” Aman took the book from his hand as Will held the box. He flipped to the page and showed him it. Will leaned over to Aman’s side as he read through the ad.

“Flatmate, male 50’s, quiet in habits, steadfast, loyal and willing to put up with piano practice at odd hours.” Will read. “Published in December- wait it’s published in December 1912.” He pointed.

Trying not to get distracted by Will’s cheek so close to his, Aman read where he was excitedly pointing “A month after the letter to the editor?”

“They must have fallen out over the reveal of his real identity. Zalman kicked Louis out and got a new flatmate. Shame.” Will said pursing his lips.

Aman frowned “This can’t be the reveal. I mean, the mention of the Oscar Wilde trial is like the Bat signal for queer youth from their ancestors. That can’t be a coincidence. Especially considering the dissertation you wrote on them, Will.” Aman bit his tongue at that, revealing a tad too much about the unwieldy passion with his friend that made him read every page of his 180,000-word dissertation when it was published.

Thankfully Will didn’t notice. “Yeah, I know dude. I’m disappointed too. Especially since I damaged my computer constantly emailing the professor to let me write on that topic.” Will put the book in the box and handed it back morosely.

They continued walking silently to the bus stop near J.N Petit School until Aman stopped. “Look, Will, we skipped to the ending here. The newspaper ad was cut out and pasted on the end for a reason. There are like fifteen letters from Louis in the between. There’s something more.”

“Okay... but how do we find out?” Will asked.

“Simple, we both take the book every other week. We read five letters each and then we discuss our findings.” Aman said with a searching look at Will’s growing expression of interest. He smiled internally.

“Sounds super. First five are yours.” Will said as his bus came down the street. “Don’t read them all or you’re not my friend anymore, ass.” He warned jokingly, his smile flashing he clambered onto the bus.

Aman waved him off with a curious ache in his chest as he looked at the book in his hand.

Whatever you say, Will.

My dear Raffles,

I had not intended to disturb in your preparations for the performance at Kent, if I have, I beg your indulgence on this important matter.

While at the Turkish baths, I had a chance encounter with an old friend from my army days. He is relatively better than most of my other compatriots with a steady job and an even steadier wife. At my casual mention of who my flatmate is, he asked in his capacity of an editor and publisher whether he could speak to you on possibly publishing an account of your rapid rise in the magician's ranks.

I told him it was unlikely you would agree since you value your privacy and code to a great extent. However in that discussion, the documents I keep hidden in your locked drawer also came up, and he begged me to let him read it.

Two days later, I received a letter from the publishing house for 200 pounds per commission.

In the last year, it has been my privilege and honor to observe the Great Magician Zalman in his element. The flash in your eyes as you calculate the exact distance and time of the knife coming towards yourself. The graceful way you move about the stage, the quick glance that lets you know of a man's secrets in the way he stands and holds his body is nothing short of astounding.

I know you will probably scoff at the stories I have written, in fact, I suspect you have read some of them, considering the relative absence of dust on the locked drawer. But I was a mere ordinary mortal, damaged and lonely until you came along. How could I not be fascinated with your shining brilliance and extraordinary compassion?

Whatever I am and write, I owe it to you and I will not proceed if you don't wish for me to do so.

Awaiting your response.

*Yours faithfully,
Louis Karswell
September 1905*

Aman closed the book with a peculiar ache in his chest. He could almost hear the voice of the man echoing around him in the emptiness of his drawing room. Suddenly he realized it was his own voice repeating the same line from the letter.

“How could I not be fascinated with your shining brilliance and extraordinary compassion?”

He closed the book a little too firmly than he should as he walked into his bedroom. He opened a drawer and removed a framed picture of him and Will in Disneyland with Mickey Mouse ears on them. He smiled sadly as he remembered the excited breathlessness he felt when he chased Will around as he skipped from ride to ride with all the eagerness of a child.

Since college, Will had been ‘that’ kid. The kid that everyone knew and loved for his outgoing, funny nature. Always ready to help with whatever matter. Brilliant and compassionate, Aman had been fascinated from a distance but scared to really approach. As a shy closeted gay kid from India, Aman had envied the demonstrative and gregarious nature of men who could be themselves out loud without real fear. A lot of that came from better social tolerance in the U.S but most of it was Will. Only Will.

Then the day after he returned to college from his father’s funeral, Will sat down next to him and asked him if he wanted to talk.

A lot of people had given him condolences, but only one person had really asked him if he wanted to talk about it.

Pop culture and media have shown a lot of dumb things that damaged the world’s psyche, but showing a man that talking through grief is bad and stoicism is good is literally the worst fucking idea ever.

Will had said that to him when Aman had tried to drive him off. Aman broke down and there began the friendship that has defined his life for five years.

It was embarrassingly easy and effortless how Aman fell in love with him. After three years of college, Aman had mentally prepared himself for a perfunctory hello on Facebook every three months or something, but when he half-jokingly mentioned this, Will looked at him with the first real expression of asperity.

Aman, I got the fucking job at the Indian branch. I’m with you to the end of the line you asshole.

Aman both hated and loved how his heart stopped at Will’s loud cheer when his name was announced as the class’s valedictorian.

Despite the fact he could not, did not actually love him.

His phone vibrated off his nightstand, distracting Aman. “I can’t wait. Tell me. What’s in the boooookkkk?” Will said reedily, imitating Brad Pitt’s voice in Seven.

Aman stifled his grin “That reference is super old Will. No wonder the kids at the school call you Uncle Will.”

“Okay, first of all, I’m two months younger than you. Two, the reason they call me uncle is because that’s the way Indian kids are raised to behave with their elders stemming from a cisheteropatriarchal system. I’m disappointed in you, brother you should know better”. Will mockingly scolded.

“Sure *brother*. Anyway, Louis has just asked Raffles if he could publish the stories. Like I know you suspected Louis was in love with Raffles in the books, but now I get why you would think that. The letters are pretty devoted to how amazing the guy is.” Aman said, trying not to let his heart sink at the brother remark.

“I know right? The letters I read last week were about that too. But like even with all that hero worship, there are so many domestic moments that are kind of unusual in letters like this. It’s adorable. They totally quarreled about the dishwashing thing though I’m sure. Louis sounds like he’s 100% done with Raffles in that letter LOL.” Will laughed.

“Kind of like when we lived together in second and third year.” He commented casually as if Aman didn’t recall that every time he read the letters.

Aman rolled his eyes “You were such a lazybones.”

“Who bought the food may I ask?”

“I’m not sure what you bought constituted as food as much as death traps.”
“Vegetarian”.

“Dead at 40.”

“Not anymoreeee. You saw to that with the food intervention.”

Aman laughed out loud, unable to help himself “Why am I friends with you?”

“Aman, I ask myself that every day,” Will said with sudden seriousness, almost reaching out from the phone to seize Aman’s heart in a paroxysm of hope and aching love.

“Anyway”. Will said after Aman didn’t say anything. “What’s in store for me to read?”

Aman flipped the next five pages “Oh.”

“Oh what?”

“Louis gets married.”

Dear Raffles,

There's a very likely chance I may never send this letter to you. But I had to write this to let you know about this matter.

I am to be married. Sabrina McDougall has accepted my proposal of marriage in the last hour and the wedding will take place in a small private church with a few witnesses on her side. She is a lovely, winsome girl with a compassionate soul.

How do I know this?

She asked me if you would be my best man.

How could I tell her that I am doing this while you're performing in a different county, like a coward?

How do I let her know that the reason I'm doing this is to have a reason to stop myself from hoping any longer? To forget the brilliant but distant shining star who would surely pity my sentiments if I ever confessed them out loud.

She is a good woman who I can have a comfortable life with. She is understanding and has accepted my priorities in life will always involve you and our stories.

I shall always be ready at your command for any adventure you wish. I will always be here at your disposal.

Please, God, tell me! Tell me if I don't have to do this.

*Always yours,
Louis Karswell
September 1908*

“Oh.” Will breathed as he shut the book.

“Yeah.” Aman sighed as he put the book back in the box on the park bench.

Will seemed to stare into the darkness silently for several minutes until he burst out “What the fuck dude? What’s fucking wrong with Louis?”

“Huh?” Aman said startled.

“Running off and getting married to a chick while he was still in love with someone else!” Will gestured angrily.

“Why couldn’t he have just grown a pair and told him? I mean my dissertation was about Louis but Raffles sounded just as devoted to Louis. ‘My dear Karswell, my faithful companion who you may trust as you trust me. ‘The way Raffles almost threatened to murder a guy who shot Karswell in the Rope Trick case, that love was totally returned if Louis had bothered to ask, Christ!’ Will shot up from the bench. “I don’t know what happened after, but at this point, he was in love with Louis.”

“Don’t know. ” Aman said. He could not tear his eyes from Will’s back as he continued “But then how do you expect the sun to love you back?”

“Huh?” Will turned to look at him.

Aman looked away, unable to look at his questioning face directly “I mean for Louis, Raffles was this brilliant man. A genius and some kind of amazing angel who changed his life. Even counting the dangerous era he lived in, Louis didn’t think he could be that small or ordinary to love someone like him back.”

“Maybe that was his problem,” Will said. Aman looked at him. “How do you mean?”

“He forgot that Zalman needed Lily as much as she needed him.”

Dear Raffles,

I beg you not to do this. This man is a wicked spirit who envies your talents on the stage. He has publicly stated his intention to destroy you and will take whatever measures to make it happen.

I understand your noble intention to expose him as a fraud and stop his nefarious use of dangerous explosives in his act that could injure others in the audience, but this may be too dangerous. Please re-consider the act in Barnsley.

If you wish to go forward with this anyhow, I insist on assisting you.

*Your faithful companion,
Louis Karswell
September 1910*

Aman cursed himself as he tossed and turned on his bed. He'd revealed too much. After six years of concealing his feelings, he had placed his heart on the gravel of the park road because of a damn letter. Those bloody letters.

He's watched numerous rom-coms, why the holy hell was this one that induced him to almost reveal his heart? He thought frustrated, with the answer coming in the next breath.

Louis was like him. The rom-coms weren't.

His phone rang aloud in the momentary silence in between the traffic on the roads below.

"Yeah?" Aman answered wearily.

"Open the door," Will said. "I'm outside."

Aman's shoulders slumped but he got up and went to open the door.

Will stood at the door soaked to the bone. His raincoat was practically falling apart and open with his shirt inside was half-soaked.

"Where did you come from?" Aman cried as he ushered Will in.

"Koregaon Park." Will pronounced Kore- as kaure as he hung the raincoat on the clothes hook.

"Straight from work?! Why didn't you stop at your flat and change, you'll get a fucking cold William." Aman scolded as he gave him a towel.

Will had a rueful smile on his face “It used to sound sexy when you call me William. Now it just sounds like you’re my mother.”

Aman stopped in his tracks and then kept walking “Why are you here?” He asked, his voice a lot harsh than he intended it to be.

Will ran his hands through his hair. “I read the last five letters.”

“Okay...” Aman said.

“Raffles died. He vanquished the evil magician but he sacrificed his life doing so.” “The letter he left behind to Louis is in the book.” “In it, he mentions how thankful he was for Louis in his life and how sorry he is for causing him pain. He ends it by saying that there was no other way for him to do so. *Believe me to be, your dear fellow, Raffles Tyneside.*” Will read from the book.

“*Your dear fellow. Raffles loved him too.*” Will said looking straight into his eyes.

“Okay,” Aman said uncertainly.

“The letter’s marked October 1910. The letters were sent to the editor November 1912.”

“Louis waited for him. For two years, he waited for a miracle. For his Raffles to come back. Then November 1912, two months after the death of his wife, he sent him the letters with one more in a secret bottom drawer. The editor would not have found until it was too late.” Will handed Aman the separate letter.

My dear Raffles,

In my days on the battlefield, there were many occasions, I lost my faith in an afterlife. A heaven where the gone could rest with the ones they loved. Where there was only peace and an eternity together with the love of your life.

You may be disappointed to know that in your presence I believed again in a philosophical concept you abhor.

I beg your indulgence one last time in my sentimental folly as I tell you that every day with you was a heaven of our making.

You didn’t come back. I waited. I waited in this miserable realm, mourning you and your absence at the neglect of everything else.

Sabrina has also left me. After years of loving a man who loved another, she met someone who would love her how she deserved. I don't blame her. How could I?

Once you had left, I truly had nothing left. Not really. Except, this one friend. One I had almost forgotten in your dazzling presence, but a constant dull reminder of his presence in my drawer now haunts my dreams.

Today, that friend will do me the last favour I will ask of him.

Deliver me in your arms, my beloved friend.

I can't wait to see you again.

Your Lily,

Louis Karswell

November 1912

"Louis Karswell's obituary was in the newspaper next week," Will said thickly.

Aman closed the book, his heart broken "He couldn't wait anymore."

Will huffed a bitter laugh. "That's not the worst part. The ad for the flatmate. That appeared ten days after Karswell's funeral."

Aman's head snapped up "What?"

"That was Raffles' way of letting Louis know, I guess. It's dumb but how do you go up to your best friend and say, 'Hey I faked my death? I'm alive! Sorry for the trouble!?' "

"God." Aman sat down heavily. "Do we know how and if he found out?"

"Yeah. Raffles was found three days after that ad near Louis Karswell's headstone. He had frozen to death. The landlady at their old flat told him when his ad went unanswered and he visited their flat." Will said as he stepped near Aman.

"You remember that line from that SRK movie you made me watch? Kaal-Ho something?" Will asked.

"Kal Ho Naa Ho."

"The first step and last step of love is friendship. All that is needed is for two to meet in the middle. Raffles and Louis forgot that and they lost each other. I'm not making that mistake." Will stepped closer to Aman.

Aman couldn't breathe as Will looked at him in a way he had seen so many times but hadn't figured out why. "Will-

"Aman Sharma, for six years, you have been my best friend, my worst enemy. We were partners in work and in crime. For six years, you have been everything for me, my conductor of lightning. My friend." Will cupped Aman's face as Aman looked more confused.

Will made a frustrated noise, "I love you, you moron. I always have". He leaned over and placed a soft kiss on Aman's lips. Aman noticeably froze for a split second until Will moved his lips. Aman held Will's strong shoulders as he kissed him back more forcefully, his mind afire.

Will broke away first. Aman was gasping but his smile was so bright it could block out the sun "It took the literal death of someone in the 1900's for you to finally tell me". He feebly joked.

"I think you're procrastinating," Will said as he stroked his cheek.

"Of course I love you, my dear William."

"Capital, Sharma!"

