

Cheat!

There is pain coming from every part of my body. I am hanging from a wooden beam¹¹ in a large room. My hands are tied to the beam with rope and my feet are a metre above the floor. Inspector Godbole has been hitting me for more than an hour. Earlier, he pushed my head into some water and held it there. I nearly drowned.

Now he is holding a pen and a piece of paper in front of me. The words on the paper say:

I, Ram Mohammad Thomas, cheated on the quiz show Who Will Win a Billion? and I will not take my prize or any other prize. I am very sorry.

Inspector Godbole wants me to sign my name on the paper. It is not true, I did not cheat on the show, but the television company cannot afford to pay me a billion rupees.

The pain is terrible. I cannot stand much more of it.

Suddenly, I hear voices shouting. Then a young woman comes into the room. She has long black hair and nice teeth. She is carrying a brown bag.

‘Who are you?’ shouts Godbole.

‘My name is Smita Shah,’ the woman tells him. ‘I’m Mr Ram Mohammad Thomas’ lawyer.’ She looks at my body hanging from the beam, then she quickly looks away. ‘This is against the law,’ she says. ‘Stop it now!’

Godbole is very surprised. So am I. I have never seen this woman before. And I cannot afford to pay for a lawyer.

‘His lawyer?’ says Godbole. ‘You’re his lawyer?’



'I'm Mr Ram Mohammad Thomas' lawyer.'

'Yes,' she says. 'I want to see the papers for his arrest¹². Give them to me now, or I'll take Mr Thomas from the police station to talk with him privately.'

'Er ... I ... I'll have to speak to ... to the Commissioner,' says Godbole. 'Please wait.'

Then he hurries from the room.

I do not know when Godbole returns to the room. By then I have fainted¹³ – from pain, hunger and happiness.

It is late evening. I am at Smita's house in Bandra, a very nice part of Mumbai. I have eaten and slept, and now I am sitting on a large sofa in her sitting room. Smita is sitting with me on the edge of the sofa. She is holding a DVD.

'I've got a DVD of the quiz show,' she says. 'Now we can look at it carefully. How were you able to answer all those questions? Did you cheat? You must tell me the truth, Ram.'

'Can I trust her?' I ask myself. I take out my lucky one-rupee coin. 'Heads¹⁴ I talk to her, tails I say goodbye.' I throw the coin into the air. It comes down on heads.

'I was lucky,' I say to Smita.

'Lucky?' she replies. 'You *guessed* the correct answers?'

'No, I didn't guess them,' I say. 'I knew them.'

'So why were you lucky?' she asks.

'I was lucky because he asked me *those* questions,' I say.

Smita is silent for a moment. Then she says, 'Begin with question one. And promise to tell me the truth.'

'I promise,' I say.

Smita takes the shiny DVD from its cover and puts it into the DVD player.

Father Timothy

I was found outside the Church of St Mary in Delhi eighteen years ago on Christmas Day. Who put me there and why? I do not know. But I lived at St Mary's Church orphanage¹⁵ for two years before Father Timothy, a kind priest, gave me a home. He also gave me a name.

'I'll call the boy Ram Mohammad Thomas,' he said. 'That will make people of all religions happy to meet him.'

Father Timothy had a very large house near the church, which had a big garden full of fruit trees. He had lived in India for many years, but he was born in York, in the north of England. Three times a year, Father Timothy went to England to visit his mother. He taught me to speak English, and my six years with him were the happiest of my life.

Many street children came to the church gardens to play cricket and football, and I soon began to feel part of a big family.

Father Timothy taught me about the life of Jesus¹⁶, and I learnt about other religions from the street children and their parents.

The church had coloured glass windows. Above the altar¹⁷ was a large crucifix of Christ and the letters INRI. I often looked up at it as I sat and enjoyed the church music and I loved the Christmas tree at Christmas.

For the first few years of my life, I believed that Father Timothy was my real father. I was surprised to hear other people call him Father, and that I had so many brothers and sisters. Also, Father Timothy was white and I was not, and I found this strange. One day I asked him about it and he explained that I was an orphan child. For the first time I understood the

difference between Father – which is what people call their priest – and a father of children in a family. That night, I cried myself to sleep.

Father Timothy was a wonderful priest. I saw him give money to poor people and visit the sick. He always had a smile on his face.

I was eight years old when he died. It was the worst day of my young life.

‘It’s a sad story, Ram,’ Smita says to me now. ‘What happened to you then?’

‘I was sent to a children’s home,’ I say.

‘I see,’ she replies. She looks at me sadly for a moment. Then she says, ‘Now tell me about the first question.’ And she presses ‘Play’ on the DVD player. We sit and watch the first question from *Who Will Win a Billion?*

Prem Kumar was the quiz’s presenter¹⁸. He whispered to me, ‘For the first question, I’ll ask you, “What do the letters FBI mean?” Have you heard of the FBI?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘Listen, we want you to win a little money, so I can change the question,’ he said.

I thought for a moment. ‘I don’t know about FBI, but I know INRI,’ I said. ‘It’s written on the top of a crucifix in church.’

The quiz show began.

‘Tonight we’ve got Mr Ram Mohammad Thomas in the studio, from our very own Mumbai,’ Prem Kumar said. ‘What do you do, Mr Thomas?’

‘I’m a waiter at Jimmy’s Bar and Restaurant,’ I explained.

‘I see. Well, Mr Thomas, you seem to have all the religions in your name so you may know the answer to this question.’

'Here it comes, for one thousand rupees. What are the letters on a crucifix: a) IRNI, b) INRI, c) RINI or d) NIRI? Do you understand the question, Mr Thomas?'

'Yes,' I replied. 'The answer is B. INRI.'

'Are you absolutely sure?'

'Yes,' I said.

There was the sound of drums. The correct answer lit up on the screen.

'Absolutely correct!' said Prem Kumar. 'You have won one thousand rupees.'