

RAHUL SINGAL [b. 1997]

## The Camera on Erie



*Sandeep Singal, like the camera owner of this novel, lost his camera one day at the end of his trip in a NYC taxicab. A knack for absentmindedness due to his nature as an artistic soul with said idiosyncrasies. Somehow having the best luck in the world as all the good karma he once put out was natural to come back to him with the return of his camera by a willing lawyer. The protagonist in this novel portraying the role of a passenger who comes across a large camera in a taxicab and works to return the camera to the owner. Her act of kindness results in a chance encounter with the owner's son and portrays the serendipitous nature of life when we least expect it. Set in Chicago due to the authors familiarity, this is a fictional take on a story that could have been.*

## **The Camera**

It was a cool, clear, and breezy Monday morning just before sunrise, the week after thanksgiving. Unable to go home and spend time with family, due to her mother working at the hospital and father across the world at an ever-important business conference. Shreya spent it here, in her new home of Chicago. Just coming out of her workout class on Erie, the same street as her apartment, but like most Chicago streets, the blocks extending miles wide across the city, she ponders the 30-minute walk to her apartment.

Relenting to utter exhaustion of an hour of endless burpees and dumbbell squats with a screaming instructor blasting early 2000s throwback hip hop, hails a passing taxi, colloquially called curbs. She lunges into the taxi saying, “Erie and Lake Shore Drive,” to the driver. Beat. Leaning back on the scuffed and worn seats, she closes her eyes. Finally, a moment to rest.

Promptly interrupted by the screen in front of her exclaiming, *Curb app multiple ways to pay. Instant cab service... pair and pay.* Grabbing her phone and entering the pairing code into the app, she catches a quick glance of the driver. A middle-age man with short dark black hair and quintessential to the numerous drivers she’s had in the past; presumably one of the many immigrants who drives a taxi in this city.

Based on his name displayed on the taxi permit below the screen, Shreya guesses that he is Ethiopian. As she’s seen the name only once before and it was her best friend’s brother. Her friend once remarked on common names in her culture. Thinking to herself for a moment that even she is able to associate people within her own culture to their regional identify based on their names. Her conjecture is validated as she recognizes an Amharic phrase. Headphones dangling from his ears as he exclaims fervently into the phone, supposedly to one of his buddies.

Finally having a moment to breath and mentally prepare for the long work week ahead. The driver heads down Erie towards her apartment, crossing State Street. Her relative moment of silence is quickly interrupted as the driver slams on the breaks, honks, and shouts out the window at another car for cutting them off. *Just another taxi ride in the city*, she thinks to

herself. As they continued down W Erie towards the lake, she glances around the taxi, while sinking deeper into the worn leather seats. Loose pieces of paper everywhere. The middle compartment by the driver and the front seat completely hidden by empty water bottles, food scraps, and clothing.

But something unusual, out of the corner of her eye, catches her attention. A sharp glistening light coming from the floor in the seat next to her. Suddenly her heart skipping a beat, as she recognizes it as a camera. But not just any small camera, a big one. A massive piece of machinery. Wondering for a moment whether this is just another one of the taxi man's belongings, quickly thinking to herself, *someone must have left it in this cab*. Conjecturing that the camera must cost thousands of dollars based on the size and massive lens. Seeming to drag her down to pick it up, her pure curiosity was likely fueled by the intrigue of the secrets the camera holds. Placing the camera in her hands, heavy, bulky, and jagged edges almost like a loose rock from the cliff of a mountain, convinced the camera has been lost. With the camera in hand, she glances up at the taxi driver whose eyes seem to catch hers momentarily in the windshield mirror, *did he see the camera? Is he going to ask for it and question me?* Shreya thought.

Nothing more than a natural sizing up of a passenger, as they cross Michigan Avenue, just blocks from her apartment. Wondering whether to let the driver know that she's found this camera in his taxi. But then questions flowing quickly in and out of her mind, *how would the taxi driver return the camera to the owner? Would he even be inclined to do so?* The value of this camera much more than a day's work for the driver. Even if he is kind hearted, how would he return it? How would it be returned in fact. More of a philosophical statement than a question. The world of possibilities seemingly endless. Memories lost forever and stored in that camera could be a novel. Thinking back to the time she lost her headphones and was not able to get them back even though it was in a ridesharing app which had a feature to contact the driver, diminishes her confidence the taxi driver would return the camera. Curbs were not known for great customer service. The owner of camera was probably devastated with the loss of their possession in a taxi, which distraught Shreya.

Pulling up to her apartment she confirms the paired payment went through and slips out of the taxi covering the camera with her jacket. As she walks into her apartment complex, she is kindly greeted by the door woman, “Good morning, Shreya!”

“Good morning, Jude,” Shreya replies, eager to get up to her apartment.

## **Secrets of the Camera**

Hopping out the shower, Shreya starts the process to get ready for her day. The camera placed on her kitchen counter, keeps her attention drawn away from her usual routine. After drying her hair and rushing around the room to get her clothes on for the day, she goes back to the kitchen to set her Nespresso machine on to brew her first of many coffees for the day. Instantly noticing the vast space the camera takes up on her kitchen counter.

It is at this time she normally leans back as her coffee percolates up into her favorite mug where she can enjoy the breathtaking view of Lake Michigan. Her apartment nestled right alongside Lake Shore Drive 9 floors up – not high enough though to minimize the sound of the cars buzzing by on the highway below. But today her attention is captured by the camera on her counter. It’s just past dawn as the sun rises up over the horizon overlooking East on Lake Michigan. A soft orange speck, cutting through the crisp winter air like a razor.

She takes the first sip of her coffee and pinches herself, not quite believing the amazing view she has every morning. The photos she’s shared to her social media never truly capable of capturing this daily transient moment. Shreya notices the lens of the camera is pointed directly out her window, betting that a camera this powerful could finally capture this moment in all of its beauty.

The camera is massive as she holds it in the base of her palms, wrapping the neck strap on for safety, which puts the entire weight of the camera onto her neck. She can feel the weight of the camera all the way down to her toes. She compares the sensation of the camera around her

neck to the medal they place on you when you finish the Chicago Marathon.

Looking down at the camera's screen, she sees a label that says, *Sony Alpha 7R III*, along with many symbols she doesn't recognize. There's a button that looks like it might turn the camera on, labeled, *AF-ON*, with a magnifying glass symbol next to it. Below that there are two circular dials with markings and symbols that she can't quite make sense of.

When she tilts the camera back up to look at the top, she sees more information about the camera. On the left, there's a label that says, *4K Steady Shot Inside*, which she assumes has something to do with video recording. On the right, there's a cylindrical dial with more letters and symbols that she can't quite decipher. There's also a small screen that shows some numbers and symbols that seem to be related to the camera's settings that are quite overwhelming and seem like a foreign language only familiar to a photographer.

She turns the top cylindrical dial carefully to the "On" position, and the camera springs to life with a satisfying beep. The screen lights up with a bright, high-resolution display, and she sees various icons and symbols that correspond to different settings and functions. The circular buttons she saw earlier are actually some sort of control dials, that for a photographer are for adjusting the shutter speed and aperture of the lens. But all this foreign to her.

Looking through the first few photos, she figures out that turning one of the dials goes forward and back through the photos. The sharpness and crispness of the pictures on the 3-inch LCD display make the photos look larger than life. Immediately recognizing that this camera almost certainly belongs to a tourist based on pictures of iconic Chicago landmarks.

The most striking picture is one of a family sitting around a dinner table at a restaurant which makes the realness of the memories this camera holds important to them and pivotal for her to find the owner. The family, almost certainly Indian with a young handsome man with a clean-cut beard and a soft smile that stands out on the high-resolution display. Next to him is presumably his mother and younger sister, which makes her believe

that the photographer must be the father as he is missing in this view and on the rest of the camera roll.

Coming back to the question she pondered in the taxi; *how could I possibly return the camera to this family?* There are no nametags or phone-numbers marked on the camera that would make it easier. Maybe he knows he left it in the taxi and is trying to get in touch with the driver. Now suddenly flashing to an image of the photographer contacting the driver somehow and the driver not able to find the camera because she took it. A heavy feeling of guilt suddenly rushing through her body that feels like a bolt of electricity. Maybe she ruined the chance for the owner to get the camera back by not informing the driver and letting him handle it.

But suddenly, a thought occurs to her as she considers whether the owner called the places he had been to report the lost camera. So, she can try to retrace the possible places based on scrolling through the photos. And that's what she does as she notes many landmarks and locations such as the Chicago Bean, Chicago Theater, Starbucks Reserve Roastery building on Michigan Avenue, skyline photos of the city that seemed to be taken from a very high rooftop bar – possibly the bar on the 96<sup>th</sup> floor of the John Hancock building, and a boutique museum called the Driehaus which she remembers walking past after her workout class on Erie countless times. Also recognizes that some of the pictures could be taken from the Art Institute along with countless unique architectural shots from around the city. The quality and array of photographs on the camera is truly mesmerizing.

## **The Owner**

Making a list of places to call based on locations on the camera, she waits until her morning work has finished to start making calls. As the line for the Driehaus Museum is ringing, she ponders how to ask them about the camera.

“Hello, Driehaus Museum, how may I help you?” From the other end of the line.

“Hello, I am calling to see if anyone has lost a camera?” Shreya probed, as that’s the best she could think of.

“Excuse me, lost a camera?” The attendant responded confused.

“Uh, yes... I found a lost camera recently and saw that there was a picture outside your museum, so thought the owner may have called you asking about it.” Shreya said, clarifying.

“Oh, we haven’t heard anything about a reported lost camera. We usually find lost keys, backpacks, water bottles, but never have I had someone report a lost camera. Why didn’t you return it to us if you found it in the museum?” The attendant asked.

“I actually didn’t find it in the museum, I found it in a taxi this morning and noticed that one of the photos was taken outside your museum, so I thought to call because it’s possible the owner visited you and put in an inquiry.” Shreya responded.

“Oh, well I haven’t heard anything about that, but we can take a look and get back to you?” The attendant suggested kindly.

“Sure thanks.” Shreya says as she gives a call back number.

“But was there an Indian family that visited the museum recently that you remember?” Shreya asked, trying not to lose hope.

“Honey, we have a lot of people come through here during the thanksgiving weekend, and I cannot tell you for certain. If someone calls and asks about a missing camera, I have put a note down here for us to give you a call, but it’s not looking promising.” The attendant stated coldly.

“Okay, thanks a lot for your help,” Shreya responded, as she hung up.

She does the same with the Starbucks Reserve Roastery and John Hancock Bar and gets similar confused responses with no leads. As the list of places shortens and no promising hope arises from any of the other locations, Shreya feels dejected as she moves on to the next place on her list to call: The Art Institute.

“Hello, this is Devin from the Art Institute of Chicago!” Answered from the line cheerily.

“Hello Devin! Umm... I am calling to see if anyone has reported a lost camera,” Shreya asked effortlessly, having done so already a few times.

“Yeah, I can check, what is this for?” The attendant Devin asked.

“I found a camera in the back seat of my taxicab earlier this morning and saw some of the most recent photos were taken inside and outside the Art Institute, so I have a feeling the owner may have reported a missing camera with you guys.” Shreya told him.

“Hmm, okay. That is interesting, can I put you on hold and check?” Devin responded.

“Sure. Also, there’s a timestamp on the photos so the family came in on Saturday, if that helps.” Shreya suggested.

“Sure, I’ll see if anyone reported a lost camera.” Devin responded, as Shreya was put on hold.

After a few minutes of waiting to the hold music that sounded like a knockoff 80s rock band, Devin came back to the line.

“Hello, are you still there?”

“Yes, I am.”

“So, it does look like we have a couple cameras here in the lost and found, but since you said you found it in a taxi and he probably called us to report it, I did a little digging with my colleague who was working over the weekend and she said that we did get a phone call from a gentleman named Sandeep Singal reporting a lost Sony camera.” Devin said.

“Yes! I think that’s the owner I am looking for! The camera I have is a Sony Alpha 7R.” Shreya responded absolutely beaming and feeling a rush of excitement.

“I think we found the one!” Devin the attendant exclaimed.

“Did he leave any contact information to call back?” Shreya asked.

“Yes, I should have his number right here,” Devin responded.

“Okay, so his name is Sandeep Singal like I mentioned before and he gave the following call back number.” Excitement ringing in her ears as she wrote down the number from the attendant.

“Thank you! So much – can’t believe I found the owner! I am going to call him right away!” Shreya remarked.



“Amazing, glad I could help! And bless you for being such a great human.” Devin said.

“Thank you!” Shreya said, as she hung up. Beaming with pride and accomplishment, wondering now the level of excitement that will fill the owner when she calls to return it.

Taking a second to digest and recite in her head the conversation with the owner, she takes a deep breath, readies herself, and dials Sandeep’s number.

“Hello, this is Sandeep.” As the line picked up.

“Hello Sandeep, my name is Shreya, and I think I have your camera,” Shreya responded.

“Oh my God! Really?” Excitement ringing out his voice, sensing a voice crack.

“Can I ask you a couple questions to confirm?” Shreya probed.

“Oh yes!!” Sandeep responded. “Absolutely! I lost it over the weekend visiting my son for thanksgiving.”

“What are some recent photos on the camera?” Shreya questions.

“Well, I took so many photos, I don’t even know where to start... I guess recounting from the last time I had it, we were leaving this Irish pub. That day we had a lot to drink and went to this amazing Japanese restaurant in a very artsy part of town where I remember taking pictures of my family with a street art mural, they were all excited about. We also had the most amazing Italian food and went for a night time river cruise the day before where I know I took some amazing shots.” Sandeep recounted.

“Okay,” Shreya said, interrupting Sandeep, “I definitely have your camera. I found it in a taxi this morning.”

“In the Taxic!! No way.” Sandeep shouted.

“How can I return it to you? Do you live in the city?” Shreya asked.

“Nope, I just got back home to Seattle on the saddest flight of my life because I thought my precious camera was lost forever.” Sandeep said dramatically.

“Well, is there an address you can give me and I can ship it over to you?”

“Shreya, right?”

“Yes.”

“My son Rahul lives in Chicago, why don’t you give it to him and he can bring it back to me on his next trip home during Christmas.”

“Yeah! I can definitely give it to him. Could you give me his number?”

“Yes, coordinate with him. I’ll call him and let him know.” “How did you track me down? You’re truly an angel” Sandeep asked, changing the subject.

“Well, I don’t know. I found it this morning in a messy cab after my workout class and didn’t think the cab driver would be inclined to return such an expensive camera. So, I looked through the photos and called places I recognized including the art institute.” Shreya responded.

“I’m speechless. I knew I didn’t leave it there, but my wife told me to call and report it anyways.” Sandeep responded. “What do you do for a living? Are you a detective?”

“I am a lawyer.” Shreya said, laughing to herself. “I guess in a way my work taught me how to handle a situation like this.”

After writing down the son’s number, Shreya gave assurance that she would return the camera to him. And hung up. Leaving her with an incredible feeling. Realizing just now that her afternoon has flown by and that she was late for a call with the managing partner of her firm. She’ll have to call the son soon thereafter.

## **The Connection**

Rahul rolled out of bed groggily. Allowing himself to sleep in to catch up on lost sleep from the holiday weekend rather than his normal routine of going to the gym. He just finished a long grueling week hosting his family for thanksgiving. An apartment that is listed as 1-bedroom, was extended to 4 to host his family for the weekend. Off for a week, but with his global team, the work did not stop for his colleagues from the rest of the world in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Ordinarily, most of his American colleagues would have a relaxing and slow start to the week after the thanksgiving holidays, but he was on a global team where the work carried

on. On top of that, add the fact that he hosted his family in his apartment for the majority of the week—he was spent. Family time together, like in most Indian families, always seemed to be full of activity and high on stress, or so he thought. This trip ending high on drama a few days back, with his father running around hyper as he lost his camera. Usually misplacing small things like keys, glasses, or chargers, but his massive Sony camera too big and important for him to routinely lose.

His phone suddenly ringing. Answering the phone, it was his father.

“Rahul, I found my camera!”

“How? You did not have it when you left for the airport?” Rahul asked perplexed.

“This girl found it in the taxi and called me this morning.”

“What taxi? Who? How?”

“This wonderful lawyer, her name is Shreya, and she called me this morning saying that she found it in a taxi cab. Was quite brilliant how she was able to get in contact with me. You have to meet her and pick it up for me and bring it back home when you come for Christmas.”

“Okay yes I’ll pick it up but how did she get in touch with you?” Rahul still perplexed.

“She somehow figured to call the art institute, I think through looking at photos on the camera and recognizing places to call and asking if someone had reported a lost camera. I called the art institute yesterday and left my contact information if they were able to find the camera there. So that’s how she got my number.”

“That’s amazing, so you left it in the taxi and the next passenger found it and figured out whose camera it was by looking at the pictures and calling the art institute? Daddy this definitely tops all of your stories. You’re the luckiest person alive.”

“Yes! It does! But I always find it.”

“Yes, this definitely tops the time you lost your glasses on the edge of a mountain in Hawaii and left your passport on an airplane in Dubai.”

“Yes, this trumps them all! I’ll text you her number and you can coordinate to pick it up from her, she lives very close to you, I think. Somewhere on Erie Street in downtown.”

“Yeah, that street is a few blocks down from my place,” Rahul said.

“Thanks beta. Okay I have to go, I’m just reaching the office, I’ll send her number. Have a good day, love you.” Sandeep says and hangs up. As if on cue a text from an unknown number:

*Hello, this is Shreya. I recently found a Sony camera this morning and traced it back to the owner who I believe is your dad? Reaching out to figure out when to return it to you. I spoke with Sandeep Singal this morning and he gave me your information.*

Exchanging pleasantries, they set a time and place to meet in the evening.

## **The Handoff**

She arrived at the Chicago Starbucks Reserve Roastery at dusk, just as the sun was beginning to set, and was immediately struck by the building's unique and eye-catching design from the outside. The four-story building, situated on the corner of Erie and Michigan Avenue, boasted a cylindrical shape outfitted with sleek see-through windows of each floor that appeared to offer a different scene, almost as if each level came together in harmony as one movie.

As Shreya entered, she was greeted by an employee who instructed her that the bar was on the fourth floor, all the way at the top. Taking the winding escalators up, Shreya realized that despite living only a few minutes away, she rarely comes here and has never been past the second floor. She last visited on a weekend, when the place was filled with tourists taking pictures and waiting in long lines for overpriced coffee. Knowing that she could get a cheaper and quicker coffee just up the block. Oof the main shopping streets of Michigan avenue.

But the feeling here on a weeknight was warm and inviting as her excitement kept brewing as she got on the escalator towards the top . Reaching the top floor and taking a brief moment to glance around for Rahul in a dark blue sweater, as he nicely texted earlier. Already knowing that he was a relatively young man who probably was similar in age to herself based on the photos of him on the camera. Seeing him sitting at

the end of the bar, with a wide smile and deep in conversation with the bartender. Shreya watched for a moment as Rahul was waving his hands empathically as if to make a point, and at the same time the bartender's smile turning to a loud laugh as he proceeded back to the register. It was at this moment Rahul's head turned to the escalators and saw her standing there. Her stomach dropping for an instant. Immediately, his head lowered and his body shifted slightly to the side. In almost the same instant, a wide smile emerged on his face as he recognized her.

"Shreya?" Rahul exclaimed, as he got up from the barstool with her approaching him.

"Yes!" Shreya responded as the smile came back onto his face. Closer now, able to see a wrinkle on top of his eyes as he smiled.

"Wow, you're incredible," Rahul said, as he came in for a hug.

"I mean for being able to find out how to return that camera to us," Rahul said pointing to the Sony camera in her hand.

"No, thank you, of course," Shreya responded, sensing that Rahul's emotions may have gotten the better of him. "Seeing this camera in the back of my taxi this morning; something in me had to make sure it got returned to the owner."

"You would not believe the happiness my father had when he called me this morning to say that you've found the camera. The stories and luck he's had is absolutely incredible. I could spend a whole evening recounting stories and it wouldn't even scratch the surface! But thank you so much again for meeting me here, I usually come here after work to grab a drink."

"Sure, it's funny I was just thinking as I walked in that I've never been here even though I live a few blocks up." Shreya said.

"That's such a shame! See as a Seattle native – the birthplace of Starbucks! It has a special place in my heart, and this is a great spot for me to come and do some personal work and people watch," Rahul said. "And the cocktails aren't too bad!"

"That drink you have does look really good," Shreya said about the dark brown cocktail in a martini glass topped with a perfect layer of white foam next to Rahul.

“Yes, it’s an espresso martini infused with olive oil!” Rahul responded. “Can I get you a drink? It’s the least I can do for you.”

“Yes absolutely!” Shreya responded as she starts to take off her jacket and Rahul pulling the barstool next to him back to get her in. “I am so interested to hear some of the other stories of your dad losing his camera.”

“Well, there’s so many to think about, I’m literally writing a novel that only includes stories that are quintessential to my father.” Rahul responded.

“That’s great, you guys seem pretty close.”

“Yeah, we’re a close family. But it does suck not being close in proximity to each other. My younger sister is also back home studying in college. And mom is working at a large tech company.”

“Yeah, I saw what I thought was your sister and mom in a picture on the camera,” Shreya said offhandedly.

“Ha, that’s funny! You’ve stalked me from my father’s camera rather than my social media,” Rahul joked, “You know about me and my family at a more personal level than most of my followers!” Rahul said mockingly.

With guilt settling in Shreya and Rahul sensing it, he quickly seemed to backtrack by saying, “But it’s all okay, because how the hell else would someone be able to figure out whose camera this belongs too? I am honestly so impressed and thankful for your ingenuity to find us. When my dad said this lawyer named Shreya found the camera, I honestly thought someone much older with a husband and kids would fit the mold.”

“And how do you know I don’t?” Shreya asked coyly.

“Well for starters I don’t see a ring on your hand, so I can rule out being married or engaged. But the rest is pure assumption. Something even if I am not a lawyer like you, think I’m fairly good at.”

“Haha fair. Well, your guess is right.”

“Anyways, I want an order of that olive oil espresso martini.” Shreya said, changing the subject.

As they settled in with the cocktails, Rahul began sharing stories of his time in Chicago and his father. Shreya became intrigued by the way

Rahul described his father, who had a knack for absentmindedness but was also an artistic soul with his passion for photography. Shreya found herself drawn to Rahul's admiration for his father and the way he talked about his family with such warmth and affection.

They started recounting stories of their time in Chicago and family. She found out that Rahul works at an office building very close to her and that they have similar interests. The conversation flowed so well that they were soon asked to leave the reserve roastery as it was closing time, but not wanting to end the night given the enjoyment of each other's company they stumbled into an Irish pub a few blocks down where the night continued until they were both spent and realized the time that's flown by. Calling a taxi, Rahul walks her out.

"This was great. Thank you so much again for finding my dad's camera and returning it to us." Rahul said.

"No worries. It was my pleasure." Shreya responded.

"I really hope this chance encounter and unforgettable night is not a one-time thing, we should meet again?"

"Yes, we definitely should. I also can't believe it is almost 1am." Seemingly with a brimming heart full of warmth and happiness, Rahul opens the door of the taxi that just arrived for Shreya, saying as she got in, "Have a good night and text me once you get home!"

"Thanks! Will do – goodnight!" Shreya responded, as she lunged into the back seat. Beat, but beaming with a sense of joy and happiness from an incredible day as the taxi took off down Erie Street towards Lake Shore Drive.

A true sense of serendipity flowing through her veins. In awe that her day started out with the same scene as it is ending tonight, with her getting into a taxicab on Erie on the way home. But the adventure of the day resulting in her chance encounter with Rahul through Sandeep's camera worth the exhaustion that was seeping through her body. Looking down at the back seat to find it empty as the taxi was spotlessly clean – a stark contrast to the morning. Closing her eyes briefly as they make their way home. Her eyes opening and making eye contact with the driver in the windshield mirror.

“Long night?” The driver asked.

“Yeah, long day.”

After a few moments of silence Shreya said, “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Has someone ever lost a camera in your taxi?”