



THE GOLD BANGLE

FABIYAS M V

A piercing cry rises above the lullaby. Being worried, Ninu calls Roj, who is pruning the orange hibiscus plant in the garden. He comes hastily, putting down the shears. Both of them try to soothe their baby.

Ninu goes to the kitchen and then returns with a teaspoonful of ginger honey syrup, the home-made medicine for stomach ache. But this medicine utterly fails, the baby doesn't cease crying.

"Roj, we had better take our baby to hospital," Ninu suggests. Before entering the car, Ninu calls Varna, who prepares the baby food, grinding the dried raw banana slices.

"We're going to hospital. Close the front door, and take care of the house," Ninu tells Varna authoritatively.

Sweeping the floor, washing clothes, slicing vegetables, gutting fish ... Varna is usually busy in Ninu's house.

Varna is a domestic laborer. She knows well that she can never complete her house construction, though started, with her meager income. An evil desire runs over the breakwater of her moral sense. She climbs up the wooden stairs. Ninu's bedroom door is open; she doesn't hesitate to enter.

With a round face and skin the color of Nescafe, Varna is a young woman. Her charms are neglected in her penury. It's true that her husband is no match for her. His appearance resembles a fried sardine. He is lazy as well as itchy, and spends his time watching porn videos on his mobile phone. Despite Ninu's compulsion, he rarely goes to work.

Varna stands in Ninu's upstairs bedroom. Fear waves pass through her veins. She feels that her master and mistress will return soon. Conquering her conscience, she pulls out the top

drawer. She finds three gold bangles and a pair of ruby earrings in the drawer. After staring at the ornaments for a couple of minutes, she takes one of the bangles, and then tucks it inside her brassiere. Her underclothing has already been soaked in sweat. Wiping her face with her cotton shawl, she climbs down the stairs.



e-warder (*The Fast & the Furious*) ~ Duncan Poulton

After an hour, Ninu and Roj come back with their baby.

“Ninu thatha, what did the doctor say? Is she OK now?” *Thatha* is a respectful word to address a Muslim woman.

“Nothing to worry, she is all right now,” Ninu tells Varna, patting her baby on the back.

Varna tries to make the baby smile through some playful gestures, concealing her guilty conscience.

An Asian koel’s unmixed voice flows from the java plum tree in the yard, as if to cool the humidity. The musical clock in the living room announces time sweetly.

“It’s one o’clock. You can go now, Varna.” Ninu permits her domestic laborer to go home.

Ninu is on maternity leave. Both Ninu and Roj work in the same school. Being locked down following the pandemic, they are more or less like the lovebirds in the cage in their front yard. Most of the time, they are watching TV.

Ninu climbs up the stairs with her baby sleeping on the shoulder. She, too, is heavy-eyed.

O Almighty! Who opened my drawer? She lays her baby down on the bed, and then tries to ensure her ornaments are safe in the drawer. But it's more than a shock. Her precious gold bangle is missing.

"Roj ... did you see my bangle?" Ninu cries aloud.

Roj joins her; they search everywhere in vain.

"Who took it from the drawer? Did a thief enter our home?" Roj's questions are unanswered. Ninu is gloomy, pondering over the loss. She utters, "The one and only person, who was in our house in our absence, is undoubtedly Varna."

"Oh, it's unbelievable! She's not new in our house."

"Roj, you see the doors were locked in our absence. No burglary happened. So it was taken by someone inside our house." Ninu speaks like a detective.

Roj praises his wife's prudence. Finally, he makes up his mind to let Ninu call and question Varna.

Receiving Ninu's call, Varna comes, panting. "Why do you want to see me, Ninu Thatha?"

"You must know a sad thing. My gold bangle is missing. Did you see it?" Ninu speaks without a veil. Her voice is heavy. Varna's visage turns darker instantaneously. Her eyes seem unable to focus on anything.

"No, I didn't see it. I was in the kitchen, preparing the baby food until you came," Varna defends the arrows. Yet a shade of guilt reflects on her face, for she is not a professional thief.

"You know there's a hidden camera set up in the upstairs. I'm going to check it," Roj's voice is threatening. In a flash, fear protrudes from Varna's mind. She stands as a statue of shock. In truth, there was not any hidden camera.

Ninu and Roj closely observe the changing patterns of expressions on Varna's face.

Varna feels she is losing herself. Soon she leaves the place, saying, "Excuse me, I've to go home now to prepare lunch for my husband. I'll come back soon."

What to do next? Roj's mind is misty. If I make a complaint to the police, will it be successful? Surely she will deny the charges against her. There is no solid evidence to believe that she has stolen the bangle. Only circumstantial suppositions. If she is really innocent, it will have a tragic consequence.

Roj remembers that a tribal youth was allegedly beaten to death for stealing in 2018. There was a storm of protest against that brutal lynching. He thinks that he should be vigilant while dealing with the present issue, especially when the accused is a young woman.

Ninu can never forget the loss of her precious bangle. For a woman, especially for a woman on the Kanoli Bank, a gold ornament is a part of her soul.

But Roj doesn't loathe Varna. A young woman's struggles to put up a small house begin to work in his mind. She deserves human consideration. Poverty is a humiliating factor.

"Roj, an idea comes to my mind, and it may be successful. I'll call Varna now; ask her to come to do domestic duties tomorrow. If she has taken the bangle, she is likely to drop it somewhere in our house because of her guilty conscience. No doubt, she is a sensitive lady." Ninu discloses her plan, and Roj doesn't rule out the possibility.

Unfortunately, Varna does not attend to Ninu's call. She dials again and again, but in vain. Maybe Varna foresees what Ninu has to talk with her about.

Ninu and Roj sit at the dining table, sipping warm brown jaggery tea. They are silent, staring at each other. A muezzin's loud call to prayer can be heard from the nearest mosque. Ninu covers her head with the end of her sari. She is the daughter of a Muslim mechanic. She was in love with the cat eyed Roj for a few years before their wedding. Roj belongs to an old orthodox Christian family. Today, inter-caste marriages are not rare here.

"Are you still asleep, Roj? I had a dream last night in which I found the lost bangle in the stone mortar in the kitchen. Varna stood near the oven, smiling," Ninu says, attempting to wake her husband up.

Roj sits in the bed, leaning against the pillow; sleep still hangs in his eyes.

"I want to recover my precious bangle somehow, darling."

"Let's try." Roj comforts Ninu, and then goes to brush his teeth.

Receiving a WhatsApp message from Varna's friend, Ninu and Roj set out to the well-known Lotus Pond. Now, lotus is only in its name. The common water hyacinths with violet blooms thrive in the large pond instead of the lotus plants.

Varna's friend confirms that Varna has stolen the bangle. Occasionally this friend comes to do domestic work for Ninu when Varna is absent. The friend is jealous and malicious by nature.

It's on the verge of Lotus Pond that Varna has been building her small house. Only the basement has been constructed.

Varna is sieving river sand, using a blue net to remove tiny pebbles, oyster shells, and other waste materials. The sand is for cement mixing.

Can she complete her house construction in this century? This question grows in Roj's mind. Her earnings are very small. Dreams drown in poverty.

At the sight of her master and mistress, Varna stops sieving sand and goes running to them. She holds Ninu's hand lovingly, and then welcomes them. But Ninu and Roj are owl-faced. Soon, Ninu shoots sharp questions: "What did you decide? Why don't you attend my call? Why don't you come to our house?" Varna, pop-eyed, cannot move her tongue. She stands like the scarecrow before her house construction site.

Ninu goes on shooting questions in a belligerent way: "Why are you silent like a puppet? Did you gobble your tongue?" Varna's face is as frozen as a corpse.

Ninu threatens Varna. "I'm going to complain about the theft to the police. They will question you."

"I've not taken your bangle. If you complain to the police, I will surely commit suicide," Varna says feebly.

"Never think of suicide, Varna," Roj chimes in. He soothes her, "We don't want to harass you. We've come here to call you for our domestic work. We hope you will resume your service in our house shortly."

As the master and mistress say goodbye, Varna, her arms akimbo, remains poker-faced on the verge of Lotus Pond.

While strolling back to their house, Roj whispers in Ninu's ear, "I'll buy a new bangle for you. Certainly life is worthier than a bangle."

"But the lost bangle is worthier than life to me," Ninu's dismay echoes in her voice. It was the first gift that Roj gifted her with during their good old romantic years. She knows well that memory and nostalgia cannot be brought from a jewelry store.

Contemplating the lost bangle, Ninu loses her sleep. Her mind burns like a fireplace until she falls asleep in the midnight.

Next morning, an old grinder shatters the silence in the kitchen. With her baby sleeping on her shoulder, Ninu watches Varna grinding red chili.

"Varna, I'm so sad. I think I've irrecoverably lost my bangle."

Varna keeps silent. Her guilt has been growing in her conscience.

“I’m going to consult with Koodathara Thangal next week. The one who stole my bangle will certainly have to face the evil consequences,” Ninu utters threateningly, unable to tame her emotion. Koodathara Thangal is a known clairvoyant and necromancer. Sudden waves of shock are distinctly visible on Varna’s face.

Being superstitious like her neighbors, thoughts of doom sprout in Varna’s fragile mind. She cannot sip and enjoy her evening tea. A black cat stares at her. Where did it come from? She has never seen this cat before. Getting up from the old chair in the yard, she goes in with the cup of tea. Her mobile phone rings. She doesn’t know why its ringtone petrifies her.

She has been waiting for financial assistance from the state government for a couple of years. The phone from the secretary of Manayur Panchayat is quite unexpected. Varna’s eyes get wet, hearing that she has been granted the financial assistance for her house construction.

Next day. It’s 9:30 a.m.. Varna hurries to Manayur Rural Bank, where she has pawned Ninu’s bangle for forty thousand rupees, from the office of Manayur Panchayat.

Summer sun emerges out of its crimson layette. Ninu helps Roj prune plants in the garden while Varna, who has come earlier than usual, stealthily climbs up the stairs with the gold bangle kept inside her blouse. Her throat is dry. There is sweat around her neck.

Ninu goes upstairs for the midday prayer. She takes the prayer mat out of the shelf. As she unfolds the mat, a ringing sound surprises her. God Almighty! My lost bangle! Her delight is beyond definition.

Instead of inferring that the bangle has been put back by Varna, Ninu cogitates about God’s grace and magic. She kneels on the prayer mat; her eyes are moist with rapture.

Fabiyas M V is a writer from Orumanayur village in Kerala, India. He is the author of *Monsoon Turbulence*, *Shelter within the Peanut Shells*, *Kanoli Kaleidoscope*, *Eternal Fragments*, *Stringless Lives*, and *Moonlight and Solitude*. His fiction and poetry have appeared in several anthologies, magazines, and journals. He has won many international accolades including the Merseyside at War Poetry Award from Liverpool University and the Animal Poetry Prize 2012 from the Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelties against Animals. He was the finalist for Global Poetry Prize 2015 by the United Poets Laureate International in Vienna. His poems have been broadcast on All India Radio. Poetry Nook, US, has nominated him for the 2019 Pushcart Prize. He has been working as a teacher in English at Government Higher Secondary School, Maranchery in Kerala.

[Duncan Poulton](#) is an artist based between Birmingham and London, UK. His work has recently been exhibited and screened at Ars Electronica; MOSTYN, Llandudno; Coventry Biennial; Art Licks

Weekend, London; QUAD, Derby; OUTPOST, Norwich; MIT Museum, Massachusetts; Eastside Projects, Birmingham; arebyte, London; CICA Museum, South Korea; and Transmediale, Berlin. He graduated from the University of Brighton in 2015, and from 2019-2021 he participated in The Syllabus, an alternative learning programme led by Wysing Arts Centre and arts venues across England.

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