

Slumdog Millionaire

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Vikas Swarup

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

I have been arrested. For winning a quiz show.

They came for me late last night, when even the stray dogs had gone off to sleep. They broke open my door, handcuffed me and marched me off to the waiting jeep with a flashing red light.

There was no hue and cry. Not one resident stirred from his hut. Only the old owl on the tamarind tree hooted at my arrest.

Arrests in Dharavi are as common as pickpockets on the local train. Not a day goes by without some hapless resident being taken away to the police station. There are some who have to be physically dragged off by the constables, screaming and kicking all the while. And there are those who go quietly. Who expect, perhaps even wait for, the police. For them, the arrival of the jeep with the flashing red light is actually a relief.

In retrospect, perhaps I should have kicked and screamed. Protested my innocence, raised a stink, galvanized the neighbours. Not that it would have helped. Even if I had succeeded in waking some of the residents, they would not have raised a finger to defend me. With bleary eyes they would have watched the spectacle, made some trite remark like 'There goes another one,' yawned, and promptly gone back to sleep. My departure from Asia's biggest slum would make no difference to their lives. There would be the same queue for water in the morning, the same daily struggle to make it to the seven-thirty local in time.

They wouldn't even bother to find out the reason for my arrest. Come to think of it, when the two constables barged into my hut, even I didn't. When your whole existence is 'illegal', when you live on the brink of penury in an urban wasteland where you jostle for every inch of space and have to queue even for a shit, arrest has a certain inevitability about it. You are conditioned to believe that one day there will be a warrant with your name on it, that eventually a jeep with a flashing red light will come for you.

There are those who will say that I brought this upon myself. By dabbling in that quiz show. They will wag a finger at me and remind me of what the elders in Dharavi say about never crossing the dividing line that separates the rich from the poor. After all, what business did a penniless waiter have to be participating in a brain quiz? The brain is not an organ we are authorized to use. We are supposed to use only our hands and legs.

If only they could see me answer those questions. After my performance they would have looked upon me with new respect. It's a pity the show has yet to be telecast. But word seeped out that I had won something. Like a lottery. When the other waiters heard the news, they decided to have a big party for me in the restaurant. We sang and danced and drank late into the night. For the first time we did not eat Ramzi's stale food for dinner. We ordered chicken biryani and seekh kebabs from the five-star hotel in Marine Drive. The dodderly bartender offered me his daughter in marriage. Even the grouchy manager smiled indulgently at me and finally gave me my back wages. He didn't call me a worthless bastard that night. Or a rabid dog.

Now Godbole calls me that, and worse. I sit cross-legged in a ten-by-six-foot cell with a rusty metal door and a small square window with a grille, through which a shaft of dusty sunlight streams into the room. The lock-up is hot and humid. Flies buzz around the mushy remains of an over-ripe mango lying squished on the stone floor. A sad-looking cockroach lumbers up to my leg. I am beginning to feel hungry. My stomach growls.

I am told that I will be taken to the interrogation room shortly, to be questioned for the second time since my arrest. After an interminable wait, someone comes to escort me. It is Inspector Godbole himself.

Godbole is not very old, perhaps in his mid forties. He has a balding head and a round face dominated by a handlebar moustache. He walks with heavy steps and his overfed stomach droops over his khaki

trousers. ‘Bloody flies,’ he swears and tries to swat one circling in front of his face. He misses.

Inspector Godbole is not in a good mood today. He is bothered by these flies. He is bothered by the heat. Rivulets of sweat run down his forehead. He smears them off with his shirt sleeve. Most of all, he is bothered by my name. ‘Ram Mohammad Thomas – what kind of a nonsense name is that, mixing up all the religions? Couldn’t your mother decide who your father was?’ he says, not for the first time.

I let the insult pass. It is something I have become inured to.

Outside the interrogation room two constables stand stiffly to attention, a sign that someone important is inside. In the morning they had been chewing *paan* and exchanging dirty jokes. Godbole literally pushes me into the room, where two men are standing in front of a wall chart listing the total number of kidnappings and murders in the year. I recognize one of them. He is the same man, with long hair like a woman – or a rock star – who had been present during the recording of the quiz show, relaying instructions through a headset to the presenter. I don’t know the other man, who is white and completely bald. He wears a mauve-coloured suit and a bright-orange tie. Only a white man would wear a suit and tie in this stifling heat. It reminds me of Colonel Taylor.

The ceiling fan is running at full speed, yet the room feels airless in the absence of a window. Heat rises from the bleached white walls and is trapped by the low wooden ceiling. A long, thin beam bisects the room into two equal parts. The room is bare except for

a rusty table in the centre with three chairs around it. A metal lampshade hangs directly over the table from the wooden beam.

Godbole presents me to the white man like a ring-master introducing his pet lion. 'This is Ram Mohammad Thomas, Sir.'

The white man dabs his forehead with a handkerchief and looks at me as though I am a new species of monkey. 'So this is our famous winner! I must say he looks older than I thought.' I try to place his accent. He speaks with the same nasal twang as the prosperous tourists I'd seen thronging Agra from far-off places like Baltimore and Boston.

The American eases himself into a chair. He has deep-blue eyes and a pink nose. The green veins on his forehead look like little branches. 'Hello,' he addresses me. 'My name is Neil Johnson. I represent NewAge Telemedia, the company that licenses the quiz. This is Billy Nanda, the producer.'

I remain quiet. Monkeys do not speak. Especially not in English.

He turns to Nanda. 'He understands English, doesn't he?'

'Are you out of your mind, Neil?' Nanda admonishes him. 'How can you expect him to speak English? He's just a dumb waiter in some godforsaken restaurant, for Chrissake!'

The sound of an approaching siren pierces the air. A constable comes running into the room and whispers something to Godbole. The Inspector rushes out and returns with a short, corpulent man dressed in the uniform of a top-level police officer. Godbole beams at

Johnson, displaying his yellow teeth. 'Mr Johnson, Commissioner Sahib has arrived.'

Johnson rises to his feet. 'Thank you for coming, Mr Commissioner. I think you already know Billy here.'

The Commissioner nods. 'I came as soon as I got the message from the Home Minister.'

'Ah yes . . . He is an old friend of Mr Mikhailov's.'

'Well, what can I do for you?'

'Commissioner, I need your help on *W3B*.'

'*W3B*?'

'Short for *Who Will Win A Billion*?'

'And what's that?'

'It's a quiz show that has just been launched – in thirty-five countries – by our company. You may have seen our advertisements all over Mumbai.'

'I must have missed them. But why a billion?'

'Why not? Did you watch *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*?'

'*Kaun Banega Crorepati*? That show was a national obsession. It was mandatory viewing in my family.'

'Why did you watch it?'

'Well . . . because it was so interesting.'

'Would it have been half as interesting if the top prize had been ten thousand instead of a million?'

'Well . . . I suppose not.'

'Exactly. You see, the biggest tease in the world is not sex. It's money. And the greater the sum of money, the bigger the tease.'

'I see. So who's the quiz master on your show?'

'We have Prem Kumar fronting it.'

'Prem Kumar? That B-grade actor? But he's not half

as famous as Amitabh Bachchan, who presented *Crorepati*.’

‘Don’t worry, he will be. Of course, we were partly obliged to choose him because he has a 29 per cent stake in the Indian subsidiary of NewAge Telemedia.’

‘OK. I get the picture. Now how does this guy, what’s his name, Ram Mohammad Thomas, fit into all this?’

‘He was a participant in our fifteenth episode last week.’

‘And?’

‘And answered all twelve questions correctly to win a billion rupees.’

‘What? You must be joking!’

‘No, it’s no joke. We were as amazed as you are. This boy is the winner of the biggest jackpot in history. The episode has not been aired yet, so not many people know about it.’

‘OK. If you say he won a billion, he won a billion. So what’s the problem?’

Johnson pauses. ‘Can Billy and I talk to you in private?’

The Commissioner motions Godbole to leave. The Inspector glowers at me and exits. I remain in the room, but no one takes any notice. I am just a waiter. And waiters don’t understand English.

‘OK. Now tell me,’ says the Commissioner.

‘You see, Commissioner, Mr Mikhailov is not in a position to pay a billion rupees right now,’ says Johnson.

‘Then why did he offer it in the first place?’

‘Well . . . it was a commercial gimmick.’

‘Look, I still don’t understand. Even if it was a

gimmick, won't your show do even better now that someone has won the top prize? I remember that whenever a contestant won a million on *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?*, viewing figures doubled.'

'It's the timing, Commissioner, the timing. Shows like *W3B* cannot be dictated by chance, by a roll of the dice. They have to follow a script. And according to our script, a winner was not due for at least eight months, by which time we would have recouped most of our investment through ad revenues. But now this fellow Thomas has wrecked all our plans.'

The Commissioner nods. 'OK, so what do you want me to do?'

'I want your help to prove that Thomas cheated on the show. That he couldn't have known the answers to all twelve questions without an accomplice. Just think. He's never been to school. He's never even read a newspaper. There's no way he could have won the top prize.'

'Well . . . I'm not so sure.' The Commissioner scratches his head. 'There have been cases of boys from poor backgrounds turning out to be geniuses in later life. Wasn't Einstein himself a high-school drop-out?'

'Look, Mr Commissioner, we can prove right now that this guy is no Einstein,' says Johnson. He gestures to Nanda.

Nanda approaches me, running his fingers through his luxuriant hair. He addresses me in Hindi. 'Mr Ram Mohammad Thomas, if you were indeed brilliant enough to win on our show, we would like you to prove it by taking part in another quiz for us, now.'

These will be very simple questions. Almost anyone of average intelligence will know the answers.’ He sits me down on a chair. ‘Are you ready? Here comes question number one. What is the currency of France? The choices are a) Dollar, b) Pound, c) Euro, or d) Franc.’

I keep silent. Suddenly, the Commissioner’s open palm swoops down and hits me tightly across my cheek. ‘Bastard, are you deaf? Answer or I’ll break your jaw,’ he threatens.

Nanda starts hopping around like a madman – or a rock star. ‘Pleeeeee, can we do this the civilized way?’ he asks the Commissioner. Then he looks at me. ‘Yes? What’s your answer?’

‘Franc,’ I reply sullenly.

‘Wrong. The correct answer is Euro. OK, question number two. Who was the first man to set foot on the moon? Was it a) Edwin Aldrin, b) Neil Armstrong, c) Yuri Gagarin, or d) Jimmy Carter?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘It was Neil Armstrong. Question number three. The Pyramids are situated in a) New York, b) Rome, c) Cairo, or d) Paris?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘In Cairo. Question number four. Who is the President of America? Is it a) Bill Clinton, b) Colin Powell, c) John Kerry, or d) George Bush?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘It’s George Bush. I am sorry to say, Mr Thomas, that you didn’t get a single answer right.’

Nanda turns to the Commissioner, and reverts to English. ‘See, I told you this guy’s a moron. The only

way he could have answered those questions last week was by cheating.'

'Any idea how he could have cheated?' asks the Commissioner.

'That's what beats me. I have got you two copies of the DVD footage. Our experts have gone over it with a microscope, but so far we have got zilch. Something will turn up eventually.'

The hunger in my belly has now risen to my throat, making me dizzy. I double up, coughing.

Johnson, the baldy American, looks at me sharply. 'Do you remember, Mr Commissioner, that case of the Army Major who won a million pounds on *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*? It occurred in England, a few years ago. The company refused to pay. The police launched an investigation and succeeded in convicting the Major. It turned out he had a professor as an accomplice in the audience who signalled the correct answers through coded coughs. It's a cert something similar has happened here.'

'So do we need to look out for a cougher in the audience?'

'No. There's no evidence of coughing. He must have used some other signal.'

'What about being buzzed by a pager or mobile?'

'No. We are pretty sure he had no gadgets on him. And neither pager nor cellphone would have worked in the studio.'

The Commissioner is struck by an idea. 'Do you think he might have a memory chip implanted in the brain?'

Johnson sighs. 'Mr Commissioner, I think you have

been watching too many science-fiction films. Look, whatever it is, you have to help us find it. We don't know who the accomplice was. We don't know what signalling system was used. But I am one hundred per cent sure this boy is a con. You have to help us prove it.'

'Have you considered buying him off?' the Commissioner suggests hopefully. 'I mean he probably doesn't even know the number of zeros in a billion. I imagine he would be quite happy if you threw him just a couple of thousand rupees.'

I feel like punching the Commissioner's lights out. Admittedly, before the quiz show I didn't know the value of a billion. But that's history. Now I know. And I am determined to get my prize. With all nine zeros.

Johnson's answer reassures me. 'We can't do that,' he says. 'It would make us vulnerable to a law suit. You see, he is either a bona fide winner or a crook. Therefore either he gets a billion or he goes to jail. There's no halfway house here. You have to help me ensure he goes to jail. Mr Mikhailov would have a coronary if he had to shell out a billion now.'

The Commissioner looks Johnson directly in the eye. 'I understand your point,' he drawls. 'But what's in it for me?'

As if on cue, Johnson takes him by the arm into a corner. They speak in hushed tones. I catch just three words: 'ten per cent'. The Commissioner is clearly excited by what he is told. 'OK, OK, Mr Johnson, consider your job done. Now let me call in Godbole.'

The Inspector is summoned. 'Godbole, what have you got out of him so far?' the Commissioner asks.

Godbole gazes at me balefully. ‘Nothing, Commissioner Sahib. The bastard keeps on repeating the same story that he just “knew” the answers. Says he got lucky.’

‘Lucky, eh?’ sneers Johnson.

‘Yes, Sir. I have so far not used third degree, otherwise he would be singing like a canary by now. Once you permit me, Sir, I can get the names of all his accomplices out in no time.’

The Commissioner looks quizzically at Johnson and Nanda. ‘Are you comfortable with that?’

Nanda shakes his head vigorously, sending his long hair flying. ‘No way. No torture. The papers have already got wind of the arrest. If they find out he has been mistreated, we will be finished. I’ve enough problems on my plate already without having to worry about being sued by a bloody civil rights NGO.’

The Commissioner pats him on the back. ‘Billy, you have become just like the Americans. Don’t worry. Godbole is a professional. There won’t be a single mark on the boy’s body.’

Bile rises in my stomach like a balloon. I feel like retching.

The Commissioner prepares to depart. ‘Godbole, by tomorrow morning I want the name of the collaborator and full details of the MO. Use any means necessary to extract the information. But be careful. Remember, your promotion depends on this.’

‘Thank you, Sir. Thank you.’ Godbole puts on a plastic smile. ‘And don’t worry, Sir. By the time I am through with this boy, he will be ready to confess the murder of Mahatma Gandhi.’

I try to recall who murdered Mahatma Gandhi, who is known to have said 'Hey Ram!' just before dying. I remember this because I had exclaimed, 'That's my name!' And Father Timothy had gently explained that it was the name of Lord Ram, the Hindu god who had been banished into the jungle for fourteen years.

Godbole, meanwhile, has returned after seeing off the Commissioner and the two men. He wheezes into the interrogation room and slams the door shut. Then he snaps his fingers at me. 'OK, motherfucker, strip!'

Sharp, throbbing pain oozes from every pore of my body. My hands are tied to the wooden beam with coarse rope. The beam is nine feet above the ground, so my legs dangle in the air and my hands and feet feel like they are being pulled apart. I am completely naked. The ribs on my chest jut out like those on starving African babies.

Godbole has been punishing me for more than an hour but he has still not finished. Every half-hour or so he comes up with a new instrument of torture. First he inserted a wooden rod into my anus. With chilli powder smeared on it. It felt as if a molten, searing spike was being driven through my backside. I choked and gagged with pain. Then he thrust my head into a bucket of water and held it there till my lungs were about to explode. I spluttered and gasped and quite nearly drowned.

Now he is holding a live wire in his hand like a sparkler on Diwali. He dances around me like a drunken boxer and suddenly lunges at me. He jabs at

the sole of my left foot with the naked wire. The electric current shoots up my body like hot poison. I recoil and convulse violently.

Godbole shouts at me. 'Bastard, you still won't tell me what trick you used on the show? Who told you the answers? Tell me, and this torture will end. You will get a nice hot meal. You can even go home.'

But home seems like a far-off place right now. And a hot meal would make me vomit. If you don't eat for a long time, the hunger just shrivels and dies, leaving only a dull ache in the pit of your stomach.

The first wave of nausea is beginning to assail me now. I am blacking out. Through a thick mist, I see a tall woman, with flowing black hair. The wind is howling behind her, making her jet-black hair fly across her face, obscuring it. She is wearing a white sari of thin fabric that flutters and vibrates like a kite. She opens her arms and cries, 'My son . . . my son . . . what are they doing to you?'

'Mother!' I scream and reach out for her across the chasm of mist and fog, but Godbole grabs me roughly by the neck. I feel as if I am running without moving forward. He slaps me hard and the blackness lifts.

Godbole is holding out the pen once again. It is black with a shiny golden nib. Blue ink glistens at its tip. 'Sign the confession statement,' he orders.

The confession statement is quite simple. 'I, Ram Mohammad Thomas, do hereby state that on 10 July I was a participant in the quiz show *Who Will Win A Billion?* I confess that I cheated. I did not know the answers to all the questions. I hereby withdraw my claim to the top prize or any other prize. I beg

forgiveness. I am making this statement in full control of my senses and without any undue pressure from anyone. Signed: Ram Mohammad Thomas.'

I know it is only a question of time before I sign this statement. I will not be able to hold out much longer. We were always told never to pick a quarrel with the police. Street boys like me come at the bottom of the food chain. Above us are the petty criminals, like pick-pockets. Above them come the extortionists and loan sharks. Above them come the dons. Above them come the big business houses. But above all of them are the police. They have the instruments of naked power. And there is nobody to check them. Who can police the police? So I will sign the statement. After ten, maybe fifteen, more slaps. After five, perhaps six, more shocks.

All of a sudden, I hear a commotion at the door. Constables are shouting. Voices are raised. The door shudders and slams open. A young woman bursts into the room. She is of average height and slim build. She has nice teeth and lovely arched eyebrows. In the middle of her forehead she wears a large round blue *bindi*. Her dress consists of a white salwar kameez, a blue *dupatta* and leather sandals. Her long black hair is loose. A brown bag hangs from her left shoulder. There is a certain presence about her.

Godbole is so flustered he touches the live wire to his own hand, and yelps in pain. He is about to grab the intruder by the collar, then realizes she is a woman. 'Who the hell are you, bursting in like this? Can't you see I am busy?'

'My name is Smita Shah,' the woman announces

calmly to Godbole. 'I am Mr Ram Mohammad Thomas's lawyer.' Then she looks at me, at my condition, and hastily averts her eyes.

Godbole is stunned. He is so stunned that he does not notice that I am equally stunned. I have never seen this woman before. I don't have money to hire a taxi. I can hardly hire a lawyer.

'Come again?' Godbole croaks. 'You are his lawyer?'

'Yes. And what you are doing to my client is completely illegal and unacceptable. I want an immediate end to this treatment. He reserves the right to prosecute you under sections 330 and 331 of the Indian Penal Code. I demand to be shown the papers regarding his arrest. I see no evidence of any FIR having been recorded. No grounds for arrest have been communicated as required under Article 22 of the Constitution and you are in breach of Section 50 of the CrPC. Now unless you can produce his arrest warrant, I am removing my client from the police station to consult with him in private.'

'Er . . . mmm . . . I . . . I will have to speak to . . . to the Commissioner. Please wait,' is all Godbole can say. He looks at the woman with a helpless expression, shakes his head, and slinks out of the room.

I am impressed. I didn't know lawyers wielded such power over the police. The food chain will have to be revised.

I don't know at what point Godbole returns to the room, what he says to the lawyer, or what the lawyer says to him, because I have passed out. From pain and hunger and happiness.

* * *