

Penguin



Readers



SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE

BASED ON THE NOVEL Q&A BY VIKAS SWARUP

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Introduction

18 years of age, Mumbai

My name is Ram Mohammad Thomas, and I have been arrested for winning a **quiz** show.

They came for me late last night, broke open my door and took me away. Not one of my neighbours came out to stare. That is because I live in Dharavi, a **slum** where arrests happen every day. The people around me there are so poor they often have nothing to eat. Life is hard there, and that sometimes means doing things that we should not do. So I did not ask the police why they were taking me. We are all used to the police thinking that we must be guilty of some crime or other.

Now, I am in a small, dirty police **cell**. It is very hot, and I am hungry. **Inspector** Godbole comes and takes me to be questioned for the second time. He is in his mid-forties and has no hair, and yet he has a large moustache.

“Ram Mohammad Thomas – what kind of a name is that, mixing up all the religions?” he says.

I say nothing. I am used to people treating me badly and laughing at my name. Godbole pushes me into a small room, where two men are waiting for me. I recognize one of them – he is one of the men from the quiz show. I do not know the other man, who is white and is wearing a suit and tie. He is the first to speak.

“So, this is our famous winner!” I can tell that this man is

American by the way he speaks. He sounds the same as the rich tourists from the United States of America that I have met in Agra.

“My name is Neil Johnson. I work for NewAge Telemedia, the company that runs the quiz. This is Billy Nanda, the **producer**.”

I understand everything they are saying. But boys from Dharavi – or “slumdogs” as people often call us – do not speak to important men. And they cannot usually speak English. So I say nothing.

“Nanda,” he says to the other man, “this boy understands English, doesn’t he?”

“Are you crazy?” replies Nanda. “He lives in a slum and is just a stupid waiter in a restaurant!”

Godbole had left the room, but now he opens the door and lets a fat man in. “I came as soon as I got the message from Mr Mikhailov,” says the newly arrived man.

Neil Johnson stands up and greets him. “Mr **Commissioner**. Thank you for coming. I know that you and Mr Mikhailov are old friends. We need your help on *Who Will Win a Billion?*. Do you know it? It’s the new TV quiz show that we’re producing.”

“I’ve heard of it,” says the Commissioner. “Why do you need me?”

“This boy was a **contestant** on the show last week, and he answered all twelve questions correctly. So he won a billion **rupees**,” says Johnson.

“What? You must be joking!”

“It’s no joke. But we haven’t shown it on TV yet, so not many people know about it.”

“OK. So, what’s the problem?” says the Commissioner.

Johnson now speaks more quietly. “Mr Mikhailov doesn’t have the money to pay the prize at the moment. We didn’t expect the top prize to be won yet. In eight months, we will make enough money from the paid advertisements. But we don’t have that amount of money now.”

“I see. So, what do you want me to do?” asks the Commissioner.

“I want your help to prove that Thomas cheated. Think about it – he’s a poor waiter who has never been to school. He probably can’t even read. He said he was just lucky, but it’s impossible that he could know all twelve answers, or guess and get them right.”

“But there are people who didn’t go to school but are clever – take Albert Einstein, for example . . .” replies the Commissioner.

“Listen, he’s definitely no Einstein,” says Johnson, and he nods to Nanda.

Nanda speaks to me in **Hindi**. “If you are clever enough to win the top prize on our show, prove it. We want you to answer some much easier questions now.” He sits down on a chair next to me.

“OK,” he asks me. “What type of money is used in France? Is it: a) the dollar, b) the pound, c) the euro, or d) the franc?”

I say nothing. Suddenly, the Commissioner walks towards me and hits me hard across the face. “Answer or I’ll break your nose!” he shouts. Nanda looks shocked.

“The franc,” I say.

“Wrong. Question two. Who was the first man to walk on the moon? Was it: a) Edwin Aldrin, b) Neil Armstrong, c) Yuri Gagarin, or d) Jimmy Carter?”

“I don’t know.” They ask me two more questions, and I get them wrong, too.

Nanda turns to the Commissioner and speaks in English again. “See? I told you – he doesn’t have a **clue**. He *must* be a cheat! We just haven’t worked out how he did it yet.”

The Commissioner looks Johnson directly in the eyes and says, “So . . . you want me to make sure he goes to jail. But why would I do that?”

“Don’t worry,” says Johnson, quietly, “Mr Mikhailov would . . . let’s say . . . be sure to thank you afterwards.”

The Commissioner nods and calls Inspector Godbole back into the room. “Godbole,” he says, “can you get this boy to speak?”

“Yes, sir, if you allow me to hurt him.”

“No way!” says Nanda. “If the newspapers find out he’s been badly treated, we’ll be finished.”

“Don’t worry,” the Commissioner says, calmly, and turns to Godbole. “There won’t be any signs of it afterwards, will there, Inspector?”

“No, sir. I’ll be careful. There won’t be a mark on him.”

Nanda and Johnson say nothing. I stare at the floor. I feel sick.

What happens next is awful. I am taken away, and I am

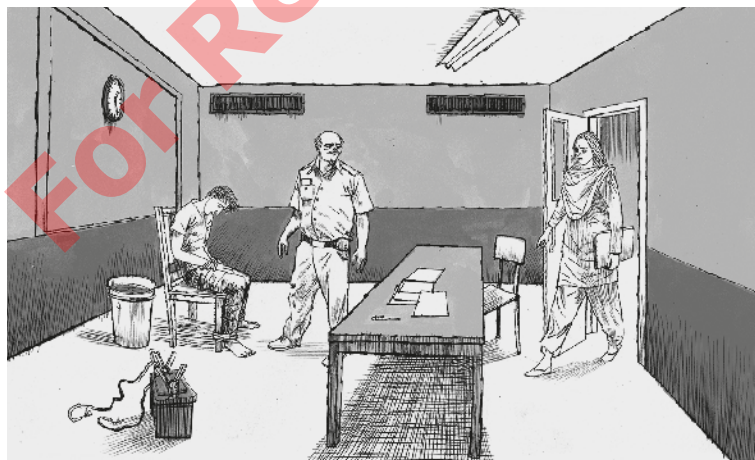
shouted at and hurt in terrible ways. My head is held under water. Electricity is passed through my body.

“Who told you the answers? Who?” shouts Godbole. “Tell me, and I’ll stop.” I feel so sick, and I am in so much pain that I start to **pass out**. He hits me around the face, which wakes me up a little, and he pushes a pen and piece of paper with writing on it in front of me. “**Sign it!**” he demands.

I **glance** down at the sheet of paper. I know that I cannot take much more of this. Soon, I will have to sign my name.

Suddenly, I hear shouting. Then, the door opens, and a young woman enters. She is well dressed and has nice teeth and long black hair. She walks forward and then stares directly at Godbole. Godbole is so surprised that he says nothing.

“My name is Smita Shah,” the woman says, confidently. “I am Mr Ram Mohammad Thomas’s lawyer.”



Godbole is shocked, but not as shocked as I am. I have no idea who this woman is.

“What you are doing to Mr Thomas is completely **illegal**,” she says. “It must stop immediately. Unless you can show me the correct papers for his arrest, I’m taking Mr Thomas away.”

“Erm . . . I . . . I’ll have to speak to the Commissioner. Please wait,” says Godbole, nervously, and leaves the room. I am still feeling sick, and I am still in pain. I pass out.

Much later, I am sitting on an expensive sofa holding a hot cup of tea. I am in Smita Shah’s flat. She has given me food and drink, and I have slept. I still do not know why she came to the police station. All she has told me is that she read about me in the newspaper and came as soon as she could.

“I’ve managed to get a DVD that shows you answering the quiz questions. We can watch it together,” she says. “I want you to explain to me how you were able to answer all those questions. And I want you to tell me the truth. I’m here to protect you.”

I start to worry. Who is she working for? Can I trust her? I take out my lucky one-rupee coin. **Heads**, I will trust her. **Tails**, I will not. I throw it in the air and catch it. It is heads.

“I was just lucky,” I tell her.

“So you guessed the answers, and by luck you got all twelve correct?”

“No. I didn’t guess them. I knew them,” I say. “I was lucky that they only asked questions I knew the answer to.”