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June 1982



One Midsummer's Day, when she was only three years old, the girl they called Azalea Ives was discovered alone and lost at a fairground in Devon. It was late in the evening, when children of her age should surely have been at home, tucked up in bed. She was held in the fairground manager's caravan for an hour, or even more, while appeals were made over loudspeakers. This was a travelling fair, and we can imagine what a faint impression the public address system might have made against the caterwauling of shrieking teens, the clattering of the roller coaster, the thundering of the waltzer, the hollering of hawkers and hucksters, and the pounding basslines of fairground music. By ten o'clock when the noise had subsided, and when most of the revellers had dispersed into the night, no one had come forward to claim the little girl. A police car arrived from the town of Torquay and two large policemen, unfamiliar with the ways of very young children, did their best to communicate with the child. They asked her her name, and when she told them, one policeman carefully wrote down 'Azalea Ives', and this is what they called her from that moment on. They asked her where she lived, and she told them that she lived at Number Four.

'What's the name of the road where you live?' asked one of the policemen.

'Number Four,' said the girl.

'No, not the number of the house,' said the policeman. 'Do you know the name of the road?'

'Number Four.'

'Do you know the name of the town?' asked the policeman.

Azalea shook her head.

The second policeman tried a different tack. 'Do you know your daddy's name?' he asked.

'Daddy,' said Azalea.

'But does he have a name?'

'Just Daddy,' repeated Azalea with a shrug.

'What does your mummy call him?'

Azalea thought about this. 'She calls him Daddy too.'

The police in Torquay searched through phone books and the electoral roll and the police records for anyone called Ives. Phone calls were made. No one seemed to know anything about the missing girl.

'Is your house close by ... or is it a long way away?' asked the policemen.

'A long way away,' Azalea told them.

'How did you come to the fair? Did you come by bus? On a train?'

Azalea looked at them directly with clear green eyes. 'Mummy drove us here,' she said.

'Where were you going?'

'We were going to see Daddy.'

'Does your daddy live near here?' the second policeman asked, scenting a promising line of enquiry. 'Does your daddy live in Totnes? Does he live in Torquay?'

Azalea shook her head.

'Can you remember what time you set off from home?' asked the first policeman.

Another shake of the head.

'Did you have lunch on the way?'

'Yes,' the girl's eyes widened. 'We had *ham* sandwiches,' she said.

If Azalea and her mother had started their journey before lunchtime, enjoyed ham sandwiches and *still* only arrived at the fairground in the evening, then the search area could easily include most of England and all of Wales.

Back at the police station, a child protection officer called

Sergeant Jennifer Nails was given the job of looking after Azalea. A police photographer was summoned from his bed to photograph the girl. Social Services were awoken and instructed to check their 'at risk' registers for any child matching Azalea Ives's description. Photographs of Azalea, looking sleepy, were printed, and posted by first-class mail to the Department of Education, from where they would be forwarded to the head teachers of primary schools to see if anyone could identify her.

Azalea did possess one distinguishing mark. This was an inch-long scar running down her face just to the side of her left eye.

'How did you get that scar?' Sergeant Nails asked her. But the little girl just shook her head.

A police doctor examined the scar, but declared it to be an old wound – possibly even a forceps mark from birth. No signs of abuse or neglect could be found. Azalea was well nourished, suitably dressed and clearly well cared for; her hair had been combed and her fingernails trimmed. It all added to the general sense of mystery that clung to her apparent abandonment. Who would do this to a child like Azalea?

By nine o'clock the next morning, when Sergeant Nails and Azalea Ives appeared at the Torquay police station, the phones were busy. The police had widened their net. Calls were made to police forces in Cornwall and Somerset. Police computers (such as they were back then) were queried. People named Ives were visited and questioned across the South and West of England and the Midlands, and Wales.

By midday, with no sign of progress, a Chief Inspector from Exeter arrived in Torquay to take over the investigation. Sergeant Nails reported that there was a faint hint of an Irish accent when Azalea spoke. The girl also had red hair, and to Sergeant Nails's mind this indicated Irish origin. So a speech therapist from the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital was called. She listened carefully to the tapes that the police had made and said that evidence of an Irish accent was thin, but that she wasn't strictly speaking an expert on accents, so she couldn't be sure. Recordings were then played over the telephone to a London expert in regional

accents. He told the police that the girl's speech exhibited a number of distinctive characteristics, which might suggest that she was from an itinerant family, or perhaps that her mother had a different accent to her father. The expert proposed that they might want to look around Liverpool and North Wales, but he wouldn't commit to either. 'The girl has a rather neutral accent,' he told the police inspector. 'She has a high rising terminal which is a feature of Australian speech, where the inflection tends to rise rather than fall at the end of a sentence. Some Americans also talk in this way. But we can't really conclude that the girl is Australian or American.'

By the second day after Midsummer's Day, the puzzle surrounding Azalea Ives had reached the newspapers. Her photograph featured, with police consent, in the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Mail*. Extra staff were drafted in to the police station in Torquay to handle the resulting telephone calls. Child protection officers were included to help detect malicious callers. For operational reasons, the newspapers had not been given the name 'Azalea'. Instead, they were asked to identify the child simply as 'Girl A'. The reasoning was, with a name as unusual as Azalea, if anyone was to call the Torquay police station and volunteer the correct name, they would surely be bona fide.

But by the end of the second day, not one caller had suggested the name Azalea – or even the name Ives. A child psychologist was charged with trying to gain further information from the girl. She spent the third day playing with Azalea and coaxing her to talk. She discovered that Azalea knew her letters but had made very little progress in reading or numbers. She knew she had a mummy and a daddy, but no nana, and no brothers or sisters or aunts or uncles. She said she had never been to school. She had been to Sunday School, but she couldn't remember where. She didn't remember ever having visited London, or Blackpool, or Brighton. She may have been to a zoo. If she had, then it may have been a zoo with elephants. This led to more calls. Maybe if they could identify the zoo, then they could narrow down the search area. The Zoological Society of London confirmed that

only a few zoos kept elephants, but these zoos were widely scattered around the country; they included Bristol, London, Chester, Whipsnade and Edinburgh, and you could, if you wanted, throw in Dublin as well, and safari parks such as Longleat. It was a rather unhelpful geography. The child psychologist showed Azalea some photographs of the different zoos, but her results were inconclusive.

The forensic people examined Azalea's clothes, but all were common department-store lines, with nothing to identify the particular shop where they had been purchased. Most of the items had been bought recently; they were, it appeared, all from the 1982 summer range of children's wear – but then children grow so fast, you would *expect* all her clothes to be new, unless perhaps they were hand-me-downs or items from charity shops. Which they weren't.

Several more ideas were explored to see if Azalea could help them to refine the search. They showed her station idents from different regional TV stations to see which ones she might recognise. She wasn't able to help. They showed her photographs of the sorts of places where children might be taken on outings. She recognised beaches and fairgrounds and parks, but only in a very general sense. Photographs of city centres or landmarks only resulted in a shake of her head.

'When did you last see your daddy?' the child psychologist asked.

Azalea looked at her, wide-eyed.

'Did you see your daddy this week?'

'No.'

'But you came here to see your daddy?'

'Yes.'

'Do you know where your daddy lives?'

Azalea thought about this. 'Daddy lives on a boat.'

'A boat? A boat or a house? Does your daddy live in a house?'

She thought again. 'Yes, a house,' she said.

'Is it maybe ... a houseboat?' asked the psychologist.

Azalea shook her head, but she looked uncertain.

'So it *is* a house. Yes? But maybe your daddy has a boat too? Does he have a boat?'

Azalea seemed puzzled. 'Yes,' she said at last.

'Do you know where the boat is? Do you know where your daddy keeps his boat?'

The child seemed to be thinking hard about this. 'Sheffield,' she said eventually.

The psychologist picked up the telephone.

Throughout the entire investigation, at the centre of a maelstrom of activity, Azalea remained remarkably untouched by the whole experience. The child psychologist, in her report, described Azalea as 'extraordinarily balanced', and 'apparently unconcerned by the absence of her parents, or any of the familiar features of her life'. She was a child, it seemed, of a cheerful disposition. She did not speak a great deal, except to respond to questions, but this she did with a politeness that would have done credit to a much older girl. Since her appearance at the fairground she had not once cried, nor had a tantrum, nor complained, nor asked for anything or anybody. She had absorbed herself in the toys she was given, the TV she was watching and the conversations that were intended to extract information. She seemed anxious to help, and disappointed, often, that the answers she gave were not more useful. In some cases, this desire to help made the adults more sceptical about her answers.

'Tell me about your house,' the psychologist asked her. 'Is it a big house?'

'Yes, a *big* house,' said Azalea, holding her hands wide apart.

'Or is it a small house? A teeny-weeny house?'

'Yes, it's a teeny-weeny-weeny house,' said Azalea, helpfully but unhelpfully.

'Do you go upstairs to bed?'

'Yes. Upstairs to bed.'

'And what can you see from your window?'

'Houses.'

'Do you live in a big town? Or a little town?'

‘A big town.’

‘Or a little town?’

‘A little town.’

‘How old are you, Azalea? Can you tell me how old you are?’

‘Three.’ Azalea held up three fingers.

‘Or are you four? You’re a bit of a big girl for three.’

‘Four.’

‘So you’re four? Are you?’

‘Yes. Four.’

The child psychologist and Sergeant Nails spent all day with Azalea. They played some games and they went out for a walk. At the end of the third day the girl was made a ward of court, and a temporary foster family was assigned. George and Eileen Robins from the Cornish village of Indian Queens came and collected Azalea, a lady from Social Services helped to complete all the forms and then a police car followed them home to check that everything was in order. Azalea joined George and Eileen’s three older foster children and one biological child in a noisy but happy-sounding household. The Robins were briefed carefully and told to report any information that might help to identify the girl.

A sample of Azalea’s hair and some fingernail clippings were sent off to a lab in London for isotopic analysis and geographic profiling. One of Azalea’s first molar teeth was loose, and with a little encouragement this was removed and also sent for testing. But this was 1982, and these were early days for this type of analysis. Today, experts could probably use such tests to pinpoint a child’s origin down to a county or even a village. In 1982 the results were inconclusive. The lab confirmed that Azalea may have spent the past few months of her life in northern Europe, most probably in northern Britain. But they couldn’t rule out southern Britain. She may have shared her time between two locations – perhaps spending some of her time with her father in Sheffield, and some of her time with her mother in who-knows-where. There were no traces of cocaine (or any other drugs) in the girl’s red hair, which suggested that Azalea’s mother was probably

not a dropout, nor an addict. The levels of fluoride in the tooth suggested that she came from an area where there was no natural fluoridation of the water supply, helpfully ruling out the West Midlands and the North-East of England and parts of Essex, but leaving open the possibility that the girl and her mother had lived almost anywhere else, that is, in practically ninety per cent of the United Kingdom.

By the end of the first full week after Azalea's midsummer appearance at the fairground, the Devon police were working on the theory that the girl had been abandoned deliberately. The assumption, based upon answers supplied by Azalea herself and on deductions made by experts and authorities, was that she came from a family that lived in the North-West of England – possibly in Lancashire or Merseyside. Her father may have walked out. Or else, perhaps, he worked away from home. Certainly he hadn't been seen by Azalea for a long time. He probably lived near Sheffield – but perhaps not in the city itself. His house was on a hill, close to a wood and next to a stream, if Azalea's account was to be believed. He sometimes lived on a boat. It was uncertain if Azalea and her mother lived with him. It seemed more probable that the couple had separated several months earlier, and that Azalea's mother had moved out and was renting a house somewhere – the 'Number Four' of Azalea's account. Azalea's mother, went the theory, had finally snapped. Unable to cope, she had bundled the girl into an old car that was light blue in colour and, telling Azalea that they were off to meet her father, she had driven as far away from home as she could before deciding that it was getting too dark to drive much further. She had spotted the bright lights of the fairground and had chosen this as the place to abandon her daughter. She had left Azalea sitting on a bench with some candyfloss, and then walked out of her life.

That, at least, was the proposition. There was no CCTV footage, and the only photograph recovered from the fairground that showed Azalea was a snapshot taken by a teenager from the top of the big wheel. There was an adult alongside the little girl, but she – or he – was in shadow, and the police could not be sure if

this mystery person was Azalea's missing mother or just an innocent stranger. No unclaimed blue car was found in the fairground car park, or in the streets nearby.

By the end of the second week, the police operation in Torquay was already being scaled down. It was July, and the holiday season was in full swing. This was the busiest time of the year for the police in this part of England. One officer was still assigned to the case, but she was overdue for maternity leave and when she called in to the Chief Inspector to say that her waters had broken, the case was not reassigned.

Four months later, Azalea Ives was placed into the care of a second foster family, this time in Exeter. Two more months passed, and approval was given for her adoption. She was adopted by a childless couple from the Cornish village of St Piran. The couple were Luke and Rebecca Folley. They were teachers. So Azalea Ives became Azalea Folley, and the events of 21 June 1982, when a small girl was discovered to be lost at a travelling fair, were gradually forgotten.

But there are postscripts to the story of the foundling girl, and these are significant too. In none of these cases did anyone appreciate at the time quite how relevant each of the events might be to the life of Azalea Ives. The first such event occurred in May 1983, almost a year after Azalea's appearance at the fairground. The body of a young woman, very badly decomposed, was discovered on a beach in North Devon, near Bude. She had been dead for about a year. She lay unidentified in a refrigerated store for eighteen months until instructions were issued for her burial. In 1986, a police constable in Cornwall, carrying out a cold-case review, was able to point to a number of similarities between this case and the case of 'Girl A'. In particular, he noted, both the dead woman and Girl A had red hair. He speculated that the body at Bude could have been related to Girl A. In particular, he thought, the dead woman might have been Azalea's mother. His report was seen by an Inspector in Exeter who considered the theory briefly and then dismissed it. The conclusions were too

circumstantial. The official explanation for Azalea's presence at the fairground was still deliberate abandonment, and the Inspector saw no reason to change this. There was no DNA testing, but crucially, the conclusions of the Cornish policeman were diligently recorded on the file.

The file on Azalea Ives was closed on 6 June 1986, and in 1992 all the documents associated with the case were sealed and sent to Exeter for long-term storage, where they still exist in a brown cardboard document box among several thousand others in a warehouse near the old docks. In all this time only one person consulted them – a private detective called Susan Calendar. We will come to her, in good time.

Neither Azalea nor the Foleys were ever officially told about the body discovered on the beach; not by the police, at least. There were insufficient grounds to warrant such an intrusion into their lives. And this could have been the end of the official story of Azalea Ives, and in many ways it was, except that the list of postscripts kept on growing. In 1990, eight years after the discovery of the girl, a fifty-year-old man called Carl Morse was arrested in Liskeard, accused of abducting a student nurse from a fairground and raping her. The girl survived the ordeal, escaped from a locked car by kicking her way through the rear windscreen and led the police to her attacker. At his trial, Morse confessed to an earlier abduction. According to Morse, he had been invited by a young woman into her car at a travelling fair in Totnes in 1982. He couldn't remember the exact date, but records confirmed a fairground had been there for the last two weeks in June. Morse denied having murdered the woman. Instead he made the unconvincing claim that the woman had thrown herself from the cliffs at Milllook, not very far from Bude.

A second event occurred in the spring of 1993. A decorator in Cumbria came across two suitcases on the top of an old oak wardrobe. It was this discovery that set in train a sequence of events that led to the mystery of Azalea's origin being solved. But that story is still to come.

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June 2012



The plain, painted sign on the office door reads ‘T. Post, PhD’, and beneath these words, in a smaller point size, ‘Lecturer: Applied Philosophy’. It is something of a forbidding legend, its minimalist presentation not especially welcoming to casual callers.

But just above this uninviting plaque, someone has helpfully pinned a more informal notice. This one is on a sheet of drawing paper, fastened with a pin at each corner in such a deliberate way that you sense the occupant of the office must have placed it there himself. It is a caricature drawing, in charcoal, of the kind that artists do for tourists in Leicester Square or Montmartre, and it portrays a lofty, angular man with a wildly exaggerated nose and chin, a quiff of disobedient hair and a disproportionate set of rabbit teeth. No one could consider this a *flattering* portrait. Although, on closer inspection, there is a kindness to the eyes, a becoming smile and a look of gentle amusement about the subject. The man in the drawing is leaning forward over a table, across which he has scattered half a dozen dice. Every die shows the number six. Now the twinkle in the subject’s eye has some meaning. He is, perhaps, a magician. Underneath the drawing, the artist has added a legend. ‘Thomas Post’, this caption reads, ‘the Coincidence Man’.

We’ve leaped forward three decades from the fairground in Totnes, and the case of the foundling girl. This part of the story takes place in London, in the glorious Olympic year of 2012. We are in the upper corridor of a nondescript building in the university quarter of north London, and we are following Thomas Post, PhD down the dimly lit passage and into his office. We can

see, at once, many of those features that the caricaturist chose to amplify. Thomas Post seems to roll along, a curious, angular fellow, a lummoX, tall, awkward, in an ill-fitting jacket and large round spectacles. His arms swing clumsily, as if they are somehow too long to control. He pushes the door shut and folds himself down into his office chair and, in that moment, but just for that moment, he is the man in the sketch; all he lacks are the dice, and the inscrutable smile.

The small office obeys the principles and traditions of academe in its furnishings and its general sense of disarray. Sunlight streams in from an attic window. There is a solitary desk, its territory occupied with books, papers and computer devices trailing tangled, disobedient wires. There are bookshelves, themselves overladen, and an armchair and a whiteboard that carries faint fossil traces of charts and tables that have never been fully rubbed away. There is a small worktop, designed, or so it would appear, exclusively for the making of tea.

This is the workspace of Thomas Post, PhD. There are few personal touches, apart from his array of mugs and the books. A poster of a steam train, dog-eared and faded, looks as if it may have belonged to a generation of occupants of this room. A postcard of the seaside is pinned up beside his desk. Otherwise, the walls are populated by charts and more books. A photograph in a frame on the desk appears to be the only private image. It's a snapshot of a woman on a hillside with the coiling blue of a lake far below. It could be Scotland, perhaps, or Wales. The woman is laughing. She has been caught by the camera unawares, and her hands have flown up to rescue her hair – hair the colour of an autumn maple.

Thomas lets his upper body cantilever forward like a tree being felled in slow motion until he is face down on his desk, his hands locked behind his head. There is something desolate about his manner.

He stays like this for some time.

'Everything that happens,' says a very soft voice, 'happens for a reason.'

Thomas doesn't stir. Perhaps he didn't hear the voice. Maybe it was too quiet for him to hear.

'Everything that happens ...' whispers the voice again.

Thomas levers himself up. He mouths the response through thick lips: '... happens for a reason.' He is distracted. He taps his fingertips on his desk.

Now that we look closely, there is no one else around. Did he imagine the voice?

There are footsteps coming down the corridor. He waits for them to pass.

'Everything that happens ...'

It isn't a voice at all. It is nothing but the echo of a voice. The remembered echo of a voice. He isn't even hearing it. He is fabricating it, creating it from phantoms and figments of his mind.

His eyes flicker to a calendar propped up on his desk. 'Six days,' he whispers. 'Six days.'

Then, without so much as a knock, his door bursts open. He has a visitor.

'Clementine?' Thomas springs upright and starts to lift himself from his chair.

'Thomas, dear boy. Don't get up.' The visitor is a woman, comfortably twice his age. She wields a walking stick, and seems out of breath. She sinks heavily into the armchair without inviting a handshake. 'On second thoughts,' she says, 'you can make me a tea.'

'Of course,' Thomas says. He looks taken aback.

The woman casts her eye around the small office. 'So this is where you've been hiding away,' she says. 'On the fifth floor, where no one will ever find you.' She speaks with a faint accent. There is something Germanic or Eastern European about her voice, a huskiness, a hint of Lili Marlene.

'*You* found me,' Thomas says. He has made his way over to the worktop and is pouring water from a jug into a kettle.

'Only after an ascent worthy of a Sherpa,' says the visitor. She is looking this way and that, as if sizing up the room for sale. In response, Thomas Post starts to scoop up books and papers from

the desk and floor. It is a transparent but hopeless attempt to tidy the avalanche of clutter.

‘My dear boy, do leave all that alone,’ Clementine says. ‘If you shovel that stuff back onto the shelves you’ll never find it again.’

Thomas stops, looking sheepish. ‘You’re probably right.’

‘I’m always right.’

‘It’s just ... I don’t get many visitors.’

‘Five floors up, I’m not surprised.’

Thomas busies himself with mugs, waits awkwardly for the kettle to boil.

‘This is your opportunity,’ says Clementine, ‘to ask me why I’m here.’

‘Ah yes,’ Thomas says, and he bobs his head like a nodding dog. ‘So, Dr Bielszowska ... to what do I owe the pleasure?’

What an odd couple they are. Thomas Post, thirty-something, gauche and gangling; Clementine Bielszowska, surely past the honourable age for retirement, looking more like a grandmother than an academic: small and stout and sporting a shawl that can only have been hand-knitted.

The kettle boils and Thomas makes tea. He balances Clementine’s mug on the arm of her chair.

‘So?’ Thomas says. He is back in his seat and waiting for a reply.

‘I thought,’ Clementine Bielszowska says, ‘that we were friends.’ She says this accusingly.

He gives a nervous shrug. ‘We *are* friends.’

‘So ... when did you last come to visit me?’

He starts to laugh, but stops in the face of her uncompromising gaze. ‘I’ve been busy.’ As he speaks, he knows these words won’t suffice. Not for this visitor.

‘Too busy to visit a friend ... for four months?’

It is a remark that can only be greeted by silence.

‘Is it that girl?’ she asks.

‘Which girl?’

‘The one you introduced me to. Or a bereavement? I only ask because every time I see you you look as if all the life has been

punched out of you.’ Clementine punctuates this observation with a loud tap of her stick on the wooden floor.

Thomas looks into his tea as if searching for inspiration. ‘Am I that transparent?’

She looks at him unmoved.

He exhales very slowly and turns his face away. ‘Clementine,’ he says, ‘sometimes I think you’re the only person left who truly understands me.’

‘Think of it as my job.’

He rises from his seat and makes his way over to the little attic window. It’s a sunny day, and the rooftops of London roll away into a distant haze. But the weather clearly doesn’t match his disposition. ‘It *is* that girl,’ he says. Then very slowly he adds, ‘and a bereavement ... of sorts.’

‘The girl is dead?’

He lets out a sigh. ‘No. She isn’t dead. I don’t think so. Not yet.’

‘Not *yet*? Is she terminally ill?’

Thomas is wringing his hands now. He turns back to face her. ‘Do you have time,’ he asks, ‘for a long story?’

She takes hold of her tea mug and sinks down into her chair. ‘Of course.’ She purses her lips. ‘I have as much time as you need.’

Thomas looks back at the window. There are so many thoughts. So much to say. A maelstrom of words awaiting an audience. ‘It’s complicated,’ he begins.

‘I like complicated.’ She is patient, settling down to listen.

‘You know I’ve been studying coincidences?’

‘Every time we meet, you regale me with a dozen.’

He smiles at this. ‘People think it’s a whimsical thing. They love to come to me with a coincidence, and they challenge me to explain it. But it’s never especially difficult. I can usually do some simple maths for them. Some events are unlikely, to be sure, but that doesn’t make them miraculous. You understand?’

‘I do.’

‘One day, a woman came to see me, and she sat in that very

chair you're sitting in now. Azalea Lewis was her name.'

'Was she the redhead you introduced to me?'

Thomas nods forlornly. There is a silence between them for a while. 'Azalea's coincidences were off the scale,' he says quietly. 'They could not be explained. Not by mathematics, at least. In fact ...' he lifts his face and the sun catches his countenance with its glare, '... they might even be proof that our universe is not the place we thought it was.'

Clementine Bielszowska sips her tea slowly. 'This sounds profound.'

'I think it possibly is.'

'Azalea Lewis ... Azalea Lewis,' she tries the name. 'She had a little scar if I remember, right here.' She lifts a finger to her eye.

There is the soft trace of a tear in Thomas's eye. 'I can tell you how she came by it,' he says.