

Revenge

Or

Who's Got the Money?

A short story

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Rama let the phone ring twice while he finished typing an expenses sum into his monthly P&L spreadsheet. Still looking over his numbers, he picked up the handset before it rang again.

"Hello."

"Rama Gupta. Do you recognize my voice?"

He sat back in his chair and stared at the phone receiver. Returning it to his ear, he asked, "Who is this?"

"Do you recognize my voice?"

"You sound like me. Who are you?"

"Your children are safe. Do as I say and they will remain so."

"Children? Sanjay and Prochy? They are in school."

"I will contact you again in one hour. Write this down: \$300,000. Today. No media. No press. No Internet stories. Repeat it back to me."

"Are you saying you have my children?"

"Repeat it back to me."

"Fine. Fine. \$300,000 and you will contact me in an hour."

"And?"

"No press."

"And?"

"Nothing on the internet."

The phone disconnected.

Rama unlocked his cell phone and speed-dialed the school.

"Farenthold Academy. This is Sheila, how may I help you?"

"This is Rama Gupta. I would like to know if my children are in school."

"Why, no, Mister Gupta. Your driver picked them up about a half hour ago."

He stood up, pushing his chair back. "I am sorry, what did you say?"

"Half an hour ago. The driver was right on time. Has something happened?"

"My children are not in school?"

Rama circled his desk.

"Why, no sir. As I said, your driver Mister Martell came by and got the children from here in the office."

He stopped pacing. "You gave my boy and girl to a *stranger*?"

"Absolutely not, sir. He was your driver. A nice fella. We followed your instructions to the letter."

"My what? I gave no instructions. I have no driver." Rama repeated the U path around his desk.

"Sir, today is the children's field trip. You called me several times about it this past week. Mister Martell was the man in the picture in the computer link you sent me. He used the code word you told me to expect. Benton night."

While she spoke, Rama thought about the voice he'd heard over the phone. Realization sank in. Someone who could mimic his voice perfectly had his children.

"Sheila. Did you ever talk with this person face-to-face?"

"Oh yes. Mister Martell came right into the office."

"Did Mister Martell sound like me, Sheila?"

"No sir. He sounded like an Okie."

"I am talking about the man on the phone. Have you met him?"

"I'm confused, Mister Gupta. I've met you several times."

"Listen to me carefully. I did not call you about Mister Martell. My children have been kidnapped." He stopped pacing for a moment. "And you, Sheila, gave them to the kidnappers."

"Oh. Oh my. Oh dear. Mister Gupta, have you called the police?"

He glanced down at his memo pad. No press. No Internet. He didn't say no police.

"No. I shall do that now. Sheila, do not talk with anyone until you hear from the police. And do not talk to anyone who sounds like me unless you hear the word ... uh ... oil shale."

"Oil shale. OK. I'm so sorry Mister Gupta. I was sure it was you. I recognized your signature on the forms and your voice on the phone and I thought it was you."

"Fine. Get everything together that you can, but do not talk with anyone. Not anyone."

"I have to tell the headmistress. I can't not tell her."

"OK, OK. But no one else. She must keep this quiet. Sanjay and Prochy are in danger."

"Yes, sir."

OK, let me tell you up front that I don't know what Rama actually said to the lady at the school. But I've studied him and I spoke with Sheila several times, so I imagine it went something like that, although I think he made her feel more guilty than I could portray here.

I've read everything in the paper, on the Web, in blogs and anywhere else I could find. Plus what I could catch on TV or their sites. Rama actually used that code word. It slipped out when a reporter interviewed Sheila the next day. I'm pretty sure the cops didn't want that to happen, but it did. "Oil shale." How typical.

Who am I? Fair question, but let me dodge it for now. It's not important yet.

If you lived in Houston when this happened, you'll know the general outlines of the story. ... or if you're a weird-crimes hound ... or a conspiracist. Or if you spend as much time on the Internet as I do.

Like I said, some of this I've had to make up, because ... well ... I wasn't there, was I? You'll have to take me at my word on that. But that's a catch-22, isn't it? I just told you that I make things up, so how can you believe anything I tell you. Well, maybe you ought to just put this down and go back to your Grisham novel. I won't care.

Let's get back to the kidnapping and I'll tell you what happened to Sanjay and Prochy.

Sheila told Rama the truth as she knew it. She thought she'd had a number of conversations with him the previous week. Of course, she'd met him in person several times over the past few years. Sanjay had started his fifth year at the private Farenthold Academy and Prochy her third. They were good kids. Rama and Prava worked hard to be good parents, engaged with their kids, and their children learned to be polite and deferential to adults. The Guptas were not on speed-dial with the administration at Farenthold, but they came to the school for

every parent-teacher event and Prava brought an Indian feast for the kids' classes every year. Sheila knew Rama, and when he called, she always recognized his voice.

Rama has a lilt that is typical of many Indians speaking English, but he has an even more distinct way of speaking. He enunciates each word individually. On top of that, he doesn't use contractions. Well, in all the transcripts, and in all the recordings, I can't recall a single instance. Maybe he did when emotionally upset, but I don't think he used one throughout the kidnapping ordeal, so I doubt that he ever used them. I've made a guess as to why based on what I've read. As a young engineer fresh out of a masters program at IIT and working for the first time outside India, his coworkers couldn't understand his accent. Careful enunciation was his solution, and it became a habit for him. Oh, and he has a tendency to overuse the interjections "Fine" and "Of course." Figure out your own deep psychological explanation of that. I know I have. Of course, from him, these words almost have no meaning.

There's a point to my digression. If you've ever spoken with Rama, you'll recognize his voice next time you hear it. Sheila had no doubt who called her.

Let me give you a flavor of the calls from the faux Rama. Based on my research, the several calls setting up the kidnapping probably went like this.

"Farenthold Academy. This is Sheila, how may I help you?"

"Good morning, Sheila. This is Mr. Rama Gupta. How are you today?"

"I'm fine, sir. And you?"

"Just peachy, thank you. In fact, quite happy. I am planning a surprise for my children, Sanjay and Prochy for next week. Can you help me to keep a secret, Sheila?"

"Is it a good surprise, Mr. Gupta?"

"Of course, Sheila. It will be a special outing for them, but it must be on a school day. Can you help me arrange that?"

"Well, I'll need to clear everything with the headmistress."

"Fine, fine. I will send you an email. I cannot use my home email address. Sanjay is already almost as big a computer geek as his father, but I still have a few tricks he will not know."

Right after the call, she got a note from a gmail account, including an attachment with a signed request to take the two children out of school on March 17 at 10 am, to be taken home at the end of the day. She put hard copies of the information into a new file.

A few days later, Rama called again.

"I have arranged for my driver to pick the children up."

"Won't you be with him?"

"No. But I have given him a code word to use. It is bentonite. Can you repeat that?"

"Benton night." She wrote the words down. She thought it was an Indian holiday.

"And of course, you will have a picture of him. His name is Mike Martell. I will give you a URL that has his picture."

She looked up the URL while he stayed on the phone, and then printed off the picture of Martell. "This doesn't look like a limo company Web site, Mr. Gupta."

“Fine, fine. I have used Mr. Martell for several years, but unfortunately his company folded a few months ago. Of course he had to lay off his whole crew and sell most of his cars. He still drives for a few of his old clients, enough to keep him busy. He kept his image online for situations like this.”

On the morning of the 17th, Rama called again at about 9:15. He asked Sheila to have his children in the main office by the front entrance a little before 10:00.

Mike Martell rolled in promptly at 10:00. A short man in his mid-forties with a full head of dark brown hair, he looks exactly like his Web picture. He has freckles and a winning smile, and as Sheila guessed, he grew up in Oklahoma. He repeated the code word, bentonite.

Sheila told the kids they were going for a special treat their Dad had arranged. They went with the driver. Sheila watched the trusting souls get into a black Town Car. She didn't think to get the license number.

We'll come back to the kids, later. Of course, you don't need to worry too much about Sanjay and Prochy. If you saw the stories in the papers, you know that it all ends well for them. And if you didn't, well, sorry. Spoiler Alert!

Let's move back to their father. The real one, not the ersatz one that Sheila unwittingly assisted. I can see him in his office, pacing. Rama paced a lot. It wasn't a nervous tic. I'm convinced he thinks that he thinks more clearly when he's moving around. Sorry for the convolution there, but you know what I mean.

After Rama's call to the West Houston Precinct, Detective Bill Barton rushed north on Dairy Ashford to the Energy Corridor. Rama's office occupied a corner of a midlevel floor in one of the high-rises in the WestLake complex. Two police technicians came with the detective to set up traces on the phones.

Rama Gupta was a section VP for Ambergris Petroleum, the international oil company formed by the merger of Amberjack Oil and Gas and the British company Tellegris Production two years ago. We'll touch on his work history again in a bit.

This seems like a good time to mention that Prava Gupta, his wife and the mother of Sanjay and Prochy, doesn't work outside the home. Rama considered it a point of pride that he could provide for his whole family alone. On the day before the kidnapping, she flew to visit her sister in Dallas. Rama called to tell her to come home, and she got a ticket on Southwest Airlines arriving Hobby at 2:30. Her sister came with her. They don't really play a part in this, but I thought you should know about her.

The police arrived about 11:10. By 11:30, they had set taps for the return phone call from the kidnapper. They already knew the voice on the line was a mimic of Rama's so they brought their best recording equipment with them. Rama paced incessantly, which I'm sure caused Det. Barton no small amount of concern. He didn't yet know Rama well enough to see that he acted normally, for him.

I'm quite certain, given Rama's personality, that he made some threats against the kidnapper. I'm equally certain the detective told him, in a calm and deferential manner, to keep those threats to himself. It is likely the detective coached Rama on what to say, what not to say, and so forth. It was all for naught, of course. The kidnapper didn't call back. He sent a text, with a URL link.

The technicians read the note first. They protected their computer against all the known viruses. Nice precaution, but it wasn't necessary. The Web site was absolutely simple, and turned out to be owned by one Rama Gupta, with a year's payment of \$5 that came from his Paypal account on March 10, a week earlier. The document had been uploaded on the 15th of March. Despite weeks of investigation, police never learned anything else from the Web site.

The text is easy to find in public records, so I've reproduced it here.

Your children are safe. So long as you follow these directions to the letter, they will remain so. I repeat that there must be no mention in the media or on the Web.

- 1) Contact Keegan Senagh at the main branch of your bank, Bank of the Southwest on Milam. He expects your call, as you have been in contact with him several times over the past few days. He thinks you are putting together a cash giveaway for your car dealership. Do not disabuse him of this notion. Your appointment with him is at 1:00 pm. Be prompt. Turn your cell phone off or to mute while you are with him. It is polite to do so.
- 2) You will need to prove to Mr. Senagh that you are Rama Gupta. The bank doesn't want to give your money to someone else.
- 3) He will have papers for you to sign and then will give you \$300,000 in \$100 bills. Don't worry about counting the money. Someone else will take care of that.
- 4) The money will be a loan from your 401(K) account. You have pre-authorized the loan, hence the papers that Mr. Senagh will have for you to sign.
- 5) Your deputy, Ralph McMakin, will accompany you to the bank. He will transfer the money into a gym bag or something similar that he should bring to the bank.
- 6) Mr. McMakin will take the money to the Hilton Americas next to the George R Brown convention center.
- 7) In addition to the \$300K, there will be some incidental expenses that you will pay. Mr. Senagh has the details and will walk you through that. The total of those expenses is \$1600, which will come from your bank account.
- 8) Return to your home. You may turn your cell phone on again when you leave the bank. Keep it with you at all times.
- 9) Mr. McMakin has an appointment at 2:00 in the Hilton Americas lobby. The person he will meet knows what he looks like. They will go to a conference room, where the money will be examined and counted. This person thinks the money is for a cash deal on a rare automobile wherein Mr. McMakin is the buyer and you are the seller. Do not disabuse this person of that notion.
- 10) Mr. McMakin will be told where to take the money, once it is validated.

11) Mr. McMakin will likely be busy with these instructions until about 3:30. He should plan his afternoon accordingly. He should not answer his cell phone unless it is from you. You should not call him until you receive word your children have been released.

Keep calm and follow these instructions and you will have your children back soon.

I can imagine a few minutes of discussion between Rama and the cops. They would certainly want to know Rama's relationship with Mr. Senagh. Rama had none. Of course, he did his banking at Bank of the Southwest, but he'd never been to the main branch downtown. He had a 401(K) through the bank's investment arm.

They would also want to know about McMakin. Ralph McMakin reported to Rama as a section head. They had travelled together on business: Europe, Middle East, even Russia. However, Rama and Ralph never socialized away from work.

Now, if Rama spoke honestly with the detective, or if the detective perceived nuances in interactions, he would easily have found out that Ralph is an arrogant prick who throws tantrums to get his way. Rama had weathered a few of those storms, often caving to the other man's demands. Chances are, he would have summarized the relationship thusly:

"I am not a fan of his. I would not choose him to help me in this, but it appears that I do not have a choice. Of course, he is an ass, but I think he is an honest ass."

You might ask, given my thorough examination of the events, whether I have any insights into why Ralph was brought into this caper. Of course I do: because he's an arrogant prick and an ass. Ralph hates to be told what to do, and he would spend that afternoon being told what to do and also to keep his mouth shut. Personally, I think that is why the instructions included him.

The first order of business had to be confirming the appointment with the banker. At the same time, Crys, the admin for the executive office, went to fetch Ralph. The detective vetted him, and then told him his role for the afternoon.

About this time, officers at the school spoke with Sheila and the headmistress. With the new information in the note, others from the Central Police Station went to watch the bank and the hotel. And there was a BOLO quietly issued for a Town Car with two children in it. Officers stopped several around Houston, but none contained Sanjay and Prochy. The media did not catch a sniff of anything going on until the end, when it all hit the fan, so to speak.

I know it's a bit unusual for a kidnapping story to tell the fate of the kids who were napped before the end of the story, but this was an unusual kidnapping. Fine, I'm going to let the cat out of the bag now. I don't want anyone to worry unnecessarily about the kids. Those of you who read the papers know what happened that day, but let me reconstruct it for the rest of you.

Before Mike Martell stopped at the school for the kids, he picked up a middle-aged woman at a bus stop about a mile away. They had gotten URL links to pictures of one another since they'd never met before. Jeannie Rayco had a

varied history that made her an ideal selection for this job. She worked her way through college leading tours of the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. After graduation and a marriage that brought her to Houston before it ended, she started a nanny service that catered to wealthy parents who wanted to home school but just didn't have the time to really do a good job of it. At one point, Rayco Home School employed two dozen nanny-tutors. Sadly, Jeannie didn't have a head for business and couldn't keep almost a hundred schedules straight. About seven months before our adventure, she shuttered her business and dispersed her staff. She was barely solvent.

Despite her business failure—or maybe the cause of it—she is very good with kids. Almost universally, they like her, as she likes them. She has an open, round face, and her eyes sparkle when she speaks with children.

The instructions had her remain in the car while Martell picked up the two children from Sheila. They crawled into the back seat with Jeannie, who proceeded to work her charms on them. Martell drove for about half an hour, then pulled into a parking garage and up five levels. He reverse parked away from any other cars. He opened the door for Jeannie, and then walked around the car and opened the other one for the kids. The four of them walked to an elevator and went to ground level. It was only a short walk to the entrance of the Houston Museum of Natural Science. Martell bought four tickets. He kept the receipt, as he'd been instructed. His fee for the day was more than sufficient to buy the tickets and pay for lunch, which he did later.

The kids had been promised a special outing, and that's what they got. If you haven't seen the new dinosaur hall in Houston, then take it from me, you want to go. The first time I saw it, I spent almost an hour just looking at the trilobites, ancient bugs among the first life on Earth. Of course, when you get to the rooms full of huge skeletons, the kids go wild. It's a treat.

Jeannie knew more fascinating facts about the dinosaur exhibit than anyone could possibly absorb in a day, and she kept the kids—and Martell—fascinated for several hours. In the mid-afternoon, all four chattered excitedly as they traipsed back to the parking garage and while Martell drove back to west Houston.

Their dad arrived at the bank promptly at 1:00. He didn't see several plainclothes police officers scattered around the lobby and outside the building. It was a nice March day in Houston. The wind blew lightly, but the sun was out and the temperature was in the mid-70s.

The cops had found out everything they could about Keegan Senagh without actually talking to him or his staff. He was an executive VP of Bank of the Southwest with an office at 919 Milam in downtown Houston. According to the Web site, he had been with the bank for 17 years, rising to his current position 7 months earlier.

In the aftermath of the day's excitement, they learned that the promotion to his current position came as a result of a reorganization of the branch bank system. Senagh had led the task force that recommended closing a dozen branch locations. The EVP post was his reward.

He kept good, but not meticulous records, which Detective Barton pored over time and again during the next weeks. "Rama Gupta" contacted him on February

26. The caller discussed his plan for a marketing event for his new company involving a cash giveaway. He told Senagh that he would need 3,000 bills of \$100 denomination. He didn't want new bills, he wanted them to have some use, "because people might think they need to save a new bill, but would spend an old one," according to the notes.

Senagh confirmed that Mr. Gupta had checking, savings and a 401(K) account with the bank. You don't need to know the balances, but the retirement account was substantial.

The caller contacted Senagh again on March 10 with instructions to gather the money, to be considered a loan from his 401(K), for delivery on the 17th. The retirement account allowed loans at market interest for up to 50% of the balance. He agreed to a bank fee for the service. On March 15, Senagh received additional instructions for some small transfers to be made through Paypal.

Senagh thought it a bit unusual, all these preparations being made by telephone, but the caller made it quite clear that no funds would transfer until he, Rama Gupta, sat across the desk from Senagh at the bank. He would bring identification, and would expect the bank to verify his identity and accounts before any transfers occurred.

The meeting between Rama and Senagh went exactly as the caller had described it would. We'll have to imagine some parts of that interaction, since the police reports are somewhat succinct.

Senagh rose from his desk to greet his two visitors. He held his hand out to the man who looked Indian.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Gupta. It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

Gupta wouldn't have smiled. After shaking hands, he introduced the other man.

"This is my colleague, Ralph McMakin."

Ralph put down a gym bag and shook hands, nodding to the banker. He had been told, in no uncertain terms, to keep quiet.

Rama looked around the office. "Do you have the money here?"

Senagh laughed nervously. "Oh no. It's in the safe. We wouldn't keep it in my office. After we finish some paperwork, I'll have the guards bring it in."

He looked through the glass window on his office door. "Did you bring armed guards?"

"Of course." It was Rama's turn to smile nervously. "They are outside, no uniforms, not so obvious." He meant the undercover police. They expected to use the money to catch the perps.

"Good," the banker replied. "I have your checklist, so we'll just go through that, shall we?"

"That would be best."

Gupta showed his passport and Texas driver's license and then signed a piece of paper while the banker watched. The signature matched the specimen the bank kept on file. Next Rama authorized the loan from his 401(K) plan. Then the transfer of money into his bank account. Next, a withdrawal of the money. With the formalities taken care of, Senagh buzzed his assistant and asked that the money be brought in.

"Now, we have the matter of the bank fee for our services ..." He pushed an invoice for \$500 across the table. "I believe you want to take care of that with a withdrawal from your checking account?" He pushed another slip across and Gupta signed it.

"As you specified, four transfers to Paypal accounts from your checking account."

He laid four invoices on the desk, made up by the bank. The first was for \$400 to Mike Martell. The second was for \$300 to Jeannie Rayco. The third was for \$300 to Coco Lucerne. The final was to a numbered Paypal account, for \$100.

Of course, Rama recognized the name Mike Martell from Sheila's remarks, but he had never heard of the two women. He wanted his children back, so he signed the authorizations. What was another \$1600? He pocketed his copies and gave them to Detective Barton ten minutes later.

After Senagh authorized the Paypal transfers, probably a minute of awkward silence passed while waiting for the guard to come with the money. Reports later indicated that Senagh expressed hope that the giveaway was a success. Rama's eyes opened quite widely, thinking this was a reference to his kids' safety. Then he remembered that he needed to act like he wanted the money for a marketing giveaway. That must be what the banker meant. Rama smiled tensely.

Ralph transferred the money into a gold and black gym bag. It had been supplied by the police and contained a hidden transmitter. Not that it did them any good, in the end.

You're probably asking yourself, "Who's Coco Lucerne?" Isn't it obvious? Well, read on a bit further and you'll find out.

Oh, and for those of you wondering, 3,000 \$100 bills will fit nicely into a gym bag. The bank straps them by the 100 count. Each bill is about a tenth of a millimeter thick. Stack a hundred new bills and you have about a centimeter. Used bills don't pack as tightly, so let's call it plus-or-minus half an inch per pack. A stack of 30 of them would be 15 inches tall. A bill is a bit more than six inches long and a bit more than two and a half inches wide. Let's make two stacks, side by side, and we have a volume of about 6" x 5" x 7.5". Pretty compact, isn't it? You could probably fit a million bucks into a gym bag, if you were so inclined.

The insistence on old bills made sense to the police. New, sequentially numbered bills could be traced easily. Making a list of the serial numbers of 3,000 old bills couldn't be done in a short time period.

Ralph carried the cash-laden bag out of the bank. Rama spoke a few words, most likely telling Ralph not to screw anything up, but later neither man remembered an exchange. Ralph got into one car and Rama into another, both driven by plainclothes police officers. Rama went home. Another undercover officer picked up his wife and sister-in-law from Hobby about an hour later.

Ralph's driver took him to the Hilton Americas. They had slow going because of the St. Patrick's Day festival underway on Discovery Green. For those of you who aren't Houstonians, Discovery Green is a recent attempt to make downtown a happening place. It's several blocks across and wide: a green space with a water feature, a kid's playground, and some eating establishments. Lots of

parking underneath. The city boosters have done a good job of making it a fun place to go. On St. Pat's day, there's green beer and "Kiss Me, I'm Irish" buttons.

Most people wearing the buttons aren't Irish. In the 2010 census, more than 40% of the population of the city of Houston was Hispanic, about a quarter each were white and black, with 6% of Asian background. It's arguably the most ethnically diverse city in the US. But on March 17th, the hyphenated-Irish population swells.

As the car approached the hotel, a large crowd on the green suddenly dispersed, as though a starting gun had sounded. People ran in every direction, some zipping in front of the slowly moving car. Nonetheless, Ralph got to the Hilton lobby by 1:55. He felt conspicuous with a bag full of hundred-dollar bills, but in a hotel lobby, no one notices a man with a gym bag.

It's only fair that I tell you what Ralph thought of Rama. According to Ralph, Rama was a pompous spreadsheet jockey who somehow had made it up the ranks of management. He couldn't manage people so he tried to manage through the numbers. He didn't like to confront staff face-to-face, but he'd ream them out in conference calls for not meeting his expectations.

Let me just add an aside here. Most of the people who worked for Rama or Ralph would have agreed with the cross-assessments of the two men. They were not generally well liked or respected.

Promptly at 2:00, a woman about 50 years old approached Ralph. She wore a dark blue business suit and carried a matching purse and portfolio.

"Mr. McMakin, I'm Mrs. Lucerne. Please follow me."

Her name shouldn't be a surprise to you. Who else could she be but the third Paypal recipient?

Mrs. Lucerne had worked for Washington Mutual Bank until Chase acquired it after the 2008 financial crisis. It was her job to trim the WaMu staff in Houston, a position that she thought would give her a boost in the new organization. To her surprise, after the reductions they put her in front of a drive-up bank window, where she stayed for several years until Chase closed that branch late the previous year. She has a long, narrow face and her black hair has touches of grey near the ears.

She made it clear she was not interested in small talk as she led Ralph up the escalator to a second-floor conference room that she had reserved. Three plainclothes police officers who had been watching the hotel discreetly repositioned themselves to watch the door.

She instructed Ralph to take the money out of the gym bag and stack it on the table. She counted the stacks and made a note on her pad. Mrs. Lucerne picked up one of the stacks and cut the paper band off using a pocketknife she had brought. She selected a bill from near the middle of the stack. It was one of the new bills with advanced anti-counterfeiting technology. She turned the bill to various angles, examining the reflected light, then ran her finger carefully across it, feeling the texture. After less than a minute, she put it back on the stack then counted the bills in that stack. She made a note on her pad.

She selected a second stack at random and repeated the process. From a third random stack she selected a bill that predated the 2013 redesign. She examined it, marking it using a special felt-tip pen. Satisfied, she counted the bills in that stack and made another note on her pad.

She retrieved a book box from the corner of the conference room and emptied it onto the table. There were about 200 slips of paper roughly six inches long and almost three inches wide, with hues nearly the colors of money. Ralph asked about the slips of paper, which announced a contest give-away. Mrs. Lucerne indicated that she was following instructions. Her tone indicated that she worked for Mr. Gupta and that Ralph shouldn't ask any more questions.

A sheet of paper taped inside the bottom of the box covered the crack. A three-digit number, 425 in huge type, filled the middle of the sheet.

Mrs. Lucerne dropped the three opened stacks of bills into the box. The bills fluttered and filled the bottom of the box. She then set about ripping the bands from the other stacks and dropping the bills into the box so they spread around the inside. Ralph offered to help, but she indicated the instructions directed her to do it alone. Once all 30 stacks were loose in the box, she swept the contest fliers onto the top of the box and then flap-folded the top together, without taping it.

"Wow," you must be thinking. "How does he know what happened inside that closed room?"

I've told you several times that I make things up, but this was a critical point in the transaction, so the police went over it in great detail with everyone involved. Well, everyone except the kidnapper, who had written out the specific instructions to Mrs. Lucerne. She told them that she had gotten the instructions from Mr. Gupta by means of a Web site. It was erased before the cops had a chance to look at it, but she gave her printed copy to them.

"Wait a minute," you may say, "Isn't everything on the Internet permanent? Like your high school record?"

Exactly. Just like your high school permanent record, until the district shuts the school and puts the records in a warehouse that burns down a few years later. Internet pages are there so long as the storage is there, and unless someone downloads a copy or makes a backup, it's the only version. But if it's a Web site with a random URL—let's say www.B893ko54894st8126.pdf—that no one is going to stumble on, and the owner erases it without backup, the record disappears. Permanently.

Anyway, eventually someone leaked the details of this meeting and I read through them with great interest. Just so you can also know what happened. I'm that kind of guy when I'm not making stuff up.

Back to our current protagonists. Mrs. Lucerne had not completed her instructions. She told Ralph to pick up the box and follow her. She led him to the second level breezeway between the hotel and the convention center. The windows stood open because of the wonderful weather. That day the term breezeway was apt, because a brisk wind filled the corridor, blowing from the south toward Discovery Green. A table in the middle of the breezeway next to the northern-side windows had a chair beside it. Mrs. Lucerne had placed it there before their meeting, along with a "RESERVED" sign. She directed Ralph to put the box on the table and to sit beside it.

She moved to the south side of the corridor and took a cell phone photo of Ralph and the box on the table. She typed a short message and sent it to a blog site. The message followed the format of her instructions to the letter.

30-G100-G100-G100. Box is on the breezeway between Hilton and GRB.

The first string indicated there were 30 packs; she evaluated a good bill from a pack with a count of 100 bills (repeated two more times). Although she thought the message redundant, since she had been told exactly what to do and exactly where to put the box, she did as instructed. After all, her Paypal account indicated that she had already been paid, and she wanted to deliver complete service to her client. It was odd business, but she needed the money. She left just before 3pm.

Ralph assumed he was supposed to watch the box, but the whole thing now bored him. He placed his chair so he could look out the open window over the box and watch the St. Patrick's Day crowd. The Avenue of the Americas, directly below him, had been closed for the day and the crowd had taken over the street as well as the Green. He stayed there, wind ruffling his hair, until the excitement found him.

Before we leave Ralph alone at his post, let me tell you about the box. Mrs. Lucerne bought it from a nondescript storage-locker rental location on Westheimer. She asked the clerk to tape the bottom of the box together. When she got home, she followed the instructions to cover the bottom slit using a piece of paper, to keep money from sticking to any tape that might show through. She didn't understand why, but she printed the number in 240 point Arial Black font, centered on the page, then taped it to the inside bottom of the box. Her instructions were quite clear and easy to follow.

By this point, the limo had arrived back in west Houston. I'm going to jump ahead a bit because you already know they arrived safely. Their arrival postdated the excitement that Ralph has not yet experienced in his story.

When he arrived at the WestPark business complex, Martell pulled to the curb at a drop-off zone in the circular drive. He stayed with the car while Jeannie took the kids in. She was instructed to have the receptionist contact Rama Gupta, whose picture Jeannie had. She sat with the children—still chattering about the dinosaurs—while watching the elevator lobby for Mr. Gupta to appear. A young Hispanic woman smiled at the children as she approached from the elevators. Sanjay and Prochy simultaneously called out "Crys!"

Jeannie was shocked to feel cold metal against her neck and hear a man's voice quietly saying, "Police, don't move."

A few moments later, Martell had a similar experience as a man rapidly approached the car with gun drawn, yelling "Police. Keep your hands on the steering wheel."

Gupta wasn't there. He'd gone home to meet his wife. When the receptionist rang Crys, the techs made a quick call to Detective Barton. They were the only cops in the building. They came up with a plan. The kids knew and liked Crys.

Once one of the officers was in position behind the woman in the lobby, she approached the kids. Sanjay and Prochy simultaneously called out "Crys!"

She took the children to a quiet conference room until additional police arrived. The kids were, of course, confused, and Crys wasn't allowed to tell them anything. Not that she knew much. After a few nervous minutes, they resumed their chatter about the museum exhibit.

Now that the kids were safe, across town other police officers swooped in to pick up Senagh and Lucerne. Sadly for the police investigation, the four people they arrested were exactly who they appeared to be. A driver. A nanny. A banker. A former bank teller. All had been hired, sight unseen, by a man with an Indian lilt to his voice who carefully enunciated his words. The thorough investigation of each person lasted weeks. Other than their involvement with this case, they had no connection. It took a few days before the police learned enough about them to see the one commonality they had, and that led Detective Barton to greatly widen his net of suspects.

Since I've been selective in what I told you about these individuals, you may already have figured out that all of them had been involved in business setbacks or mergers, and they had all laid people off. I won't bore you by repeating those details. You can reread the story if you've forgotten. It isn't that long.

Now, you might think that since they got paid reasonably well for their services, this job was a boon for some of them. In fact, the payment was just fairness. They performed an honest service; like anyone they should get an honest wage for it. Although there was talk of taking the money away from them, in the end, they got to keep it. And for that very reason: their pay was not part of the ransom demand, and in fact had been invoiced and paid separately as services rendered. But given the amount of time and stress they endured in police custody and the intrusion into their lives, their hourly rate of pay was truly abysmal.

Here's what Detective Barton eventually realized. They were selected for their part in the kidnapping—which the police continued to call it—because they had fired employees. Either through their personal incompetence as businesspeople, or because they were in the right (or wrong) place in the corporate structure, they had disrupted the lives of a large number of people.

Barton figured that it could not be a coincidence. Gupta had directed layoffs of hundreds of people, with McMakin deciding which specific ones were to go. It was the "ah-hah" moment that the police needed, and they immediately started down the list of people laid off as a result of the merger that formed Ambergris Petroleum.

Let's suppose you're about 48 years old. You've been working as an engineer for a corporation for twenty or twenty-five years. You're two years shy of the magic age of 50, when your pension benefits fully vest. You're laid off. You get a pension, but it is severely discounted from full vestment. The difference in lifelong benefit between the pension you would have gotten at age 50 and the one you get at 48 can be substantial. Hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Let's call it \$300K, just to settle on a number.

The money just ... disappears. Well, it's present in the company bottom line, but not as a "plus," merely as a "minus" that goes away.

Detective Barton eventually figured this out, and he interviewed hundreds of people who had been cut by Ambergris two years earlier. He focused much of his effort on a smaller number of suspects who fit the profile, who had lost benefits in the range of \$300K. Either the person behind the plot was very clever, or he (or she) wasn't one of those people.

Had Barton expanded his view to include everyone cut within the past decade by Ambergris or either of the two companies that formed it, he would have had almost ten thousand worldwide to interview. In the Houston area, it was still more than a thousand. And had he looked at the wider industry, he would have seen many thousands in the Houston area. He was looking for a veritable needle in a haystack.

It's a cold case, now. Since no one was killed or physically injured, the case got less and less attention over time. You can still rev up the fire in Barton's eyes by bringing up the case, but he ran out of leads and he ran out of budget. Ironic, that, given how many people had been laid off because of budgets.

Early on in this story, I dodged the question of who I am. At this point, you're probably thinking that I'm one of the people that Rama Gupta laid off. How else would I know enough about him and his mannerisms to write this story? Surely, I'm the mastermind behind the plot. I admit that it would be tempting to claim the glory for the caper, but that would just be stupid, wouldn't it?

Keeping in mind that I make things up, how do I think the genius behind this did it?

Well, Gupta had been interviewed by the business press several times over the years, especially during the layoffs. Recordings are available on YouTube. Someone clever with voice-pattern software could use those interviews and synthesize a wide variety of words and phrases. Enough to sound real on the phone.

Or maybe the perp was a gifted mimic. Gupta's vocal pattern is certainly distinct.

Enough of my musings. We left poor Ralph McMakin sitting bored, wind whipping through his hair, watching the box and the crowd of "Irish" celebrating on the green. Let's work our way back to him and finish this story, shall we? But to understand the end, we're going to have to backtrack even more, and pick up some more people that the mastermind of this caper pulled into his web.

About a week earlier, fliers appeared at a number of hip bars around Houston, advertising a treasure hunt. The hunt included a mix of online information and clues at locations the seekers had to find. The twenty-two gamers met at City Centre in west Houston at the appointed time with their cell phones. Each received a clue to a location within the shopping center. Participants got clues to a one of nine different locations. At the target location, they had to find something that helped with the next clue. Only the first to enter that piece of information into the online contest site got the clue to the next location. The Web site locked after the first correct access. Of the nine winners, three each sought one of the next three locations. Then the three finalists raced to the last location. The winner found a \$50 bill.

Several participants talked about the contest on social media. When the second hunt announcement appeared online, more than a hundred people signed up, even though it was in the afternoon of a workday. They were told to be at Discovery Green, on the Lamar Street side in front of the Hilton by 1:45 pm on St. Patrick's Day.

The first clue was released at 1:48 and the participants found themselves heading in every possible direction. Twenty-seven seekers won the qualifying heat, and each online site indicated the next clue would come at 2:15, and that each clue would be given to three random participants, who would compete head to head. Those winners would compete against two other winners, and so on until only one remained.

This is an example of a qualifying heat clue.

Replace the x's by the third, fifth and fifteenth characters counting from the top of the second section of the menu at The Lake House restaurant in this Web site:
www.58x6x84WEB8726x.com

Now, at that time, the online version of the menu did not match the actual one, so those who looked up the menu on their phones wasted time. The next set of clues was more difficult, requiring the recipient to figure out what it meant, then go there and determine what the rest of the clue was. For example:

Not George for President, but not a man to sneeze at,
either. Tramp around when you're blue and looking down. When
you're bouncy, count up. Add a color and a number to the Web
site.

This led the intrepid to the John P. McGovern playground—named for a famous and wealthy allergist—where the trampoline is held by five blue posts over a tan mat. One of the next clues was this:

I sing night music. Face me unconventionally and count my
pieces, then go left to the first carved-stone sign. Count
the same number of words and use the next in the Web site.

The Music of the Night is sung by the Phantom of the Opera. The Monument au Fantome in the park comprises seven sculptured parts. It sits across the street from the George R Brown Convention Center. Facing away from the Center, a left turn takes you past the parking garage entrance to a park dedication sign carved in stone. Putting in the right word led to the next clue. The seekers had to wait and watch for a new posting on a blog. It appeared at 2:54 and they were off.

McMakin noticed people running around the park below him, but didn't think anything about it. He just wanted to get this over with. He was alone in the breezeway, but five police officers watched discreetly from positions around him.

All were keyed up, waiting for the kidnappers to make contact and take the money.

One officer alerted his team that a woman had entered the Hilton on the run and was heading for the escalator. At about the same time, another officer radioed that two men had entered the Brown convention center and raced along the second floor corridor. He added that several other people were following behind at a slightly slower pace. The officer in the Hilton added that people were trailing his woman also, and that she was at the top of the escalator leading to the breezeway.

McMakin rose in surprise when people burst onto the breezeway from both sides, charging in his direction. Three officers had eyes on the box as one of the men from the Brown side got there first. He grabbed the box, tore it open and leaned out the window, dumping the contents into the breeze. He looked inside the box, then shouted with joy and ran toward the hotel. Most of the crowd shouted encouragement and followed behind him. The woman and the other man looked disappointed, but then joined the crowd surging toward the Hilton elevators.

See the connection? Coco Lucerne posted the picture of Ralph and the box on a blog site. Three people, equidistant from the breezeway but in different directions, simultaneously got the blog update and raced there. Many of the losing participants followed along. The final clue was the following:

Watch the blog listed below. It will update shortly with a photo of a box and its location. A room number is listed on a piece of paper at the bottom inside the box. The box has fliers for the next contest. Dump them into the wind so others can join the fun. Do not waste time reading the fliers, you want to be the first person to the hotel room whose number is written on the paper. Go to that room. What you see will lead you to the prize.

The man thought there would be another two people racing to the hotel room, but the contest was over. Hilton room 425 was locked, but a planter sat beside the door. One of the onlookers suggested the winner check it. Nothing was in it, but there was an odd serial number stenciled into it that was similar to the Web sites that had been used for the contest. He keyed that in and sure enough, it gave him instructions for downloading \$100 from—can you guess?—a numbered PayPal account.

Most of the crowd snapped pictures with their cell phones, so the two plainclothes officers also took pictures of everyone there. They couldn't do anything until the Gupta kids were returned, and almost everyone was gone when word came that they were at the dad's office. Officers tailed the final three seekers, so they were swept up quickly, but it took a week to find everyone else who had been there.

I'm sure Detective Barton was frustrated that everyone he had identified in this case was innocent of kidnapping. Usually, the money is the key. The kidnappers want the money and when they take physical possession of it, they are vulnerable. But what if the kidnapper doesn't want the money? And what if

there wasn't really a kidnapping, just an unauthorized visit to the museum, and the money was thrown away?

The bottom line is, no one was ever charged. Rama Gupta got his kids back safely, with \$300K less in his retirement account. Like the retirement money for some of the people he had laid off, it just disappeared.

Of course, Discovery Green had a lot of happy people who plucked up three thousand Franklins fluttering in the breeze.

I have a confession to make. Although there is a second floor passage between the Hilton Americas Hotel and the George R Brown Convention Center, it isn't open to the breeze. I might have changed that detail a bit.

Maybe McMakin waited down on the street level. Or maybe the payoff took place down in the Sugar Land Town Square.

Fine, I admit it happened in Dallas.

No, Minneapolis, and Gupta's company wasn't an oil company, it was a coal company. No, no, it was a toy company.

OK, don't believe me. After all, I make things up.

The End

So, do you want to see what else I make up?

The first clue is my on Web site.

You can sign up for the newsletter to get future clues.

Go ahead. The police can't arrest you just for that.

Click or go to www.MarkAndersenTales.com/Welcome/.

Revenge, or Who's Got the Money

© Mark Andersen 2015. This is a work of fiction. No actual children were kidnapped for the making of this story. The people described here do not exist outside my head, including but not limited to the narrator. If you think you recognize yourself in one of these characters, my advice to you is to get a life that doesn't involve firing people. The one exception is Mike Martell. The real person knows this name but it's not his real name, and he's not a chauffeur. I hope my friend Mike will contact me, because I've lost track of him for too many years.