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Sam and the Salvation Run

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When the dim violet turns to bright glare signalling the end of the day's business, sudden quiet lands in the bar as when muting a till-then-loud television; customers have a silent respect for the signal - a command - and even the loudest go hush-hush. The sound of shuffling chairs, the frantic final quickies, barmen delivering bills, and tipsy men, their eyes used to the dim light, groping in the glare as they moved to the exit door. The whole scene looked comical to Samuel George,

the busboy, leaning against the corner pillar waiting for the day to end.

He moved out of the shadow with his work tools - bucket, towel and sponge. Soon his hours in the dim light would be over with a closing round of doing the tables. Most of the customers had left; the last three in the corner signalled Sivan for the bill. A peaceful day - no table rage, no cricket match on TV, no adrenaline rush. Gopi, the cashier behind the counter, got busy on his laptop muttering numbers, and was, as usual, interrupted many times by Mathukkutty, who was placing the bottles back on the shelf as he hummed his favourite melody, miserably out of pitch; always the same song and whenever Gopi pleaded him to try another one, he ignored him.

Moving away from the third table, Sam saw Ramchand waving at him from the rear end. Ramu, coming from a distant Bihar village, handled the glasses and bottles, and has been his closest friend. There was an unusual look of urgency on his face, and when Sam reached him, he pointed towards the wall end of the twin seat. The red and yellow plastic shopping bag on the seat gave them a forlorn look. Curious, Sam came up to check out the contents, but was hurriedly stopped by his friend.

“Don’ t,” he whispered. “I checked it. I think it’ s an urn with someone’ s cremation ashes!”

Sam stepped back quickly. There was anxiety and confusion in Ramu’ s voice as he explained. “Someone has left behind the ashes meant for immersion in some holy place. They do it, that’ s how the person’ s soul attains *moksha* - eternal salvation.”

Sam remembered what his neighbourhood friend Mahesh told him about his uncle’ s mother’ s cremation. Mahesh had been there when the uncle carried the red-cloth covered pot

with her ashes and left for Thirunelli in the hills where the river near the temple was considered holy.

“The immersion has to be done for his mother’ s soul. Otherwise it will wander as a spirit, homeless and desperate. That will be a grave sin for the entire family,” Mahesh said.

Sam had then wondered about his father’ s soul. He was buried in the church cemetery and there was no ashes. Will his spirit be still wandering without refuge! What would happen when mother finally met with the inevitable?

“No, no,” Mahesh had reassured him. “For you people no ashes is also ok; only need to pray at the grave and the church. For us, the souls must go to Lord Vishnu’ s feet. After that they won’ t have to suffer anymore births and deaths. Lord Vishnu’ s feet may not be possible for you, but *moksha* is definite. Don’ t worry.”

Sam felt he shouldn’t even have tried to touch the bag. But then who, for God’s sake, left behind the urn with a soul in a bar!

They called out to Sivan. One look and Sivan realized the seriousness. The table was sponged dry one more time and the urn placed upon it. The three went to the counter and the counter burst out in anger. How could someone do this! This is not like the usual lost-and-found in the half-light. Bus conductor Murali, for example, after his three-pegs-only pledge invariably crosses six every day and regularly forgets his take-away roasted duck that he is supposed to have carried home to pacify his angry wife.

But somebody’s cremation ashes!

This has to be returned to its owner, the counter decided unanimously. First step is to find out the owner. Babu took the final order from the table, Sivan remembered. He had left early because it was his wedding anniversary. Sivan, himself in

hurry to leave for home, called Babu on his cell phone. A couple of rings and Babu responded. He heard thunder rumbling and sound of heavy downpour. Babu shouted over the rain, “Yes ...what’s the matter? It’s bloody raining.”

Sivan told him about the bag. “We wouldn’t have bothered you in this rain, but it is serious and we have to find out who was there in that seat....”

Babu, watching his bike getting soaked in the rain, shook his head in disbelief. There were four men. One was Divakaran Sir, the everyday man who, as usual, was solo in the aisle seat. The other three ... State Bank Joemon and his two friends, or was it workshop Shibu and his team? How could one be sure?

The downpour mellowed into drizzle; Babu walked towards the drenched bike, talking into the phone, “Keep it there for the night. We’ll discuss tomorrow. By then hopefully somebody may contact us.”

That sounded sensible to the men at the counter. They deputed Sam to keep the bag carefully and safely, away from rat or ant attack. It’s sacred, Gopi warned. Sam, totally unfamiliar with the ritual of collecting and storing ashes from cremation grounds, looked desperately at Ramu for help. The two took the bag respectfully and locked it inside the pantry cupboard.

Sam cycled homewards along the deserted night road, stilettos of rain stabbing him all over. He tried to sing aloud in an attempt to wipe off the uneasiness, but stopped half way feeling disgusted. Later, lying on bed, his mind raced back to the pantry shelf. A long column of rats and ants, specks of ash on their mouths, filed out of the shelf to the slow beat of a familiar marching song. Each of them began to grow in size till they filled the room and trampled over Sam in a stampede. He screamed out in his feverish sleep.

The morning was slate grey. He sat on the bed, listening to the rhythmic sound of the sewing machine from the next room. His mother Susanna was already at work. There were a couple of orders she had to finish by evening. Alice, his sister, must have left for school.

She stopped pedalling and looked at Sam sleepy eyed and brooding. He told her about the night and the bag, now under his care. She was least amused.

“I’ ve told you a hundred times to quit this stupid job. Didn’ t Joseph uncle ask you to join him at his electrical shop? You won’ t listen. You’ re chained to that dirty liquor shop and its drunks,” she swore, returning to her pedalling.

“Damn, I shouldn’ t have told her,” Sam cursed himself. How can he explain that he gets more money from the bar as tip than his salary, whenever he worked as a stand-in bearer? Where else can one expect that kind of free money? At the current pace the Bullet Classic 350cc of his dreams could be his in a few months!

He ran towards the pantry first thing in the morning after he reached the bar. Thank God, no rat march! He remembered Ramu’ s warning: “Be careful, if some rat nibbles on the pot, the sin will be yours!” He shuddered. Sivan rushed into the pantry to collect the porotta-beef ordered by an early arrival.

“Gopi sir wants you at the counter, urgent,” he told Sam.

There was a group in deep huddle across the counter. Gopi, and bearers Sivan, Babu, and Anto agreed with Uncle Sekharan’ s advice that the urn needed to be returned to its owner immediately. Sekharan, everybody’ s elder brother, was a daily presence in the bar right from the opening hour till the time of the evening *arati* at the nearby temple. He loved the half-light and remained sober, no matter how many refills went into his glass. “First, we’ ve to find out the great man

who forgot to take the ashes urn,” he told them. “There’ s a human soul trapped in it. Deal with it carefully. It will only raise the bar’ s credibility if we can return it to the owner.”

Determination was visible on the bearers’ faces as they dispersed to take orders from the pre- lunch tipplers. Sam and Ramu exchanged looks of concern from the shadows of their own separate pillars.

“Got some work, come over,” Babu shouted at Sam as he rushed to the counter for someone’ s bill. He suggested to Gopi, “First, we must contact workshop Shibu. That table is their favourite and they are usually late to leave. The workshop is on the bend after the Plantation Bus Stop.” Gopi looked up from the laptop and in a rush set the roadmap for action. Sam and Ramu will go to the workshop with the bag; take Babu’ s bike. They may return by the evening rush hour.

“Call me from the workshop,” Babu told Sam as he gave him the bike’ s key. Happy that things started rolling, Uncle Sekharan drifted away from the counter with his drink.

The team raced away with Ramu on pillion holding the bag, discomfort evident on his face. Finding the workshop and the grease-stained owner Shibu was easy. Dismembered cars and bikes waited for attention. Sam stopped the bike by the roadside and walked in; Ramu hung the bag on the bike’ s crash bar and followed him.

Shibu was blown away by Sam’ s bar-night recall; so were the owner of the Maruti Swift under repair and the other workers.

“You mean somebody left an urn with ashes in the bar?!” the surprised Swift owner asked.

Shibu couldn’ t remember any of his friends carrying a plastic bag to the bar that night. Probably he didn’ t notice it. Or was it already there before they arrived and went unnoticed? He went up to the bike. Urvashi Textiles,

Alummood, the garment shop' s name shouted from the bag. It must be someone from Alummood, the Sherlock in him whispered. Deep in thought he returned headfirst into the Swift' s open bonnet. Sam and Ramu waited patiently, hoping the man would give them some clue. Suddenly the engine revved and Shibu' s head popped up. Soon they saw the car speeding away.

It was Sharaf, the bike specialist, who came up with a clue. “ Viswan was with us, remember? He is from Alummood. His father died of cancer last week.” Shibu caught it - Oh yes! But why should Viswan come to the bar with his father' s ashes? Whatever, he rang Viswan' s number; no answer. He turned to Sam and suggested why not contact Viswan in person. “ Alummood is not too far away for you boys. Ask for Organic Viswan ... vegetables. You go, I' ll call him again.”

Sam looked at Ramu. Eyes sparkling in the unfamiliar daylight, Ramu suggested leaving the bag on the crash bar so that he won' t have to hug it all the way. The bike raced towards Organic Viswan. What if the bag fell off and the urn got broke, spilling the ashes on the road! Sam shuddered. Damn, what a day! Wind on his hair, Ramu started shouting a Shahrukh Khan hit that skipped over Sam' s helmet into the midmorning sky.

Organic Viswan' s vegetable shop was close to the main road at Alummood town centre; it was closed and a black flag flew from its front pillar. Death and mourning ... Sam and Ramu felt a wave of relief swelling inside - Viswan could be the one. The neighbouring tea shop told them his house was nearby and yes, there was a death in the family. The bikers beamed in delight much to the surprise of the man behind the samovar! They didn' t reveal the news about the son leaving his father' s cremation ashes in the bar as it would be a blow to Viswan

's local image; handing it discreetly to him would also help raise the bar's credibility.

Leaving the bike, walking up the climbing country road, they felt the mission was coming to a happy ending. The yard was green with jackfruit and mango trees. A woman was drawing water from the well near a cluster of hibiscus plants in red bloom; Viswan's wife or sister? Sam's eyes locked on the rectangular patch of scorched earth in the far corner of the yard with burnt-out pieces of logs stacked by the side - the cremation ground. Did the ashes come from there? He was not sure how to open conversation with the woman at the well.

"Viswan Chettan ...?" "Gone to Chelamattam to immerse the ashes in Periyar," the woman said.

Sam's heart sank. Ramu looked at the bag in Sam's hand. Then whose soul are we carrying!

They ambled down the road without a clue. Sam took his phone to report back to Gopi. Just when he was about to dial, it rang. Babu's tone was apologetic. "Shibu called just now. You must go to Naadukaani. Handover the bag to Dileepan of Dileepan's Food Hub. He was in the bar on the way to Varkala with his grandfather's ashes. A bag mix-up ... he took his friend's fried beef takeaway!"

Laugh or swear, Sam wondered. "But that place it up in the hills, Babuchettaa." No option, Babu said, this has to be done. A day off has been sanctioned.

Ramu enjoyed the ride uphill. He had never seen so much of lush green back in Bihar. Sam sulked. As the bike raced up the winding road, his mind wandered. Life had been tied to the half-light of the bar where days and nights remain undistinguishable. How many of those faces he saw every day must have gone to ashes by now! Has there been any case of lost souls in forgotten bags? No point in complaining. After

all, rehabilitating lost and found cremation ashes is not in the daily work menu.

Naadukaani was in afternoon snooze when it saw the bikers arriving. Dileepan's Food Hub was an asbestos-roofed modest hotel mainly serving hill travellers. There were a couple of cars and a van parked nearby. The view from the bus stop was breathtaking. Sam saw the sun beginning its descend at the western end of the expanse. Going in, Ramu was visibly delighted to notice the youngster with cleaning towel and bucket. Bengali or Bihari? Binoy said he was from Guwahati and Ramu felt a surge of camaraderie. Binoy told Sam that Dileepan will soon come by the time the returning tourists from the hill top arrive for tea and snacks. As Ramu and Binoy shared nostalgia over their distant homes, Sam walked out. The coffee plants in the nearby yard danced in the wind. He wondered what the hell he was doing in this unfamiliar hillside with a dead stranger's yearning for salvation throbbing inside a bag. He touched the bag in pain, cursed the man who left it in the bar.

Dileepan was well-built and all muscles. Sam went up to him, stuttered about the lost and found bag. He asked them to follow him behind the hotel. Not a word and not a muscle twitching on his face, Dileepan took the urn from the bag, removed the red cloth, opened the taped lid and emptied the ashes to the bottom of a banana plant. Specks of flying white ash landed on Sam's face. Shocked, he wiped it off. Dileepan kicked the soil to cover the ashes and told Sam in total dismissal: "Throw the pot somewhere else; not here, Ok? Whatever needed to be immersed has been immersed. Not your worry. Now scam!"

That took their breath away. Certainly, not the way souls are liberated, Sam thought while riding back. He felt deeply hurt ... desperate. Ramu was silent. "He didn't immerse

anything. Liar. He simply ignored it,” Sam shouted into the wind. The bike sped down the hill.

It was while crossing the old iron bridge that Sam remembered to discard the pot. He stopped, took the empty, open pot from the bag. There were traces of ash remaining inside. Sam felt a strange sensation passing through him. He walked back, parted the riverside bush and, without taking off his jeans and T-shirt, entered the river holding the pot with both hands.

Surprised, Ramchand stood watching his friend raising his hands to the sunset-sky, saying aloud “Please, Jesus, bless this soul with salvation!”

Sam slowly descended into the water holding the urn close to his chest. It bubbled and disappeared into the river, leaving on the surface the last traces of a stranger’s soul.

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