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ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

Thanedar Sahib

By Charanjeet Singh Minhas

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Thanedar Sahib

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It was just two of us standing in the courtyard of his house on a nice, clear, cool day. It was a day shortly after his retirement from the Punjab police. A day between the weeks and months leading to my tenth birthday.

“Many do not get to eat loquats in their lifetime, son...you know that? And here, look, an orchard standing full of them!” *Thanedar* Sahib sailed his long slim right arm proudly towards his trees while his left, as usual, was busy twirling his mustache.

Thanedar Sahib’s ancestral home and farms were miles away in Bathinda. As he lived here now in Patiala’s Model Town with his family from last many years—a few houses away from mine on the same street—we often saw him scratching his farming itch working on this “orchard.” The activity surely took an upswing on his retirement.

With the winter break in school still on, I visited his house again a few days later. *Thanedar* Sahib was sitting and eating *somasas* and sipping his tea on the veranda.

When he saw me I greeted “Sat Sri Akal” to him with folded hands. He responded with a hand curling invitation. I went over and sat by his side on the same stringed bed. Also on the bed were a couple of gardening implements.

“Son, you know what, though I have recently retired, even then, there are always two sepoys watching my back.” With that, he drew in the last sip with a big slurp. I heard an “Aaah” of joyous satisfaction as his fingers and thumb separately cleaned the mustache and the long flowing gray beard under it in a circular motion.

I wasn’t fond of the policemen. Warily, I swept a glance behind him. There was no one. Yes, two sepoys stood behind his chair, one on each side—but in a framed picture hung on the wall.

“Oye, son...we are never in the eyes of the people when we are keeping an eye,” *Thanedar* Sahib roared with laughter. His belly jiggled like jelly in the custard mom made now and then.

Suddenly, he started to tap his leather chappal with the toe of his right foot, breaking momentarily into his catchphrase cough. OMG! I had known him long enough to tell what was imminent. In fact, everyone knew. Reflexively, my hand moved to my nose. However, my bad, the trigger had already been pulled and the shot escaped the gun before I could—brrr rr r r *Thanedar* Sahib went.

With the end of the winter break in school, I could not go back to the bungalow for a couple of months. But that was not the only reason. The tap-cough-and-shot routine was a potent deterrent as well.

When I did go, I found the bungalow seething with family turmoil. Buboo was holding his parents captive in one of the rooms. He had bolted the room from the outside.

Noticing me, he stormed out of the kitchen, fretting and fuming. Standing tall and sturdy at six-feet-five-inches, Buboo looked like a bearded monster, and not a student of the local, nationally famed, Thapar Engineering College.

“Why you visit these rascals?” looking down at me he screamed. Though I had played with him many times and was fond of his gentle and caring demeanor, I had never seen his present avatar.

“These bastards pawn kids, butcher childhoods, and are insensitive to a persecution of small innocent souls. And she especially! She...in there...my mother, she can do that to anyone and will do the same to you too and very soon. One fine day she will use you as collateral for usurping someone’s property.”

When I realized it wasn’t me he was mad at, it was a relief, though not a lot.

“The only things she values are property and her first son and his wife living in America. Look at my other brother rotting on the streets with his wife and children. He and his family are not allowed to live in this mansion. Why?”

He paused looking very intensely at me as if he expected me to know.

“Just for one reason. He contributes no value to her property or pompousness. Why? Just because he doesn’t have a fancy degree or a lucrative job like the American! She feels he and his family smudge her vanity, their presence around her dilutes her conceit.”

I had heard mentions of “Buboo eruptions” before but had never imagined the volcanic temperature or the intensity of the lava.

“And him there,” Buboo roared, stretching his hand towards the room where his father, *Thanedar* Sahib, and mother, *thanedarani*, were captives. “He can’t dare even fart when she tells him not to. He reads her eyes for instructions.”

Blurting expletives he suddenly bolted out of the bungalow’s gate like a hooded snake. Confused and shaken by the vitriolic sermon, I waited a minute more before opening the door to release the inmates from their captivity. *Thanedar* Sahib and *thanedarani* emerged from inside the room.

While *thanedarani* even didn’t so much as look at me, *Thanedar* Sahib put his right palm on my head in a blessing and heaved a long and cold sigh. “Don’t know for which past life is he taking a revenge,” he said in a daze, smacking his forehead. I didn’t know what to say.

I felt wrapped in moments of deafening silence. When I looked up, *Thanedar* Sahib was again busy looking at his orchard.

Just then we heard *thanedarani*’s scream from the kitchen. I followed *Thanedar* Sahib there.

What a mess it was in! We were aghast to see kitchen’s appearance. It bore a vandalized look. Buboo had dumped tealeaves, sugar, milk, flour, rice, lentils, spices, cereals, and eggs into the sink under the open tap. Shattered cups, saucers, glasses, and plates lay strewn across the floor.

What anguish manifests into such a rage in Buboo? What terrible things could *Thanedar* Sahib and *thanedarani* have done to turn him such?

I don’t recall going back to the bungalow again that winter.

In the summer I joined a boarding school in the neighboring town, Nabha. I met *Thanedar* Sahib before leaving, though. On hearing about my going away, he came down to meet and congratulate me.

Next, when I came home after four months for Diwali vacation, I found an unfamiliar table and chair in my room. Mummy told me, “*Thanedar*, *thanedarani* and Buboo migrated to *Amrika*. The whole bungalow is leased out now.

‘Before leaving, *thanedarani* sold most of the household articles and what the buyers didn’t want was given to neighbors and acquaintances. This study table and chair she gave us saying, ‘my gift for Charanjeet.’”

Then Mummy embraced me tightly, fondly stroking and kissing my head as she narrated a part of her conversation with the *thanedarani*. “You know, what the *thanedarani* said when she came to drop these?”

“What?” I snuggled deeper into her embrace. I had missed this deep and divine warmth in my first-ever four months away from her.

“May Charanjeet take after my oldest and give you a lot of comfort and happiness.’ Also, that she will send for you two-three neckties from *Amrika*.”

I liked my new school very much. There were a lot of opportunities for learning all kind of things. Besides the vigorous academic routine, I wholeheartedly participated in athletics and other extracurricular activities—buzzing around good-looking girls included.

Just when I had not thought of *Thanedar* Sahib for a long time, *thanedarani* popped up on the scene. That, too, on a day I was home preparing for an important test next day. Above all, she came home to ask for the table and chair she had “gifted.” I was not pleased.

Still nudged by the rules of courtesy, I went over to greet her. I bowed and touched her feet in respect and asked her how *Thanedar* Sahib and Buboo are?

“Oh, he has grown to be quite big,” she told my Mummy. “Really beautiful neckties I have for him in America, or should I also say *Amrika* like you...hahaha.”

This really fumed my heart and mind.

Then she looked at me and said, “*Thanedar* Sahib is fine...that’s what I was telling your Mummy...how else can a parent be when his child takes so much care as our oldest son does. He has two big cars...two of them.” She raised two fingers of her right hand to ensure I understood. There were hardly a few cars in all of Patiala in those days. “World’s most expensive clothes, he buys them for us. He is so up there but I just never talk about him lest people think...”

“Let that be then...” I almost blurted, but stopped short.

“Hundreds of *goras* work under him in his company. And it is the largest aircraft company in the world,” she glided her hand in the air as if one of her audience was deaf.

Besides using her hands, *thanedarani* widened her eyes to the fullest to emphasize her son's success and high position. "Yet, I know, you will not believe, he does not let us even pick up a glass or spoon—he just wants to serve his parents. Such is his love and dedication: just matchless."

The decked-up *thanedarani* sat stiffly. She was wearing an expensive designer *salwar-kameez*, and a huge gold necklace adorned her neck and its glaring studs highlighted her painted face.

"Buboo too has, Charanjeet, undergone a sea change, under the constant guidance and mentorship of his brother and sister-in-law. So much change...how should I tell you...the *gori* he has married is so beautiful that a mere touch blemishes her. She is as tall as Buboo and very rich, too, with a large estate and many horses. They live like *Nawabs*, and the two of them now have a year-old son as well."

I was happy to learn that Buboo was doing well. He had left behind a Robin Hood-like name and fame in Patiala. There were so many who respected him for so much he had done for them, many others for his honesty, strength, and intelligence.

After *thanedarani* left, Mummy came to talk to me in my room. I was in the middle of settling books, other things, and myself on the floor to continue test preparation.

"She is a classic example of the proverb you were asking the meaning of the other day."

"Which one?" I asked.

"Great shop, dismal crop," she told with a chuckle.

A few months after *thanedarani* went back to the US, Daddy surprised us when he mentioned the call he received in his office.

"It was *Thanedar Sahib* from *Amrika*," he said.

"Why?...What happened?" Mummy asked.

"He wanted to check if I can pick him up from the airport. He said he will tell me when we meet, but he did say, 'I am coming for good.'"

"Is he? What about *thanedarani*...she too?"

“When I asked that he just said he is coming alone and said something really weird after that: ‘Finally, forever, I am alone now, no family, no nothing...I am just coming back to die in my own place,’”

When I was walking past *Thanedar* Sahib’s bungalow that evening, I stopped. The bungalow was eerily quiet. Not a soul was in sight. The orchard to my left looked barren and deserted. There were no loquats. Only dry leaves covered the surface below, and squirrels hopped among them.

That night when we were all at the dinner table, Daddy told me, “Charanjeet, it is better if you accompany me to the airport. He will surely be glad to see you.”

And so I did. But not without a handkerchief!

When *Thanedar Sahib* walked out of the airport, I didn’t recognize him. A face the size of a watermelon now reminded me of a half sucked mango. His inner power supply seemed unplugged. He had darkened. Even when he stopped, putting his weight on the trolley to look around for daddy, I recognized him only because he started his characteristic mustache twirling.

During the five-plus hours ride back from the airport to Patiala *Thanedar* Sahib was silent.

“How was the flight?” Daddy asked him

“It was too long,” *Thanedar* Sahib replied.

“Yes, I guess it takes longer from Seattle to Delhi than New York to Delhi!” Daddy was attempting to draw him into a conversation but not succeeding. After a couple of hours, we stopped on the highway for tea.

“Did you say on the phone that you are coming back to India forever?” Daddy asked *Thanedar* Sahib.

“Yes.” *Thanedar* Sahib nodded his head more than once.

“That is good for us, but how about others in the family.”

“There is no one now.”

“What do you mean...? Have they shifted to another country?”

“No...to another world!”

Daddy looked at me and then at other people around him.

“What are you talking about?”

“One day after *thanedarani* returned from India, she invited both our sons and their families for dinner at our house. Our oldest came first with his family, and Buboo came later, and alone.” *Thanedar* Sahib paused. He took a sip. He seemed to be concentrating.

I suddenly felt a premonition welling up in me.

“He banged the door shut behind him. He took a drink I offered him and sat where everyone else was. Soon after that he asked his brother’s kids to either play outside or go upstairs. I also got up to check on things in the oven.”

This was the first time *Thanedar* Sahib tapped his right foot. I was quick enough to make use of the handkerchief in time.

“While in the kitchen, I heard an exchange of loud arguments. Knowing Buboo, that was nothing out of ordinary. However, when I looked out of the kitchen to offer them more drinks, what I saw made my blood run cold.”

Thanedar Sahib fell silent. His face reflected bewilderment. He asked the *dhaba* guy where the restroom was.

“I don’t have a good feeling,” I told Daddy while *Thanedar* Sahib was away.

When he returned, *he* continued his account: “Buboo had a gun in his hand. Before I could even think, he shot all three of them dead: First, his mother, then his brother, and finally his sister-in-law. He killed all three of them.” *Thanedar* Sahib’s eyes were moist. “What can one do...?”

He looked at us. Our minds were numb. He continued: “The dining table near the kitchen with a cloth hanging all around it seemed a good place to hide. Close to it on a small stool was the phone, too. However, before I could make my choice, Buboo came toward me, gun still in his hand. He picked up the phone and called 911 himself.”

“Oh my God! How is that possible...that’s really sad,” my Daddy said.

It was late afternoon when we reached our house.

In the evening Mummy sent me to the bazaar, while Daddy and *Thanedar* Sahib sat in the family room with a couple of glasses and a bottle of scotch. I sat with them when I returned.

“Everyone has the same question as yours. How could Buboo do it...now what answer do I give?” an agonized *Thanedar* Sahib said.

“When *thanedarani* made her childless sister adopt Buboo, what could I have done? She only took advice from the oldest and his wife...all the way from America. Around me she incessantly went parroting, ‘We have three sons but land and property not enough for even one...look at her, she has ten times more land but no kids,’ over and over again. She finally forced her sister to adopt Buboo.”

Thanedar Sahib paused to pour himself another scotch. Then, he was momentarily silent, only twirling his mustache after knocking the drink down his throat.

“Yes, what was it I was sa-saying...Oh, yes, *thanedarani*’s sister and her husband took to Buboo like their own. They really doted on him. But they didn’t give up on their efforts to have a child themselves. A few years later, the couple succeeded. They produced a child of their own.”

Daddy winked at Mummy when she came to serve freshly made kabobs. In the meantime, *Thanedar* Sahib had fixed himself yet another king-size drink.

“Now this newborn made *thanedarani* very anxious. She turned my life into hell. Then on the advice of the Americans, she took me along to talk with her sister and sister’s husband. The couple did not agree when she asked them to will at least half of their assets to Buboo right away.”

“Why? We are not dying right away,” they said.

“But what if you don’t give Buboo anything later!”

“Why not? We are his parents. Also, how is that your business anyway?”

In the end, she just forcefully dragged Buboo back to Patiala. A fragrant flower in that couple’s house never ever bloomed again. Now, you tell me, what could I do? Like a tumor that grievous wound stayed and grew in Buboo’s mind. He never forgave the three for the unabashed greed and the brutality. Now... what...I...DO!”

“Yes, you are right,” was all Daddy could say before *Thanedar* Sahib started snoring in the sofa seat.

The next day when we took him to his bungalow, the first thing he looked at was his orchard. Or, what was once his orchard. His hands didn’t rise to twirl his mustache. The look on his face evoked pity. He sighed deeply and murmured:

**Even the bar doesn't hold that much today
What I used to leave in the glass every day**