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Golok Bagchi's Silver Coins

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1

Sleepless Night

His wife was sleeping mouth gaped, eyes fast closed, absolutely undisturbed, as though she was all blessed with a night's deafness against the obstinate growling of the occasional thunder-strike and the constant drumming of rains over the adjacent tin-roof of the cow-shed. The weather report proved to be genuine. After a fortnight's hot and humid spell a brief July shower lulled all and sundry to a slumber.

But, the same was not for Golok Bagchi a bald headed, bulbous nosed, thick-set man in his late forties. He was sleepless: hot-eyed, tensed and perspiring. He turned to his wife Laxmi. The crackling thunderclaps were easily submerging the sound his wife was belching through her nostrils. Golok wiped away the thick beads of perspiration with his hand and then tapped with his finger tip gently on the mobile screen lit up and showed 2:30. He propped up and felt restless. Again

his forehead got moistened. Now, he got off his bed and shuffled across the spacious dining room with a surprising attack to his luke-warm toes by making them walk across the marbled floor that got cold due to the night's rain. He screeched open a door and found his only son Dhruba comfortably snuggled head to foot under a bed-spread. He smiled but with the closing of the door it absorbed like a piece of camphor.

The threat-calls were terrible.

They made him discreetly sleepless...restless for days. He returned to the bed, halted a little and bent over to inspect whether Laxmi was in fast asleep to his comfort she was snoring still. Now, with an opportune moment in hand he clanked open the almirah. With the help of his mobile phone's flash light he put the key into the locker-key hole and, there, before his eyes was a small aluminium box. From amidst the other bric-a-bracs he scooped out two old silver coins. Now, the objects could best be certified by Golok Babu was only in two phrases souvenirs from his great grandmother Sashibala' and 'the root of all problems'.

He cursed the day when he had clicked the photos of the two coins with perfect zoom in 48 megapixels and posted them on fb. What he wanted was many and many LIKES and COMMENTS in praise of his rare collection. He knew that Murali Babu, his boss was an amateur numismatist for he would often brag of his collection of rare, old coins. Golok Babu did never wish to be a numismatic like Murali Babu. In fact, those two old silver coins were more assets than a source of numismatics for him a pride for his family for more than six generations. Those were believed to be lucky charm for his

family. Many years ago, when Golok was in his twenties his parents going with the tradition of his family had placed those two silver assets on his forehead and, he, in return had bowed with great reverence in his customary pranam before his job interview. He succeeded in securing the post of the Junior Accountant in a renowned cement factory followed by acquiring of his own two-storied building, a Maruti Dzire, washing machine, thirty two inch LED television to be installed in a 12 × 15 feet well-furnished sitting room and above all a neat and well-secured bank-balance. His son Dhruba followed the same custom, successfully cracked his B.B.A second semester.

The family prospered and their faith deepened.

The silver linings of the two old coins under the phone-flash were sparkling in the dead darkness of the night. Though the Urdu inscriptions on the coins were never legible to him, they were no less than the holy mantras or scriptures. In fact, none of their family bothered to decipher those inscribed Urdu letters. Even in an orthodox Bengali brahmin family who still devoutly customed rituals like *achman* (sprinkling water around the plate as an act of purification before starting any daily meal in the Hindu religion), chanting the *Gayatri Mantra* (a universal prayer enshrined in the Vedas) after the day's bath, those two Urdu inscribed silver coins were taken for granted as deities rather than relics. For the Bagchi family those objects were the magic-amulets of The Arabian Nights.

What they all knew, was, that the two coins belonged to the mid-eighteenth century issued during the reign of Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula of Bengal. Not a month ago, how Golok Bagchi

pouted his lower lips and shrugged his shoulders when Biswanath Mondal, his neighbour happened to tell him that he had a great, rare asset of an old German mirror belonging to the time of the Second World War. The later was literally outdone for his collection was not as worthy as the former. Not long ago, just on that day, too, his wife's acerbic humour pinched her neighbours Mridula and Bobita, whose possession of charming look and graceful figure that drugged both the young and old of the colony, failed to prove as loud as her prized two old silver coins in the gathering near the roadside kiosk selling *puchka* (rice cups stuffed with spicy, smashed potato and tangy tamarind water).

Golok Babu cautiously slid the box into the dark cell of the locker. Huffed hot eyed. Mind, impregnated with the question: 'Who could have done this?'

2

Recap

Afternoon recess time saw Golok Bagchi flip open the steel lunch-box lids one after another as soon as the big, round clock's two tiresome hands would trudged their way to twelve thirty. On that very day hardly had he bitten off a morsel of paratha(a flat bread) when his phone rang out.

He pressed the green button and from the other end a voice in the broken Bengali accent of a Hindi speaking person slid through his earhole, 'Are you Mr.Golok Bagchi speaking?' The relaxing, soft tone was welcomed.

'Yes.'

'Sir, you've two old rare coins of the eighteenth century. Am I right? '

Now, the listener scowled. The tone looked cunning.

'Yes...but...'

'How much do you want?'

Now, the tone looked poisonous.

'But I don't want to sell them off.'

'You may have got many LIKES on your fb but you'll get a great one, if you sell them off to me,' the stranger's voice continued acidly, 'you couldn't make out...I'll give you three lakhs for each coin. Not a bad bargain I hope.'

'Who're you speaking?' asked Golok Bagchi boldly quite forgetting his lunch.

'Let it off. What's there in the name? Let's make a deal. '

'But I'll never sell them off. Those are in my family for generations.'

'Now, let those be in my family,' cunning smile was heard from the other end. 'I'm giving you a week's time. Take a decision...but, remember, it must be in my favour. After all, you're a meek gentleman not to get involved in any trouble, I hope. Live happily with your family. Good bye.'

A tormented week elapsed.

Golok Bagchi was driving his way to office when his phone placed on the car dashboard rang up. His heart throbbed in suspense. He screeched his car to a halt in the mid-way. He received the call that lasted for not more than four to five

minutes. But, from just a hum and haw in the beginning to the sharp pitch that crashed through his wind pipe till the end, he was finished with, 'I must get what I want. I feel sorry for you to have lost a good bargain. Now, see what I can do.'

He drove off perspired.

3

Suspicion

In the office, all the faces were suspicious to him. He goggled at every one but unfortunately without any clue. When the entire office building was submerged with the sound of clacking keyboards, rustling ledger-books and the intruding factory-sounds gruntings and bellowings of machines, Golok Bagchi, thoughtful and unaware of his surrounding was staring at the faint blue light flashing from the mouse of his computer. He lifted his head to stare at the blurred figure of a man sitting within a cubicle partitioned off with glass-panels some yards away. He was Gagan Tiwari, the Production Manager of the factory. Suddenly it occurred to Golok that the man had once told him how he had come by a newly issued coin with an inscription of the logo of the Common Wealth Games 2010. He had even showed it to him and furnished that he was a lucky one to have got it for the coin was not issued in a large scale.

'Can he do it?' he muttered, scowled and blinked. 'His Hindi mixed Bengali accent...being a rare-coin-woner...can be a prima facie.' But, the next moment he thought, 'may be it's he or may not be.'

He fished out his phone from the drawer and clicked away to get the number from which he received the threat calls. He dialled it forthwith to see whether the phone of his suspected one rang up or not. But...it did not. It's switched off to his disappointment.

Then his thought veered off to Murali Mitra, his boss. Golok still remembered the party thrown by his boss two years ago on the day of his promotion. To all and sundry present in the party he had displayed his skill as a numismatist. Everyone present there raised their brows in praise. Now, the faint suspicion germinated within him whether his boss was involved into this whole dirty affair, as his family's possession of two old, eighteenth century-silver coins was known to him.

'He might have engaged a man to threaten me to acquire the coins,' Golok Bachi was brooding over. 'Who knows, if he's running a racket of old coin-smuggling pretending to be a numismatist. After all, such old coins are great antique pieces, sold in high price...the older they're, the greater is the value old is gold.'

Again, a sleepless night. Now, the incident with Biswanath Modal flashed before him.

'His old German mirror was not as worthless as he had proved on that day for the Second World War took place long ago...and his coins belonged to long, long ago. What bad is there getting a less LONG? Even the chappals of Gandhi Ji, Neta Ji's glasses and handkerchief and Maradona's jersey have guts to get millions and millions of rupees if they're auctioned off. Those will not be as old as even a century' he thought all of these and made his night more sleepless.

'Does that Biswanath have any hand in it to fulfil his revenge?...but as a book-stall owner is it possible for him to commit such a daring act, even after knowing that it's a serious crime?' such fleeting questions were clouding through every membranes of his hot and restless brain. Then, he retaliated, 'Why not...after all who reads book these days in this age of smart-phones? They've a hypnotising appeal rather than books-----boring, dull and time-wasting to this generation. There's a time when *Books Corner* boasted to be the city's top-most and renowned book store. Still the framed autographs of the famous author Chakradhar Barua and the veteran Bengali film star Gautam Kumar are the witness of book-shop being renowned in the yesteryears' days. How the book-worms of all ages would converge to bag their favourite books and fill up every inch of the book-shop was really amazing. His neighbour prospered by dint of earning leaps and bounds now a mere myth; business slackened; aristocracy faded away and, now, only plodding through hardships. They need money. He may be involved into it.'

He was winking still. The night looked longer.

Then, he thought of his son Dhruba. He often took his friends home and each time those coins would be taken out of the locker and displayed to their utter astonishment. Golok remembered that one of Dhruba's friends had told him that a relative of his worked in the office of the city's archaeological department and he only knew the value of such old coins of the time of kings.

'Is...?' his wandering brain could not halt to slumber.

Laxmi was snoring unlike, and, now he turned to her, gazed at her swelling and contracting nostrils 'How can you sleep so cosily putting me in a fresh trouble?' he thought to ask her when such a suspicion infiltrated into him that his wife might be indirectly responsible for the mental trauma he was going through. How his wife used to flaunt those antiques before the other ladies of his society, who came to his house was not unknown to him. On those days Golok invented a theory that women are not only passionate about jewellery but also about antiques, especially, made of metal and if the metals happen to be of gold or silver, their greed is boundless.

Their maid-servant Malati, too, was within his radar of distrust. She had been working there for more than five years. She would never leave an opportunity to peck her goggling eyes at those silver coins whenever she chanced upon to have a glance at those and once she sought to touch those but was denied outright. She might be nourishing a long-lasting greed for those precious, old articles.

He lit a cigarette, puffed out rings of smoke and thought to sleep.

4

Disappearance

A week glided away. No more threat calls.

The grid-lined tabulation sheets occupying across the computer screen were flashing before him and a tiny finger-cursor was blinking in vain to make him tap a double-click on the mouse. His mind was troubled and fleeting. Golok Bagchi's index finger tip was gently rubbing across his bulbous nose.

He often did this when troubling thoughts occupied him. He felt something sinister creeping up. A man continuously harassed with threat calls for the last few days suddenly relieved of them without any foul retribution from the side of the culprit now started prodding him.

Still, he did not tell his wife anything of the affair. He dared not, actually. He knew the habit of his wife very well. Her raucous approach into this matter would certainly publicize the whole affair in the society. It would no more be a secret. Their life would be more threatened. Suddenly, the locker of his almira at home was dawned on him to be quite insecure. So, he determined to take those precious, silver coins to the bank and secure those into his personal bank-locker. At least, this would relieve him of the fear of those articles being stolen.

The next morning Golok was getting ready for his office. He thought to do his bank work on his way back to home, as would leave early from his office that day.

He clanked open the locker, slid out the aluminium box to take out the silver coins. But, what was awaiting him was...~~was~~ horrible...utterly shocking: **a gruesome sight those old, silver coins were not there in the box.**

His hands trembled and feet got frozen in terror. A shiver ran through his spine. Slumped in the bed he went dizzy, recovered only when his wife sprinkled water over his face.

Now, as the cat was out of the bag, his wife could not at all believe the whole tale narrated to her. She was utterly horrified getting known of the threat calls followed by the missing of the two precious silver coins believed to be an

inseparable part of the Bagchi family. Both of them regretted at the loss and felt guilty over their failure to protect the family's legacy. Golok felt that the family would be cursed by his forefathers that was inevitable. His wife started sobbing at the thought that now the spirits of his forefathers would hover round their house unappeased in the darkness of *amabashya* (the new moon) that night. She, even proposed a *yajna* to be conducted (rituals of flaming the sacred fire praying for the blessings of Gods and Goddess) to make an amendment for the sin committed by them losing the coins and disregarding the faith of his forefathers.

Both the shocked couples could not get a clue that who could have guts to steal those away from their house in broad day light.

'What if those're stolen at high?' his wife intensified the suspicion.

Suddenly Golok remembered that the previous night soon after the clock struck seven, when Malati busy washing dishes, they were all leaving to attend a wedding-feast. Malati got late yesterday and she had told that she would leave a little later and the keys of the house would be left with their neighbour Paresh Banerjee.

'Don't you think that Malati's committed the act?' Golok asked suddenly warned.

'But...'

'Malati was still here after we left for the feast,' he snapped getting in her way.

Before his wife could say anything, he spoke out in a commanding voice, 'Call in her right now...call in her.'

'But she'll not come here for three days. She's on leave. She's gone to her native village to see her ailing cousin.'

'What !' hollered Golok utterly shocked. Now, he thought that he was right to suspect her.

'Phone her immediately,' Golok handed the phone over to his wife, who, too, turned restless by the time.

She dialled.

But, she pouted her lower lips under a pair of bulging eyes to reveal, 'It's switched off.'

'Switched off!!' barked he infuriated. His hot, deep breath and the thumping heart-beats witnessed an unknown panic that seized him outright. His suspicion took a root so deep within his tormented soul that he got almost paralysed in fear and moreover, in the breaking of trust.

'Where's Dhruba?'

'He's left for his college,' informed his wife.

'So early? It's just eight thirty. He's supposed to leave at quarter to ten.'

'Dhruba said that he's to submit his college-fees today and there'll be long queue. So, he left early to get it done in time,' she supplied the information.

Golok Bagchi told his wife that the silver coins must have been stolen by none other than their maid servant Malati. Hearing it, eyes popped out and brows raised she narrated him that the wife of Paresh Banerjee had once told her that many years

ago, Malati was driven away from a lawyer's house for pinching some money. She further told her husband that on enquiring the matter Malati waved aside those accusations saying that they're baseless and the lawyer's wife had actually stolen the money and after a round of altercation she herself left the house.

'I think she's told you a lie,' said Golok. 'All the maid servants are same. They come to serve, stay for some years, get to know everything of the house where's the locker, master's monthly income, jewellery, bank-balance, property and make off with the valuables getting an opportune moment. Disgusting! They all're a bunch of crooks. Everyday I come across such incidents in the news paper *old woman murdered in an apartment, maid servant absconding; child kidnapped, maid servant arrested; servant found nexus with goons and thugs*. Newspapers are full of these.'

'O Sankatmochan, how gracious you're to save us all from being murdered,' wailed his wife.

'Hush! Can't you keep silence? You'll let everybody know. Stop this at once.'

'What to do now?'

'I'll go to the local police station and lodge a report against that Malati. She must not have gone too far and will be caught soon with her gang. I must get my old coins back,' Golok said.

5

Repentance

On that day when Golok Bagchi returned home his wife enquired of him what the police did. He informed her that he lodged a complaint against Malati. They would issue a lookout notice to catch her. Laxmi, on the other hand reminisced how she looked upon Malati as her own daughter extra-money, cosmetics and new clothes for Durga puja, a glass of milk everyday for her five-year-old son Bachhu and most of her whims she ignored. In the end, how she repaid her benefactor held her in dismay. She felt, as though she was not at all prepared for such an unpleasant surprise.

Golok, on the other hand was brooding over something sinister misfortune might befall upon his family in absence of those two lucky, old silver coins handed down to him by his forefathers. The absence of those coins shook him through his entire nervous system to make him feel restless and insecure.

6

Back to home again

Later, on that day when Druba returned from his college his parents in broken heart furnished the incident of the coins being lost. Surprisingly, their crooked brows, pouted lips, creased foreheads and restless eyes could hardly impress upon Druba's cold, soft eyes. His face remained far from what was supposed to be livid. The incident was no more a crux to him. It was to them only now.

Then, something happened that left both of them shell-shocked. Dhruba thrust his hand into his *Polyester Skybag* and within seconds brought out five fingers closed to a fist. One after another fingers went up and there it was before their eyes that dunked in his palm **two gleaming silver coins.**

Golok picked up those promptly between his thumb and the index finger, very close to his eyes to inspect. After a little while his famished countenance exhibited a shower of smile. He proclaimed as a winning captain, 'These're our ones...exactly those ones.' But suddenly the landscape of his face witnessed a seasonal change...smile vanished, crooked brows and deep face lines jutted out. Like a cranky headmaster he asked Dhruba, 'Where did you get these from? How did such things come to your bag?'

Dhruba hiccuped and then started, 'I committed the act of taking out the coins from your almira. I knew where you keep your locker keys. Believe me, I didn't want to do such thing but I'd to...'

'And may I know what made you do so, you lout?' asked Golok with his eyes bloodshot in anger.

Laxmi remained passive but she, too was shaken.

Dhruba continued with his head bowed down in shame, 'Chandrashekharan, our Business Economics faculty takes fancy in coin collection. When he came to know that we've some rare, old, silver coins dated back to the eighteenth century he wanted to see those. Now, how can I object to his wish whereas our entire practical marks for the rest of the semesters was in his hands. I'd told my friends not to venture but they all started mocking at me and cunningly dragged me

to a dirty bet: on the success of sneaking the coins from your locker I'd be given a grant treat in the Mac Donalds...'

'You...you rubbish, turned into a complete hooligan,' hollered Golok Bagchi.

'Now, what'll become of Malati?' asked his wife askance.

'Malati...what's wrong with her?' asked Dhruba rounding his eyes in the gripping thrill.

'Your father's lodged a complaint against her in the local police station suspecting that she's stolen the coins. Poor girl...I...I knew she can't lay her hand in such a dirty thing.

Dhruba winked his eyes, hiccupped and had a go in the end despite his hesitation to divulge the bitter truth that was to come to light sooner or later,' Baba...the threat calls you'd got were from none but one of my friends.'

'What !' Golok's voice burst out like a cracker.

'What the hell're you saying?'

'Yes, they suggested me that the threat calls might make you shift those coins to my mother's cupboard for a while from where I could have easily accessed to those.' No sooner did his confession come to an end than Dhruba broke down and promised that he would never do such a thing again.

His father heaved a sigh of relief looking at his long cherished eighteenth century-silver-coins.

'What'll happen to Malati if they arrest her and put her into lock-up?' asked Dhruba worried.

'I'm going to the police station now. I'll tell them to withdraw the complaint against her,' said Golok giving a warning look at

his son and continued, 'How shameful it's that my own son's involved in such a dirty affair. Don't know what the police will think when they'll hear of it.'

He put the coins back into the locker and then rushed out of the house and, soon the clop...clop of his sandals trailed away into the darkness of the street.

Laxmi, too, heaved a sigh of relief staring in complete reverence at the miniature marble idol of Hanuman lifting the mountain of Gandhmadan. She bowed down before the idol and muttered, ' O Sankatmochan but for your grace what we could have done. You gave us back our old, precious coins...our family-asset...you saved all of us. Now I'm sure that spirits of forefathers will spare us or who knows I'd have to call in a sorcerer or amend for sin somehow? '

Dhruba was pondering, 'Are the coins really lucky charm for us?'

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