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The Cock

Qaisar Bashir

After donning his dress, Yousef walked downstairs; and as usual, he entered the room his mother was sitting in to receive her blessings. "I'm leaving", he said as soon as he opened the door.

"Khudayes hawwal! (God be with you!) Mouj wished him. "But", she quickly added, "don't forget to bring the cock today!"

"Alright", Yousef responded.

Every morning, Mouj would tell him to buy a cock— mothers in old age crave for such things; every evening, however, he would walk back without bringing the one. Today, he set it as a reminder in his mobile phone and left.

With a mobile phone in his hand, Yousef reached to where rickshaws stand lined up, in the village, waiting for their turn. He got in the one that was ready to leave for Bandipore.

After sitting comfortably inside, he unpinned the screen lock of his phone, clicked on the Facebook app with his index finger and began scrolling up and down the stuff— videos and text: informative, funny, concocted or real; till he reached Bandipora.

Yousef climbed out and felt the bum pocket of his pants for his wallet so as to pay the richshawwalla. Then, he phoned one of his colleagues. "Why isn't he picking the phone?" he murmured. He started scanning the Tata Somu cum Rickshaw stand for a lift. "Chuntipora!" he said excitedly, when he found a Somu.

Chuntipora is a far flung village, in the eastern side of Bandipora. All the officials, most importantly teachers, had to wait for hours together if they failed to catch the lift in time. That was why, Yousef felt overjoyed on seeing the Sumo.

Making sure not to miss the Sumo, he briskly stepped towards it. "Shukur Khudayes kun! (thank God!)", he said, while he climbed in.

As he arrived in Chuntipora, he looked at his wristwatch and mumbled, "Five past ten." He speeded his steps so as to reach school as early as possible. And when, he entered the school premises, he saw that students were standing in rows; and they were reciting prayer: *Sa'hibo sat chem me cha'ni* (Lord, you're my hope!). Though he greeted his colleagues, he remorseful why he was late and walked towards the office room.

Yousef would not like to report to school late, but today he was. And this was why, he did not like to attend the after part of the morning assembly.

Later, when students got in to their classes, he took up the 8th form attendance register, tucked it in his left arm; clinched a marker and a duster in his hand and left to take a class.

“Asalaam u Alikum, sir”, all the students, standing up, said together joyously, when he entered the class.

“Walikum Salaam, dear boys and girls”, he said smilingly. “Sit down!”

After marking their attendance, Yousef taught today's lesson. And, when the bell was rung, he walked out. On the school veranda, the reminder ring of his phone rang. He turned and got back in the class so as to ask students if they could get a Kashmiri cock for him: teachers would often ask their students to get eggs but of Kashmiri hens or to get a Kashmiri cock, but, for that, they would pay them in advance. The students, as expected, again sat up to greet him. He, however, interrupted and said, “Could any one of you manage to bring a cock? I need one.”

A few students rose their hands. This brought smile on his face. He thought for a while whom he should give money. His eye fell on a boy, who was bold and brave in the class. His name was Saleem. He was quick at doing things like getting milk and bread from a shop, making tea, serving it to the teachers, playing games and above all, he was good at studies. “You, get up”, Yousef said, pointing towards him. Saleem did. Taking out his wallet, Yousef drew two hundred rupees from it and handed them to the boy and left.

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Back home, Mouj welcomed Yousef, saying, “Empty you're home again?” He feigned a smile and started unlacing his shoes. “You smile? I know you're expert in evading the issue,” Mouj added.

“If It weren't a Kashmiri cock, I'd have surely bought one today from the market”, Yousef, casting an affectionate glance at her, said. “But, I'll get a cock. I promise.”

At this Mouj did not comment. And Yousef walked in.

That night, at bed time, his wife demanded for a new dress. “Noted, my dear Shakeela darling”, he replied, smilingly.

Shakeela glowed with joy. She clung to him. They conversed till sleep invaded her. She leaned back and slowly slipped in the bed. Yousef also reclined back, but sat against the pillow. “My two months salary is yet to be released. And I've a little money left in my wallet... which isn't suffice to buy a dress. And I've to reserve some money for myself as well, otherwise how can I ride to school?” Thinking so, he fell asleep.

The next day, while he left for school, he reassured Sakeela that he would get her a new dress; but, however, his priority today was to full fill the wish of Mouj.

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Yousef entered the class and witnessing the boy, he felt happy. And before he would start his lesson, he said, pointing towards him, “Did you bring the cock?”

The boy shook his head.

Yousef thought, perhaps Saleem's family could not be raising chickens. “Do you rare chickens at your home?”

The boy shook his head.

“Bring it, tomorrow”, Yousef, without trying to insist on him, said.

The boy nodded.

Yousef taught his lesson. The day, in the school, passed comfortably. At departure time, Yousef remembered the demand his wife had made him last night. He took out his wallet and counted the money. “Four hundred and fifty”, he muttered. It was not enough. “These days”, he thought, “a simple frock and shilwar costs at least one thousand, that too, if I buy a local brand.” He felt distraught. The signs of worry started to dance on his countenance. He began cursing himself that he is not able to full fill small demands of his family. Just then, he thought of calling one of the officials, working in ZEO's office, so as to ask him when the salaries of teachers would be released. The official did not respond. He cursed him too. “What if only I were a clerk, my life would have been altogether different,” he heaved a sigh.

Suddenly, however, an idea flashed on his mind, “Let me try a lie today. I’ll tell them there was stone pelting going on in the market... That I’d to run for life. Hmm... this ruse will work. And at least, I’ll get one more day. And may be, tomorrow, our salaries will be released.” The idea brought the lost smile back on his face.

Back home, he told a lie for the first time. His family believed him. Why could not they? In Kashmir, incidents like these would happen and that too, unpredictably.

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A month passed. Saleem had failed to bring the cock. Mouj too had ceased to ask Yousef.

Today was Monday. Today, Yousef thought he should give a reminder to Saleem. And when he reached school, he said to the boy, “Saleem, why didn’t you bring the cock.”

The boy kept mum.

“If you aren't able to get the cock, my son. You can return my money.”

The boy did not comment.

“Why don't you reply?” Yousef said to him, in a louder voice.

The boy blushed.

What could Yousef do? He could not thrash the boy. He tried to persuade him to either return his money or bring the cock. And then, he taught his lesson, as usual, and left.

That evening, the boy told the matter to his father. His father fumed. He swore and vowed to complaint against the teacher.

The day following, the boy's father went to the CEO's Office. Registered a complaint. All the teacher, in the school, were suspended. The headmaster was phoned. When he came to the Office, he was told the matter. He rang to one of the teachers, in the school, and told him the entire story. Soon the winged news hit Yousef like a bullet, because he knew it was baseless. He worried. His face lost colour. His throat dried up. He wrung his hands in desperation as to why he assigned the task to the boy. “...but I gave him money,” he uttered, trying to console himself. He rushed towards the class where 8th form students are kept. There, he quizzed the boy.

“Master ji... I had bought a cock,” the boy, out of fright, said nervously “... I had kept that... under a wicker basket. The next morning... when I lifted the basket up... I found the cock... was dead....I...”

Yousef chided him as to why he did not tell him that.

The boy kept silence.

Yousef could not fathom what he should do. After pondering on it for a moment, he moved a few steps towards the boy, sat on his knees and hugged the boy against his chest and said, “Don't worry my boy. It isn't your fault... But, you'd have told me this.”

“I scared.”

Yousef patted the boy on his right cheek; but, however, when he walked out of the class, clouds of dismay reappeared on his face. What worried him more was his honour that was then at stake. Frustrated, he dialled the headmaster's number and told him what the truth actually was.

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Next day, a well-dressed man, in a light grey coat, followed by a couple of subordinates, visited the school. The headmaster and his crew welcomed them. Yousef's heart sank. His already pale face turned grumpy.

Just then, the officials were served tea. While taking the tea, the man in a light grey coat said, "We have received a complaint from a parent." The headmaster and the teachers carefully listened to him. "The complainant said 'a teacher annoys my ward unnecessarily. He asks him to get a Kashmiri cock from his home.' Does this really happen here?"

"We apologise", the headmaster pleaded.. "Mr Yousef, my subordinate and one of the dedicated teachers, in the school, has done a mistake. But, I must tell you he has given rupees two hundred to the boy. Sir, you can call the boy and ask him in order to know the truth."

"Well, bring the boy," the officer said.

When the boy came, he looked distraught.

"Come here, good boy", the officer said, smilingly.

With hesitant steps, the boy came up onto the officer and sat his head bowed down in front of him.

"What's your name?"

"Saleem."

"What's your father's name?"

"Kareem Gojjer."

"Well-done. Which class do you read?"

"Eighth".

"Nice. Who's your best teacher?"

"Yousef Saeb."

"Okay! Did he ask you to get a cock from your home?"

The boy nodded.

“Good. Did he give you money?”

The boy nodded again.

“Well done”, the officer said. “You can go now.”

As the boy left, the man in light grey coat peered at Yousef, smiled and said, “Next time, beware!” And then, he started drafting the report.

Yousef lowered his gaze and lowly said, “Noted, Sir.”