

SHORT STORY

THE SECRET

I always think of Kaka as an old man. As far back as I can remember, from the days of my early childhood, Kaka was already old. Kaka, as I learned much later, was not a blood relative. He had been a close associate of my grandfather and even my father called him Kaka. Kaka stayed in a sort of outhouse on our grounds, a stone's throw from the house where we lived. According to family lore my grandfather, as a young man, was an extremely adventurous type – quite unlike his son, my father, who had always preferred the quiet rural life – and Kaka had been a constant companion on his romps.

Grandfather had passed away quite some years back at a ripe old age so Kaka, the constant companion of his youth, must have been of an even riper old age.

As happens so often in families, the youngest and the oldest get thrown together and so it was with Kaka and me. Since he had been quite the old roysterer he had plenty of memories from the old days with my grandfather and, sitting on our sunny lawns as a child, I remember hearing a lot of these old yarns. Looking back now, I suppose none of these were quite as he had described them, age and time do fade the actual incidents lending them a flavour of fantasy, but I still have vivid memories of some of the old treasure stories Kaka had told me.

It always began with how it was a big secret and how I should never tell anyone else. At the end of each and every one of them, he would give a rip roaring laugh so I could never make out if they were for real or just figments of his imagination.

One of the secret stories he had told me about was of buried treasure behind his outhouse. The only problem was, he would never let me do any digging anywhere near the old outhouse or, for that matter, anywhere else on our grounds. No, he was of the opinion that if you went digging, you would get entrapped by adventure-lust and, according to him, there were no treasure adventures left in this world. Go to school, he used to tell me, study hard, he used to tell me, that is the only way in today's world.

I completed school and had to leave our small town, since there were no proper institutions of higher education in the district. My parents felt that college was a must and old Kaka was of a similar opinion. I grudgingly left my youthful homestead and went to college in the big city. I graduated in economics, making the capital markets my speciality and was soon doing fairly well, at least as far as wealth was concerned. Somehow, it's everyone's opinion that if you were doing well from the money angle, you were doing well in everything, and you must be happy.

Initially I accepted the city life only grudgingly, but soon I was swimming in it. Late nights, bright lights, hectic days were all part and parcel of the fun of my late youth. Very different from the staid, sedate years of my childhood when one got up with the break of day and went to bed a couple of hours after the sun had set.

I did not visit my hometown often, so caught up was I with the crazy, kaleidoscopic life I was so thoroughly enjoying. I suppose the roistering genes of my grandfather skipped a generation and lay latent in me till I landed up in the city. Not that I did not think of the old place; I did, not very often, but on an occasional evening when I was sitting around doing

nothing in particular, I did.

Over the years Kaka had passed on at a very ripe old age. Soon my parents were also old and I decided to go back home. The longing had always been there.

After I went back I found that time had taken its toll on our old home. Old Kaka's place was in a decrepit state. I decided to put the money I had made to use and started renovating all the old structures. However, according to the architects, old Kaka's place was finished. There was no way the old structure could be repaired. It would have to come down. For me this was heart-wrenching since it was a part of my childhood, but they were adamant.

The day was set to tear down the old out house. I decided that I had to be there at the time of the demolition. I stood with an aching heart as the process of bringing down the structure commenced. Suddenly there was this huge commotion – as the place was being brought down a huge hole opened up in the ground! All my memories came flooding back, Good God, the secret treasure he had spoken of those years back! We called for torches and examined the hole. I climbed down with some of the others inside the chamber. It contained mostly old mementoes but there was also an old rusty metal crate. The excitement inside me was intense. Treasure!!

We hauled the case out into the open and prised open the old lock. I opened it and inside was an incredible sight. Stacked in piles were notes of currency! Lots of notes of currency!! Huge amounts of notes of currency!!!

My God, I thought, Kaka was not joking! Buried treasure!!

I hauled the crate into the house and showed it to my parents. Excitement! Lots of excitement! It lasted about ten minutes. My father looked at the old notes and started laughing. They were of no value at all. These notes, all this currency, had been demonetised way back in 1978!!!

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