



RONILCAINE

COIN

A NOVELETTE

HOW FAR WOULD YOU GO
TO NOT BE THE LUCKIEST PERSON
IN THE WORLD?

Ronil Caine

COIN

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*'Good luck seldom walks in pairs,
but bad luck never walks alone.'*

(Song Jiang)

1

Luis Moreno stepped out of the office and opened his umbrella. The wind immediately caught it and turned it inside out. Luis cursed, closed the umbrella and opened it again, but this time he took care to point it windward. It was raining cats and dogs in Mexico City. Heavy rains were not uncommon in the month of February, but this year was worse than usual. Everything was flooded, cars had to inch along carefully, which made the traffic jams in the crowded city more frustrating, the shouts and honking angrier.

Luis went to work on foot. His office was a half an hour walk away from his home. Sometimes it was pleasant, but that day it did not look very promising.

The skies darkened the day before and it started to rain at noon. By the time he left for home, around seven, there was water everywhere. Luis huddled under his umbrella. He pulled it down to his head as much as he could and started to walk home.

The houses and the neon signs lost their colors in the rain and the otherwise colorful city seemed to dull like it was reaching the final hours of its life. The people on the streets were struggling with their umbrellas, running from cover to cover to take refuge from the rain, already drenched, or they were watching the streets, the cars, the creaking trees and the millions of fat raindrops exploding onto the concrete from the shelter of a roof.

As Luis got closer to home, the tall buildings of the business quarter gave way to rows of one- and two-story houses. Stores, barber shops, cantinas, car repair shops followed each other, though most of them already closed for the day. Ramshackle houses, newly opened car sa-

lons and gas stations, then a line of broken-down buildings. In Mexico City, Luis thought everything was diverse, eclectic, and at the same time, endlessly boring. He loved the city and yet he wanted to leave it. He had many good things that kept him here—and just as many pushing him away.

The water was rushing on the side of the road like a miniature river, gushing into the sewers with mindless rage, sweeping along the trash and dirt it found. Mexico City was one of the dirtiest cities and even though this area was relatively clear, they said that breathing this air was as bad for the lungs as smoking a pack of cigarettes a day.

Overall, this part of the city was safe. Luis lived here for twenty years, and he did not encounter a single incident. Sometimes he read about a robbery or a fight, but that was negligible compared to the more dangerous quarters.

He was just a few streets away from home. He knew his wife, Camila, and their young son, Marcos would be waiting for him by the window as usually. He was cold despite his coat; his shoes were drenched, and he could feel the cold water squelch in his socks. By now, his trousers were wet, too. On the other side of the road, a fat man was smoking under a shade. He was only wearing a vest, even though it was just 15 °C. He did not seem to care about the rain or the cold.

Rain had always reminded Luis of his father. It was raining when he died, and it was raining when they buried him. They did not spend too much time together. His father was always on the road, travelling South America; he was involved in all sorts of businesses and investments. He managed to eke out a living but never made enough to live well and Luis did not have a real father. Then on a useless day such as this, a stroke killed him.

RONIL CAINE
COIN

Luis reached the final corner. He would round it, pass two more gates and then he would be home. A dog passed him with its head hung low, its wet fur hanging in clumps. It passed Luis, repeatedly looking towards the road as if waiting for the moment it could safely run across it. It stopped and started to walk back towards Luis, keeping an eye on the road...

Luis fished his keys out so he would not have to bother with them when he reached the gate. The loose change in his pocket jingled and the wind tore at his umbrella, leaving his head exposed. His hair got soaking wet in a matter of second. At this very moment a lorry rounded the corner.

Luis lifted the umbrella above his head again, but that made him drop his keys. He started swearing again. The water trickled from his dark hair into his eyes. He wiped it off and leaned down to pick them up. Something caught the light on the road. Something small, carried by the water, bobbing up and down as it was swept towards the sewers. Luis grabbed his keys and looked at the tiny, shiny object. All he wanted was to get home and get out of his wet clothes, and yet it caught his eyes. There he was, bending forward in the rain with his keys in one hand and his umbrella in the other. The rain enveloped him, the wind tugged at his wet coat like a sail, and he was staring at a small, glittering something on the road.

It was a coin. Now, having already bent down to get his keys, it was just a step away from him. If he did not reach out for it, it would be carried down into the sewers and remain there until corrosion ate it in a matter of centuries.

Luis took one step sideways. The coin reached the sewer grille half covered by the carelessly spread tarmac of the road. The sewer open-

ing looked like a flat, inert mouth greedily drinking dirt and rainwater. The coin got stuck in a small crevice between the grille and a crack in the tarmac. Luis reached out for it and grabbed it.

Suddenly, he heard a dull thud from behind, followed by an agonizing howl. He looked up and saw that the lorry struck the dog just a few feet away from him. The driver was leaning out of the window and shouting something, but the rain and the wind dragged his voice away. The animal limped to the other side of the road and lay down on the pavement. Luis jumped onto the pavement; his shoes squelched on the concrete. The driver seemed to be shouting at him, perhaps asking what he was doing on the road, but Luis did not care about him. He hurried to his house, unlocked the door, stepped inside, and pulled the door closed.

The patter of the rain smoothed into a gentle whisper, the wind was cut off, and only his coat dripped fat drops of water on the pavement. Luis leaned against the wall to catch his breath. He felt as if he had been running away from something for hundreds and hundreds of yards.

That was close, he thought. That dog was run down right behind me. If it hadn't been there, maybe I would have been hit and limped off to collapse on the pavement in the rain. He tried to convince himself that the driver would have certainly noticed a human, but the dog was just a few feet away from him. Would the driver really have noticed him? "What matters is that I'm at home now. Finally!"

He opened his palm and studied the coin for a moment. It was not small change, at least not a peso. It looked more like a memorial coin, the kind people press for themselves in front of museums and monuments, although it looked too valuable for that. Maybe old money from

a collection. Maybe it was worth something. It had no numbers on it, so perhaps it was going to be a memorial coin after all. He pocketed it and rushed up the stairs to the second floor. He entered his flat, and as soon as he felt the spicy tomato smell of dinner, he forgot about the whole affair. The dog, the lorry, the rain, and the coin. He was at home; it was warm and peaceful here. His son, Marcos, ran towards him and climbed into his arms.

2

The rain had stopped overnight, and the following day was gloriously sunny. Luis was so happy about the weather that he completely forgot about the coin. He remembered it only when he had to use his coat again a week later. He spent a few moments staring at the shiny piece of metal in his hand and odd thoughts popped into his head.

He spent the previous week thinking about all the unexpected things that happened to him. He was given an important client because neither of the two other advisors could handle it. One of them had a nasty fall with his scooter and broke his collarbone, the other had to take a few days off to take care of his divorce proceedings. The new customer came with a serious bonus, not to mention that Luis could finally prove his mettle, which was something he always dreamed of. Some could say he had a lucky streak, but Luis felt his time would have come anyway. He had been saying that for twenty years and now—eventually—it did come.

One morning as he was about to leave for a meeting with the board of executives, he spilled his coffee as he reached for a document on his desk. The coffee swiftly flooded the desk, soaking a few sheets of paper, getting under his keyboard and dripping down over the edge of the desk. But it did not stain either his shirt or his trousers. That was lucky, Luis thought, but then he wondered how often people have luck without even noticing it. Had the coffee spilled on his clothes, he would have remembered it for a long time, but this narrow escape was something he would soon forget.

A year earlier he invested a largish sum of money in a company whose shares had kept falling ever since. A week after finding the

RONIL CAINE
COIN

coin an international concern bought the company, and the price of the shares skyrocketed. Luis's money paid the highest possible dividend.

Luis sat down in a park before going home. He was looking at his coin. The past week went very well. More good things came his way in that one week than in the six months leading up to it. Perhaps more good things than in the past twenty years of his life, with the exception for Marcos's birth and Camila. All things considered, everything was great since he found that coin.

He started to laugh. He was not a superstitious man, he never even went to the Día de los Muertos celebrations. How could a coin, something made of copper and iron, maybe silver, have any effect on a man's life? Maybe it was he who had changed. Maybe he simply passed some sort of a tipping point and started performing better. But he could feel this explanation did not hold up.

“So could it be a lucky charm?” he asked himself. “A lucky dollar? A lucky coin? Let's put it to the test!”

He bought a scratch card on the way home. He scratched off the coating with the coin. He won 28,000 pesos; this was the jackpot, the highest prize available for this kind of card. If things went on like this, he could stop working altogether. He would try the national lottery the following week. This was crazy!

He did not tell his wife: unlike him, Camila came from a deeply religious family, and even though she did not adhere to the traditions very strictly, she was somewhat superstitious and God fearing.

He spent his winnings on a weekend in Acapulco. This was their first holiday in years. They missed the bus to the airport and Luis cursed himself for it; himself and the coin. Was it a lucky charm or was it not?

It was only when they returned from their trip that they learned there was a shooting on the bus they missed: several people were injured, two American tourists and a Mexican man were in critical condition. The gunman was arrested following a failed suicide.

When Luis returned to the office on Monday, he was told one of his co-worker's brother was on the bus. He was one of the critically injured. He was shot and they still did not know whether he would live.

Despite all of this they did catch the airplane to Acapulco due to a computer problem that delayed the check-in process. They spent a wonderful weekend by the sea. Luis, Camila and Marcos were happier than ever, together in Acapulco.

When they got home, they heard that the previous night their upstairs neighbor was robbed, and the burglars took all her savings. The house was swarming with police and relatives all day long.

Another week passed. Luis won the Lotería Nacional as well. It meant twenty million pesos. Nobody in his family even saw such a sum at once. He decided not to tell anyone and stop playing before they charged him with cheating, the media started to hound him, or the wrong type of people found out about his luck and kidnapped him to extort his money.

A few days later an SUV ran over Luis's cousin, Andrés, in Puebla. He was killed immediately. However, it was not the tragedy that made Luis come up with new ideas about his coin, but a much smaller accident that happened soon after.

Camila was frying eggs one morning whilst Luis was reading the news on the internet. They heard shouting from the street and then the kitchen window shattered with a loud crash. A rock flew in across the kitchen and hit the wall a few inches from Luis's head, fell to the

ground and disappeared under a cupboard. Camila was so spooked she flipped the frying pan. Hot oil splashed on her legs and burned her badly.

Luis helped her put a balm on it, then fixed breakfast for the family. Then he sat down and took the coin in his hand. If it truly had magic powers, was it attracting good fortune or bad? This was the question he asked himself. It seemed to him that whenever he had good luck, something very bad happened to someone. And not just anyone, but people around him. His colleagues, his neighbor, his cousin—poor Andrés!—and now Camila. And maybe even that dog in the rain, the one which got hit by the lorry in his place. The luckier he got, the more misfortune fell on someone else. But was it even possible? Or was it all just coincidence, and was it just him who thought it was driven by a coin and its magic powers?

Luis was getting worried. If his luck really had its price then he could not be sure his family would live to see the New Year, even if he never bought a lottery ticket again. There was this affair with the frying pan. Would have Camila burned herself even if the rock had hit Luis? Presumably, yes, but they would never know the truth. Or the bus, the one they missed; he did not even know they were lucky, and his colleague's brother had to pay for the consequences.

Luis decided it was better to get rid of the coin before it caused more trouble. He had won quite enough, and his job looked stable, too. He would not be greedy. He would stick with what he had. He would get out before the one million dollar question and run with the smaller prize. He was afraid that if he threw away the coin, he would lose everything he had won so far, but even that would not have bothered him as long as his family was safe.

Luis walked down to the street where the policemen were still questioning the locals about a fight in the morning, the same fight that sent that rock flying into Luis's kitchen.

He found the drain where he saved the coin from wandering in Mexico City's sewers for all eternity and dropped it into the opening. The coin disappeared with a muffled tinkle.

"So that was it," Luis thought. Or rather, he thought now he would see if the coin had anything to do with the peculiar nature of recent events.

He decided to test his luck in a casino that evening.

3

Luis bought tokens for 10,000 pesos and an hour later the manager invited him to a private dinner at the VIP lounge of the casino to get him to leave the establishment before he bankrupted it. The VIP lounge was just a fancy excuse for holding suspects until the casino's team went through the footage of the security cameras to see if they could prove foul play. They did not find anything. The director apologized and told Luis they could not pay any more of his winnings.

Luis left the casino with a check for half a million pesos. The fortune coin was in his pocket, and he was no longer certain he had thrown it away in the morning. He remembered the tinkling sound it made as it disappeared in the sewers, but perhaps it was just his imagination. He started to suspect the coin belonged to him now. There was a bond between them.

Another man arrived at the casino that night, an hour after Luis left. He was fired from his job that day, diagnosed with lung cancer a week before, and he had next to no chance of recovery. He did not tell any of this to his wife and their two children. Desperate as he was, he decided to take all his savings and shares to a casino and try his luck to have something to leave to his children. He lost 16,000 pesos in twenty minutes. It was all he had.

Luis read about this four days later. The man shot himself in the head right by the very roulette table of the same casino Luis had nearly bankrupted.

“Jesus Christ!” Luis said to himself. He could not get rid of the feeling that he was responsible for this tragedy. He did not know this man, but he sat in front of his computer utterly desperate. But what could he

RONIL CAINE
COIN

have done? How could he have known? And it did not matter, either. The important thing was that he realized that fateful consequences followed his luck and so he decided to stop the coin somehow.

He sat down by his desk, which served as a kitchen table during the day, put a reading light on it and carefully studied the coin in the stark light.

He saw an ornamental frame on one side, a repetitive folk motive, probably the work of an Indian tribe, which ran around a star-like central image. The coin was worn, and the patterns were blurred by the iron grasp of time. The star was just a blob, an amorphous protrusion, but when Luis looked at it more closely, he saw it was a winged beast. A bird, perhaps? He turned the coin over.

There was a pattern around the edges as well; it was different than the one on the other side, but represented the same style. There were scratches in the middle of the coin.

Writing! Luis thought. It could be writing, though it is really worn. He strained his eyes so much they started to hurt, but he could not recognize a single letter or a sign. It's not Spanish, he thought to himself. If it is indeed writing, it does not use the Latin alphabet.

He turned the coin around a few more times but he did not get any closer to the solution. His conviction that it was just an ordinary piece of metal and had nothing to do with the weird events grew by the moment. He felt stupid, but also hopeless and devoid of ideas. He decided to take the coin to an expert.

4

He took the day off from work and went to the Numismatic Museum first thing in the morning. After a lengthy search and even more waiting, he found an expert willing to have a look at his coin. He told Luis he had never seen anything remotely similar, and he thought it was a fake.

But Luis was not comforted by that. He thought it was just an everyday coin.

Do you really think so? A voice inside him asked. You are only seeing things! There were a few odd coincidences, and that's that! Luck? Come on! What is luck, to begin with? A benevolent constellation of coincidences? And what is a coincidence?

A tall and lean man bumped into Luis as he was standing in the museum lobby, lost in one of the major series of questions human philosophy had yet to answer. Luis dropped the coin, and it ricocheted away, merrily tinkling on the stone floor. The man leaned down and caught it, glanced down at it and handed it back to Luis.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I wasn't paying attention. I apologize."

"It was my fault, really. I was lost in thought," Luis answered and took the coin. Later, he wondered if he had run away at this point, like a madman, could he have broken free? Could the ownership of the coin have passed to the man when he picked it up?

"This is a strange coin," the man said.

"Indeed."

"Are you an expert?"

"Me? No, I just brought it in to have someone look at it."

"And how did it go?"

“Not too well,” Luis nodded towards the offices. “A man checked it and said it was not interesting.”

“If you want, I can have a look at it, too. I’m Óscar Hinojosa. I’m the museum’s research director.”

And I just happened to run into you, Luis thought. But of course!

“Would you really do that?” Luis asked.

“I always have time for unusual objects” Hinojosa said and shook hands with Luis.

“I am much obliged, sir. My name is Luis. Luis Moreno.”

“Glad to meet you, Señor Moreno. Please, come with me to the lab!”

The lab was a small room with barely enough space for three researchers. There was a low but wide bench along the wall with the necessary equipment, materials for chemical probes and cleaning, and a staggering number of coins. Some just lay heaped on the desk, others were carefully placed in small, velvet-lined boxes.

An overweight woman sat in front of a bench, and she was so engrossed by her microscope that she did not even look up when the two men entered.

“Good morning, Maria,” Hinojosa greeted her.

“Good morning, director!” Maria jumped up from her chair to show respect to her superior.

“Oh, do carry on, I’m only here for a moment!”

Maria sat back and was lost in her microscope again. Hinojosa sat down in front of another microscope and asked for the coin. Luis handed it over, wondering if he could pass it on to another, or if it was destined to stay with him until death?

Hinojosa calmly set the microscope and put the coin under the lens. He kept humming for a moment and then he looked up at Luis.

“Well, this is a strange coin indeed, I can tell. I could feel it was not your average change when I first touched it. Its material, its weight, its surface—none of them resemble the more commonly used materials, such as iron, copper, gold, silver, bronze and who knows what.”

Luis nodded.

“One side depicts a four-winged hummingbird, something I’ve never seen before. It’s worn, but recognizable. Hummingbirds are totem animals in several cultures. There is writing on the other side, but I cannot make it out, either. I’m not a linguist but I suspect it is an extinct language or something unknown, like the language of the Voynich manuscript, for example. The letters remind me of oriental writing but still have a distinctly Indian character. The pattern along the edges reminds me of the folk motifs of Central and Southern American Indian tribes, but that’s not my area of expertise, either. Still, I know enough to say those Indians neither minted, nor used coins. Should this still be an Indian coin somehow, I’d say it was made by the Inca.

“I see.”

“If you want it, you can leave it here for my colleagues to check its composition and age. Maybe we could have a better look at the inscription and the bird motif, though I’m afraid it could be a custom-made fake coin. You know, the kind those wizard-mad kids like to play with.”

“When would you have the results?”

“Maybe this week.”

Luis considered the offer. There was nothing to lose. And with the coin removed, maybe his lucky streak would break as well. Though he was starting to doubt that it was a lucky charm and not a herald of misfortune. The more he thought about, the more it seemed the coin only attracted the trouble and protected him from it.

“That would be wonderful, Señor Hinojosa!”

“Perfect. Give me a number where I can reach you.”

Hinojosa slipped the coin into an envelope and put Luis’s name and phone number on it. They said goodbye and Luis left.

When he stepped out on the street, he felt like a great burden had been lifted. It felt like the coin had not just weighed a few grams, but several pounds. Luis walked away from the museum with a smile, and he started rehearsing an excuse for never going back for the coin.

But he went back for it.

5

On Sunday, Luis took his family to church. It was a long time since their last visit, and it was easy to convince Camila to attend mass. Afterwards, Luis said a silent prayer to thank God for his luck and providing enough money to secure his future. He could not quit his job, but Marcos could go to a good school, and they could move to a nicer area.

He felt like it was over. The coin, even if it did have magic powers—and that sounded ridiculous in retrospect—was far away from him. It was no longer his problem.

Luis found a house in the Zona Rosa district. It was one of the best areas of Mexico City. When they met the owner, he told them he had just posted the advertisement in the morning and that they were the first to call. He wanted to sell the house as soon as possible, otherwise, he could not pay the deposit on another house. The house was on sale for a very reasonable price, but Luis could ask for even more discount because he paid the entire sum immediately. He told Camila he got an employee credit from his company. But even so, he had to acknowledge that he was amazingly lucky with the flat. Luis started to worry again. What sort of sacrifice would the coin demand in exchange for the house?

A few days later they were already boxing up their own home, when a woman called Luis from the Numismatic Museum to say that he could pick up the coin and the test results.

Luis decided not to go and continued packing. He was trying to get one of their old wardrobes out of the corner when its bottom fell off. It was an antique which they inherited from Camila's parents and Luis always hated it because it creaked loudly and took up too much space. On

top of that, it was impossibly heavy, because in the old days' furniture was made from real wood rather than flimsy chipboard covered with a film of pathetic woodgrain imitation. But now that the wardrobe started to fall apart, Luis immediately wondered if he could convince Camila to leave it behind. As he stared at the broken piece his eyes widened. There was a whole heap of US dollars on the floor. It must have been hidden at the bottom of the wardrobe. The edges of a few banknotes crumbled into dust as he touched them, which meant the money was old. Perhaps so old even Camila's parents had no idea it was there. At least, they never told them anything about it. Luis shoveled the money from under the wardrobe while Camila and Marcos gathered around him. Camila made the sign of the cross.

“Look what I found!” Luis said and pretended to be pleasantly surprised, when in fact he was more than a little scared by this unexpected fortune. “It was in your mother's wardrobe. This is at least...” Luis ran his gaze across the heap a few times. “At least fifty thousand dollars. If not more.”

“We have to tell the police,” Camila said. “Maybe it belongs to the drug cartels!”

“Oh, come on! Look at how old these banknotes are! They must have been here for decades! Nobody's looking for this any longer.”

“You think so?”

“This wardrobe's been with us for four or five years, and as far as I remember, it was in your parents' home for at least twenty years before that.”

Camila needed a bit more convincing, but in the end, she agreed to keep the money... and the wardrobe as well. Luis would have gladly gotten rid of the heap of dollars, but not by handing it to the police.

When the removal van arrived, Marcos helped to carry the boxes. He could hardly wait to move into their new house where he would have his own room. But as he was climbing down the stairs, his foot slipped, and he dropped the box on his leg. It was not particularly heavy, but it was enough to break his shin.

The ambulance took them to the hospital and as soon as Marcos was attended to, Luis left him with Camila and hurried off to the museum.

He had to find a way to get rid of the coin. It was still his, he was certain of that. He could not just give it to someone. Maybe it could not even be taken away from him. If it really came to that, he was ready to melt it down or kill himself, but he had to find a way to protect his family. He was not certain that the fortune of buying a house for three quarters of its market value was fully balanced by one broken leg. He started to feel everyone around him was in danger.

In the museum, he was received by a portly mustached man called Manuel Tovar. He kept fiddling with his thick, black-rimmed spectacles as they spoke. He said Professor Hinojosa was away, but had asked him to give Luis this report on the coin.

He handed Luis a sheet with the museum's logo, Hinojosa's name and position, and a short, written assessment. It read more like a sketch than an official report. It stated that 98% of the coin's material was identified as an alloy of bronze, silver and gold, with the remaining 2% containing some sort of organic matter and unknown material which needs further processing and more time to fully identify. It contained no iron, which supported its theoretical Inca origins, as the Inca had no knowledge of iron.

The designs were most similar to those found in Inca culture, but the hummingbird remained a mystery, despite Hinojosa having con-

sulted an Inca expert in the Numismatic Museum of Toluca. All they could say was that the hummingbird was a totem animal for the Inca, but just one of the several totems and that it had no special significance.

An expert of Tawantinsuyu, the language of the Inca Empire, said that the inscription was a coded, written version of Quechua, used by shamans to pass on their knowledge without granting outsiders access. Hinojosa added a note saying that this is just a legend, and the Inca did not use writing but recorded information with the help of knots.

All in all, the coin seemed to perform some sort of religious purpose in the Inca Empire, sometime in the 1400s. Tovar told Luis that the museum was willing to pay him 10,000 pesos for it. Luis declined this offer without thinking. Tovar gave him the coin and the written reports and shook his hand. Luis thanked him and left.

It suddenly occurred to him to call his old friend, Daniel Cazares, and ask if he was free for lunch. Cazares was a lawyer and a busy man whose company mostly handled private investigations. Cazares was a well-respected man with many friends, including politicians and important people in high positions. He and Luis attended the same school for eight years and their friendship was one of those rare, honest acquaintances which were not built around profit or interest. They usually met for lunch or dinner every two or three months and it took them weeks to find a suitable date.

This time Cazares immediately said yes. He was free that day and Luis was not surprised to hear it, even though he found it odd that the coin apparently did not care that he was trying to get rid of it: he was still lucky.

Having first discussed the usual topics—friends and family—Luis summed up the situation for Cazares. He told him he had found a coin

and would like to learn as much as possible about it. He gave him the museum's report but omitted certain details, such as the amount of money he won, the new house he bought or how many people suffered for it and in what ways. He did not talk about luck, magic or superstition either, because he knew how ridiculous it would all sound, even though it was frighteningly real in his head.

Cazares promised his help and asked for a week. Luis tried to make it look more urgent—he was afraid of what a week would cost him—and Cazares said he would try to get results in a few days.

6

Luis was scared and even Camila noticed it. He was afraid that something would happen again. Something even more portentous. He would win a huge sum or survive a catastrophe, and it would cost Camila's or Marco's health. Or their lives. Anything could happen at any moment. Maybe if he stayed at home, Luis thought, it would avert disaster. He would not take risks and thus avoid luck. Right?

He could still not figure out the exact price each lucky turn required, or even pair up each misfortune with each fortunate event. He was not even sure they were evenly balanced or came in separate pairs. It just seemed things happened. Good followed by bad, bad followed by good. The weighing seemed to be accidental, but in the long run, it was evenly balanced.

For three days, Luis moved around the flat as if he had Lobstein-syndrome and his bones were as fragile as butterfly wings. Camila kept asking him what was wrong, but Luis only said he had something bad to eat. Of course, Camila suspected he was not telling the truth and that made her think of the worst. Her husband, the man she had shared her life with for fifteen years, was keeping something from her. What? What could it be that he could not tell her, what could be so bad that he could not tell his wife, his partner, his friend?

Then Cazares phoned and Luis rushed away from home. They met in a quiet little café. There was no one else but them. They sat on the terrace in a deserted side street.

“Where did you get this coin?” Cazares asked twirling it between his fingers. He was good at it but his eyes were grim.

“I found it on the street,” Luis said. Cazares put the coin on the table and pushed it towards Luis.

“Well. I hope you’re not superstitious.”

“Not really,” Luis said, but his lips quivered. Luckily, Cazares was not looking at him. “I’m not even particularly religious.”

“It took some work but we learned that these kinds of coins were made by the Inca magicians for the emperor to grant them good fortune.” Luis could feel the cold running down his spine. He almost started to shiver with fear. Grant him good fortune? Magicians?

“The hummingbird,” the lawyer went on, “is a symbol of good fortune. At least it was according to a small cabal of magicians. The bird is rare and seeing one was a good omen. Giving it four wings was just a way of showing its supernatural powers, the same way Hindu gods have multiple arms. This certain sect was persecuted by many, mostly through fear. Very little is known about them, and I’ve already told you almost all of it.”

“And the inscription?”

“We couldn’t solve that. It is a coded message. The symbols, however, are not characteristic of the Inca culture. They look more like oriental signs, but they don’t match anything found there, either.” Cazares showed him his empty hands with a guilty look. “I’m sorry, but we don’t have the resources for that now.”

“Of course, I understand. No problem. Even this has been great help.”

“And did it bring you good luck?” Cazares asked and pointed carelessly at the coin. Luis forced a smile and hoped it looked heartfelt enough.

“Oh no! After all, it is just a coin!” he said but he had to clasp his hands together because they were shaking so badly. Cazares nodded.

“I flunked a very important case this week,” he said and shook his head. “A great loss of reputation, too.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Luis said and tried to look nonchalant.

“And one more thing,” Cazares said. “We have discovered a man in Lima who might have more information. His name is Guayasamin. He has some Inca blood. Here’s his number!”

“Thank you, Danny. Really!”

“It’s nothing. And now I must go, I’m sorry.”

“Okay. I owe you one.”

“Talk to you later!”

Luis called Guayasamin in the afternoon. A raspy male voice answered the phone.

“Sí.”

“Señor Guayasamin?”

“Yes.”

“My name is Luis Moreno, from Mexico City. My friend Daniel Cazares gave me your number. It is about...”

“The coin.”

“Yes.”

“You have an Inca coin of good fortune?”

“Yes, I do.”

“You found it?”

“Yes, on the street, but...”

“And does it bring you good luck alone or good luck and bad luck?”

“Unfortunately, both.”

“Come to Lima.”

“Lima? Peru?”

“I know a few Incas who can probably help you. But I cannot promise anything.”

“Have you met such a coin before?”

“No, but I’ve heard about them. Of course, these are just legends.”

Luis kept silent. Guayasamin’s rasping breath through the phone measured the time.

“Okay,” Luis said in the end. “I’ll go there.”

“Find me in the port. I’ll be at the shipping cranes,” Guayasamin hung up. Luis kept the mute phone on his ears for a few more seconds

and then he sat down and started to think about how he could get to Lima. If there was hope, no matter how infinitely small, that he could get rid of the coin, he had to grab it.

Following this phone call, and after what Danny Cazares said, it really seemed that the coin possessed magical powers. It was made for emperors. They really did need a lot of luck to remain in power for a long time, and they would not have bothered about attracting bad fortune. But it was equally possible that the coin performed differently for the Incas five or six hundred years earlier. It could even be a cursed coin, which gives its owner everything while taking everything away.

The important thing now, however, was to get to Lima, possibly without ruining every city on the way. Luis started to giggle at this and felt like he was going mad. He could see himself laughing hysterically in a few months time as he wins millions, survives accidents, terror attacks and hurricanes, while each and every member of his family dies in seemingly accidental tragedies. Meanwhile, he just laughs and laughs and laughs.

Luis went home and told Camilla everything. He tried to relate the story in such a way as to reduce its seriousness and to avoid appearing utterly mad. He failed. Camila burst out crying and packed her bags. She told Luis she would take Marcos to her mother because she could not take it any longer. Luis asked for a few more days, saying he needed to go to Lima and get rid of the coin, and when he comes home, everything would be back to normal. Camila told him she would go to their new house in a week's time. Luis should be there by then, and should be his old self, too, or he would never see either of them again. Luis agreed to this.

Luis bought his ticket to Lima, packed a few change of clothes and went to the airport. His wallet and the coin were in his pocket, and he took only hand luggage with him on board. He phoned his office, saying he would take a few days off due to a viral infection. His boss was understanding and wished him a swift recovery, but Luis knew both him and the entire firm were under considerable pressure. He only had a few days or his career would collapse.

Whilst waiting to board the plane, it occurred him that perhaps it was not a good idea to fly on an Airbus A320 with a hundred and fifty other people when he had a lucky charm that also attracted ill fortune in his pocket. But statistically there was only a one in ten million chance for accident on these planes, and anyway, what else could he have done? He could not walk all the way to Lima.

He trusted the pattern that misfortune only came after he had a lucky break would hold. He went through every single instance and realized that luck always proceeded catastrophe—which always happened to someone else, but someone near him, as if he had to see, had to know the exact price of his luck.

Just before the plane took off, Luis received a voice message from Camila. His wife was in tears as she told him that their old flat burned out, together with two other apartments. The old lady who lived downstairs fainted as she was cooking, but she was the only victim of the inferno. Camila asked Luis to take care of himself and begged him to come back to them because they needed him more than ever.

Luis looked at his phone in shock. The important things, including the dollars they found, were already moved to the new house and only useless knickknacks and discarded furniture were left in the old apartment. Camila and Marcos were at Luis's mother-in-law, and he was at

the airport. Their home burned down, and they were all unharmed and hardly lost anything. They were lucky. Luis was paralyzed by one single question as the Airbus took off. Was this luck big enough to bring down an airplane? He looked around on the plane. The potential victims for his family's escape from burning to death. Old people, young people, children, businessmen, families.

Ding! A friendly male voice called in. The captain announced they had reached cruising altitude.

8

From the left side windows of the Airbus, they could see Peruvian cities and the stark peaks of the Andes for a while, but Lima was still a long way off. The captain slowly started to descend when the entire plane was rattled unexpectedly. The impact felt like they collided with another airplane head on. The rattle was followed by a thundering noise and a loud hiss. The plane tilted right, and the Peruvian coast flipped out of sight.

The co-pilot told the captain that their left engine was on fire and the captain sent out the distress signal. They managed to stabilize the plane but were losing altitude too quickly and, worse still, the landing gear had jammed. They asked the Peruvian Jorge Chavez Airport's help for urgent evacuation on water. The captain already knew they would end up in the water; the only question was if they landed in one piece or a million fragments.

The passengers started to panic, but even that did not go beyond shouting, weeping, and it even subsided a little when the captain announced they needed to perform emergency landing on water and everyone should stay in their places, with their seatbelts fastened. At this very moment the oxygen masks dropped, which distracted people's attention from the quick emergency drill the senior attendant was trying to give them. The shouting was replaced by wailing, prophecies of doom and whispered prayers.

The plane dipped again and one of the air hostesses fell and hit her head hard on a seat. She did not get up and her body rolled between the seats like a discarded rag doll.

Luis was the calmest on the plane. He knew he would survive, and he suspected he would escape unscathed. But even so, he was utter-

ly terrified and gripped the armrest so hard his knuckles went white. When the oxygen masks dropped, he put his on and tried to breathe normally. The woman next to him crouched down and protected her head with her arms. The man on his other side unfastened his seatbelt and stood up. Perhaps he wanted to help the fallen hostess. They hit the ocean at this very moment. The captain managed to put the plane down at a gentle angle, but the force of impact was still elemental. The plane immediately shattered into several pieces. The wings broke off and exploded in a cloud of splinters, lashing the water into huge waves wherever they hit. The fuselage broke into two at the wings, and this was when the man standing by Luis disappeared, like a pawn taken off a chessboard. Luis closed his eyes; he did not want to see what happened around him. There were people tied to their chairs flying everywhere, not all of them in one piece. There was an explosion in the front of the plane, and fifty people were, quite paradoxically, in the middle of the ocean, burning to death. Luis could feel his mask tear off, he could feel the heat of the explosion on his face and the way his chair peeled off the floor. He no longer knew up from down. His body was afloat in nothingness and his consciousness drew back into the deepest, safest recess of his mind and closed the door on himself.

He regained consciousness with a thundering crack, and suddenly, he was immersed in cold water. He slammed into the ocean and started to think. He unfastened his seat belt and swam up to the surface. Finally, he thought. It was over. He saw a life vest floating by, grabbed it and inflated it. He did not dare to look around, even though he could hear the cries. He saw debris in front of him, and flaming machine parts. He recognized a few clothes, but refused to take a closer look to see if they came from a broken suitcase or off a passenger.

The coast guard and the emergency services arrived at the scene fifteen minutes after the accident. They rescued Luis and thirty-two other passengers out of a hundred and nineteen. But, as it often happens in such cases, many of the initial survivors died in the coming days and months. Some succumbed to their injuries, others could not take the psychological burden of losing their loved ones or facing the injustice of having lived where so many others died.

Luis was discharged from hospital the next day. He was lucky that his wallet stayed in his pocket, even though he lost his phone and luggage. The coin was in his pocket, too, which seemed almost impossible after such a plunge and impact, but it was there, nonetheless. It would not let him go, Luis thought.

At the hospital, he was approached by a lady with a kind voice. She told him if he wanted to talk about what happened later, he should seek her out, but Luis just told her he was preoccupied with more serious issues.

He called Camila from the hospital. He told her he was alright and lied to her, saying he was not on the airplane that was all over the news.

After this, he withdrew some Peruvian cash and bought himself two changes of clothes, a pair of hiking boots and a backpack, and went down to the docks to find that man with the strange name who could hopefully put an end to his nightmare. He had a hamburger-like sandwich on the way with coca leaves in it. Luis knew that this was normal in Peru and that kitchen coca leaves had nothing to do with cocaine but had high potassium content. He did wonder, however, about the fact that one of the restaurants he passed offered guinea pigs for lunch.

The first man he asked in the docks turned out to be Guayasamin himself. Luis's impression based on his voice and occupation was of a

younger man but this man was about sixty. He had few facial wrinkles but these he had were deeply ingrained into his features.

“I didn’t think you would come all the way here,” Guayasamin said wiping his hand on a rag before extending it to Luis. He had a pair of heavy-duty gloves under his arm.

“There was nothing else I could do,” Luis said.

“I believe you.” Guayasamin looked around the docks and tapped his square chin. “Well, my shift doesn’t end for another six hours, but I could make myself available tomorrow and take you to the priest.”

“What priest?” Luis asked.

“The one who can help you. I’ll tell you everything in the evening. Where are you staying?”

“I haven’t really given it a thought yet.”

“Go to the Orca. It’s a small bed and breakfast in East Lima, on the Jirón Áncash. It’s run by a friend of mine and I can find you there. Just tell him I sent you and he’ll get a room for you no matter what.” A weak smile passed across Guayasamin’s face.

“Alright.”

“I’ll come by in the evening and tell you what I know, and you tell me what happened.”

“That’d be great. Thank you!”

“Don’t thank me yet! I don’t know how your story ends, Señor Moreno, but I’ll try to help. And please, just call me Gua.”

“Alright, Gua. Thank you.”

“And one more thing. You are Raúl Moreno’s son, right?”

Luis could not hide his shock. Nobody, not even his own mother told him anything about his father since the day he died.

“Yes,” he answered, nearly stuttering. “How...”

“You look exactly like him, except you are a bit slimmer. And I remember the name Moreno very well; it is not a particularly rare name, but I’ve not known another man of the same name, save your father.”

Luis’s mind was full of questions, but Guayasamin said goodbye and returned to work before he could ask them.

Luis left the docks and went to find the hotel. He had never been to Lima before, but since Spanish was the official language in Peru as well, it felt like a trip to the countryside. He was lucky he did not find a French or a Chinese coin. Though truth to tell, he would have had a hard time getting by in an English-speaking country, too.

He found a room in the Orca hotel—the last room available, according to the girl at the front desk—closed the curtains and tried to sleep. Lima was the hottest at this time of the year, in early March, which meant it was twenty-eight degrees that day, but it felt hotter in the tepid air.

Luis kept tossing and turning and thinking about the coin. From the moment he picked up the coin, it belonged to him, and this must have been magic, because he could not throw it away, lose it, or even hand it over to someone else. Obviously, he would not be able to sell it, smash it or melt it down. But then how could he get rid of it? And who could that priest be that Guaya... Gua mentioned?

Luis thought his death would most likely solve the problem. The coin could only have power over him for as long as he lived, it would not pass on to Marcos. Oh well, Luis thought, but how do people with infinite luck die?

If he put a bullet in his head, it would definitely miss the delicate brain parts which cause instant death. No matter how much damage he would do to himself, eventually, he would recover; that was obvi-

ous. If he jumped off a building, a truck full of goose feathers would pass right under that building, he chuckled. And it would be similar if he tried to poison himself, hang himself, or use any other contraption to end his life: anything that would certainly kill another man would leave him unscathed. He would survive anything because his luck was unlimited.

This was true, but he was just very lucky, not immortal. The two were not the same, so there has to be a thin line where luck and death met and where the balance could tip towards the latter.

He hoped that it did not have to come to this, but he had to remember he came here to protect his family. His little Marcos and his wonderful Camila.

He thought about how Danny Cazares found Guayasamin. He could have asked, but he could almost hear the answer. Through unlikely coincidences and enormous luck. If this was the case, his luck was like the roots of a tree: it tangled around everyone he knew, and as long as they worked in line with his luck, they were lucky, too. This thought made Luis's head spin, so he settled for the answer that Cazares and his men had great connections and it must have taken them just a few phone calls to reach Gua.

Guayasamin arrived at the Orca at nightfall. He was considerably friendlier now that he did not have to work. He pulled his hair back in a ponytail—not one grey strand in it, despite his age—and his eyes above his wide cheekbones were peaceful, but strong. He wore a thick vest over a worn polo shirt.

They walked over to a bar and ordered two beers. Luis told him everything that happened from the moment he found the coin, from the dog to the airplane, and how his wallet and the coin stayed with him

throughout his tribulations. Even though Gua said that the hotel usually had plenty of rooms, Luis could not help but feel he had luck with that as well. He saw everything in this light lately; this was another sign of madness. It wrapped its sticky tentacles around him so slowly it seemed to toy with him.

Guayasamin explained Luis that his ancestors were Incas and he decided to help him because he owed a lot to Luis's father. Raúl often visited Lima, they had dealings together which profited Gua as well. Those days were long gone, and so was the money he earned, but he was still very grateful to Raúl and he still missed those nights out when they celebrated yet another month of success.

Gua explained that his ancestors had told him of a sect who performed magic for the Inca emperors. A small cabal above the laws and above the people, who only answered to the monarch himself. They read the future, they decided when to send the warriors to battle, they made the amulets and totems, all sorts of sacral objects which helped the emperor in war, in love and in all his decisions. They called upon the powers of nature and the ancestral spirits to create these objects. Nobody had any idea what sort of objects survived the ages and how many of them were still around. Some of them were harmless, but Gua firmly believed that, unfortunately, some of them preserved their magic powers.

He told Luis he could take him to a tribe in the mountains. Where the priest he already mentioned lived. His position and his knowledge was passed down to him from one generation to the next. He could probably say more about the coin. They decided to meet in the morning and Luis agreed to cover all expenses of their trip. They drank to their health and had another round. The two of them had a tough case

to crack. Luis felt dizzy when he thought he carried the lucky charm of a secret cabal of magicians, a coin that could manipulate events to his advantage.

9

Guayasamin arrived at the hotel in a cab a few minutes before sunrise. They went to the airport together and took a small Bombardier with seventy-eight passengers to Jauja. Luis told Gua they would not crash because nothing particularly lucky happened to him in the past few days. Then he remembered the catastrophe he survived two days earlier and wondered if it counted as such, but then he convinced himself that was not how the coin worked.

The plane did not crash. It landed softly on the tarmac of the Francisco Carle airport. They rented an SUV in Jauja and headed out into the depths of the Andes. They carried spare cans of gasoline and food in the back of the car.

Guayasamin disclosed interesting details about the Incas as they drove, and Luis listened intently. Gua told him that several tribes still lived in the mountains, practically the same way they did in the 15th-16th centuries. The Incas were always good at passing on information, so if only one such temple survived, or if there was someone who knew about this cabal, they would find out. He told Luis that according to the Inca worldview, man had a duty to protect nature and keep up mutual respect.

The roads were uneven. As they went through an ever-changing countryside, the bleak rocks gave way to flourishing plant life and the dry gravel roads were replaced by a dirt track. Once, they took a rope ferry across a river, another time they had to haul the mired SUV across a muddy spot with their windlass. It was hot and Luis's shirt was dripping with sweat; later, it was caked with dust, while his boots and his trousers were covered in mud. He looked like an archaeologist excavating at a dig.

Guayasamin's raspy, but comfortable voice kept telling him about the Incas, and how their empire spanned three thousand miles in its heyday. Their cities were connected by well-paved roads and hanging bridges that made even the Spanish conquerors stare. They carved terraces into the hillside to have arable land and dug canals to water them, and did all that without inventing the wheel. They built their empire with their hands and their animals, and their buildings still survived to modern times. Neither rain, wind, nor even earthquakes could destroy them.

After this he told Luis about their emperors, whom they believed to be the children of the Sun; and the hosts of protective spirits who guarded them, their totems and the huacas which marked the extraordinary in this world, such as an oddly shaped tree, a cave, a meadow.

Luis asked Gua about human sacrifices, but his guide told him that was more typical of the Aztecs and the Mayas; the Incas did not practice such sacrifices, or only did very rarely and on a voluntary basis. This was not what Luis had heard, but he did not know too much about the Incas.

The road forked off into the forest and Guayasamin left the main route. This track was narrower than the car and less travelled, and the branches and the leaves kept lashing the side of the SUV. Luis pulled his elbow back in and grabbed the door.

"We're almost there," Gua said.

"This is where you're from, right?" Luis asked.

"My father was born to this tribe, yes, but I grew up in Lima and I've lived there all my life."

It was getting dark when they arrived. Suddenly, the trees disappeared, and a wide plateau opened before them. Luis counted as many

as thirty houses surrounded by croplands and pastures. Guayasamin stopped the car two hundred yards away from the closest house; he did not want to frighten the locals or their animals.

“We’ll walk from here,” he said and climbed out of the SUV. Luis grabbed his backpack and followed.

Three men came from the village to greet them, while everyone else visibly slunk away between the houses. The children only dared to steal a glance at the strangers from behind their mother’s backs. Gua greeted them in Quechua and told them who they were and the purpose of their visit.

One of the men told Gua, and Gua dutifully translated, that they had come in vain; the priest did not see strangers and it was ill-advised to meet him.

Luis did not understand Quechua, but he could feel the tension in their voices. It was a worry beyond tongues, something no human could have missed.

Gua explained to the locals that his father was born there and that he had met the priest before, once on a visit eight years earlier. The mood became visibly more relaxed. The three villagers talked amongst themselves for a few minutes before waving a hand to them to follow.

They were led to a hut made of stone and wood. An unkempt, middle-aged man greeted them. One of the escorts explained that he was the village priest, but Luis felt as if he had stepped into the booth of a shady fortune teller at a dodgy fairground. The priest stared at them dispassionately. He looked strong, but half his face was horribly disfigured by a scar. It looked as if he had been mauled by a wild beast, and even though he survived the attack, the wounds healed badly. The scar ran across his cheekbone and disappeared behind his

ears, but not before branching off towards his temple. He was not a trustworthy sight, and Luis had his doubts that they would receive any help here. They sat down in front of him and Gua explained who he was and told him Luis's story. The Inca muttered something and Gua translated it.

“Show him the coin, Luis!”

Luis took the coin from his pocket and thrust it under the man's nose. He did not touch it, just leaned over to get a good look. He muttered some more.

“Turn it over!” Gua ordered. Luis turned the coin and Gua translated what the priest said. “This is a dark luck coin. It is called dark because it brings good luck to its owner by bringing ill luck to someone else. It was made for the Sun King to protect him in his noble life and to punish those who would harm him.

“Sun King?” Luis asked.

“The Inca emperors were the mortal stewards of Inti, the sun god.”

“Like the pharaohs?”

“Yes, something like that. The hummingbird is a symbol of good luck, and that pattern around it refers to the ruling dynasty.”

“And what does the writing say?”

“He doesn't know that” Gua said. “The Incas did not use writing.”

“What do you mean, they did not use writing?”

“They did not use writing as we know it. They used a knot-writing called quipu. They tied knots of colored yarns on a stick and that was how they wrote. The content was defined by the combination of knots and colors. Whatever this inscription is, it is not in Quechua.”

“They told me in Mexico,” Luis said, “that this is some coded writing magicians used in the Inca empire.”

The priest kept silent for a while and then he rubbed at the scar on his face and Luis could see that his forearm, his hand and his fingers were covered in scars as well.

“This is just a legend,” the priest said and Gua translated. “Even if they did have such knowledge, it was lost in time. Nobody knows the truth anymore.”

“And what do these legends say?” Luis asked, even though he could see the priest was not happy he kept forcing the issue.

“They say the Inca sailed to the Far East, which, to them, was the West. The priests took their script back from this journey, but instead of sharing it with others, they kept it to themselves. They re-shaped it so they would be the only ones to understand. This was how they recorded their knowledge, and maybe it still exists somewhere, maybe it does not. Maybe it never existed.”

“How could I get rid of this coin?” Luis asked after a short pause. He was starting to feel very uncomfortable in the hut. The priest’s gaze was even, but Luis sensed some sort of threat in it as well. “I put everyone around me in danger. Whenever I have luck, someone gets hurts, or dies, or suffers some other loss.”

Gua translated patiently. Sometimes he had to repeat a phrase and other times, he had to rephrase a sentence so that Luis and the priest could understand each other.

“He doesn’t know that” Gua said, “but there is a wise old Inca with another tribe, who might know more.”

“Great!” Luis said. “Let’s go!”

“It is a day’s walk from here,” Gua said. “We can’t leave tonight. He invited us to stay for the night and he would give us a guide tomorrow morning.”

Luis accepted, even though he knew he would not be able to sleep. He kept thinking all day long if that moment or the next was lucky, and if it was, what would be the price? Was it luck they did not have a flat tire? Or that the rope did not tear when they crossed the river? That they were not attacked by marauders or beasts? That he would not get bitten by a snake at night?

Even though he had no reason to be suspicious, he put most of his valuable belongings into a small bag for the night, and fastened it across his chest with a strap.

He took another look at the coin. He could clearly see the four-winged hummingbird now, as well as the signs of the inscription. They did look some kind of a South American kanji system.

He managed to sleep for a few hours, after all, but he nearly fell out of bed in terror around dawn. He dreamed his family burned to death in their old apartment and that jolted him awake. The air was cool and Gua was snoring peacefully at the other side of the hut.

It did not matter whether his dream held a deeper meaning or not, he had to get rid of the coin. Even if it cost him his life; he was convinced of this now, and he was ready for the worst.

As he was lying awake in the darkness, he thought if he was an Emperor who did not have to care about anyone but himself, he would consider such a coin very handy indeed. The Sun King, who is always lucky, and what does it matter if a few of his men, warriors, and concubines die? And then he saw the gaze of the priest again and it seemed even more threatening in retrospect; memory cast horrible scars on both sides of his face.

If the priest killed him and took the coin, Luis's luck would certainly fall on him. It never occurred to Luis before, but there were a lot of

people who would be happy to have such a coin, and his death was not such a high price for a life of good luck.

He nodded off, but twenty minutes later he woke up again; and this time, for a more uncomfortable reason.

10

Something hit his chest. He opened his eyes, and the priest was kneeling above him. A pale light leeches in through the door; the sky started to turn grey above the trees, but it was still almost pitch black. Luis could only see the scarred half of the priest's face, which made him look more like a night terror than a living man. Something glittered above him. The priest held a knife and was about to slam it into him again. Did he stab Luis? But Luis felt no pain.

He did not cry out, he did not want to wake Gua because he was afraid the priest would hurt him as the man came to his defense. He pulled up his leg and kicked the Inca in the chest. The priest could hear but not see what happened, and he was not prepared for the attack. He fell down on the carpet by the bed and landed flat on his back. Luis jumped up and ran for the entrance. His bag fell off, and it was then that he realized what the punch that woke him up could have been. The priest stabbed him in his sleep but hit the bag's clasp instead. The clasp broke, but it saved Luis's life.

He thought he had more chance to protect himself in the open. For one thing, it was lighter out there, and for another, somebody could see them and come to his aid. As he rushed out of the hut, he expected a full cadre of warriors intercepting him and handing him over to the priest, but no one was there. The village was under the spell of the dawn quiet only woodlands know.

The priest ran out of the hut and rushed at Luis. His face was distorted by determination, but the scarred side of his mouth did not snarl and that looked even more terrifying. He pointed a six-inch-long blade at Luis. The Mexican froze. He never fought seriously, or even read

about such things. He was completely unprepared. He had no other idea than to start running, but the priest was already in motion and could catch him easily, slashing at him with this knife.

In that very moment Luis tripped on one of the tree stumps around the bonfire place. He fell on his face, while the momentum of the slash carried the priest forward and he fell on the trunk. Unlucky as he was, he landed on his own knife, skewering his own chin with it. He rolled over and started to whimper. The knife entered under his chin, half cut off his tongue, and stopped just under his palate.

Luis got up, stared at the priest, and waited for something to happen. If he dies, the others would not help him get to the next village. The Inca kept whimpering; he looked weak and harmless. The scars on his face looked like a misfortunate disability now, and not terrifying stigmas. Luis knelt down beside him and had a look at his new wound. There was no artery nearby, so Luis took the knife out, no matter how much it hurt the priest, and softly told the man.

“You will never come up lucky against me.”

The priest nodded and clutched his bloody chin. Luis did not know if he understood what he said or simply resigned to the fact that he could not defeat the stranger. He could not get the coin just like that. Luis helped him up and waited until he staggered back to his hut, then threw the knife into the bushes. He was incredibly lucky again! Fear grasped his heart, but there was something majestic in how he did not defend himself and defeated the other. He went back to his bed but remained awake.

The others woke up half an hour later. They departed after a modest breakfast. Guayasamin decided to stay in the village. He did everything he could do and the locals told him there would be Spanish speakers in the other village as well. He told Luis he would wait for him for three days before heading back to Lima. Luis thanked him and they shook hands.

The priest did not show his face again, but he did send Luis the guide he promised. It was a young boy named Raimi; he was around twenty. He wore cotton trousers, a linen shirt, and a dark, plain *k'eperina*. His sandals were made of recycled car tire. He had short black hair, a bent nose, and friendly, though not very clever eyes. He walked into the forest with a staff that reached up to his shoulder and a machete on his belt. Luis followed him glancing anxiously back at the village disappearing behind them between the leaves. He had a feeling they would never come back here. He could not always see the path as they hiked through the woods, but Raimi walked as confidently as if it had been a paved highway. They walked in silence; they did not speak a common language.

They stopped to rest every two hours, but even so, they left the forest behind in the afternoon. They continued their journey along the face of a cliff. The pebbles kept crunching under their feet. Luis had a sudden bout of vertigo, but he refused to stop. On his right, there was an eighty-foot-deep ravine, hypnotically pulling his gaze to the bottom, while the cliffs on his left seemed to want to push them down into the abyss. He could see goats above them and on the cliffs. Vultures circled in the sky. They could even see llamas in the valleys. Without the coin,

it would have been a wonderful hiking trip in the Andes. They caught a glimpse of the village in the distance, but Luis saw there was still one more forested swathe and a valley before they would reach it. All the same, he thought they could be there by nightfall.

Luis walked carefully. They were at the end of their journey and Raimi reached a rocky plateau when Luis missed a step and slid on the pebbles. He fell, but he managed to grab an edge of the cliff. His feet were hanging over the abyss. Raimi started to run back but when he saw that Luis had already pulled himself to safety, he stopped. This was when the rock fell down. Probably a goat pushed it or it came loose some time before. It slammed into the path a few inches from Luis's head and ricocheted off into the deep in a cloud of dust and debris. The very next moment a coral snake flashed out from under a stone and bit Raimi's leg. Coral snakes usually cannot bite through thick canvas, but Raimi's trousers were too thin, and the snake was a big one.

Luis knew what happened. He survived the rock, so Raimi had to die. He did not know anything about snakes, but he knew that was the case.

Raimi knew a lot about snakes, but this one was too fast and by the time he looked down, it already disappeared between the stones. The bite did not hurt, but that did not mean anything. If it had been venomous, he would be dead in a few hours without the antivenom. Luis did see the snake, but he could not explain what color it was. They kept pointing at stones, flowers and each other for a while, but they did not get anywhere. It was certainly a red snake with yellow and black colored banding, but what is crucial is the order of the bands. If the yellow touches both other colors, than it's venomous, any other combination means the snake is harmless. Luis had nothing that was clearly yellow

or red. And they even had trouble saying “yes” or “no” to each other. In the end, Raimi waved that they should go on.

They walked another hour before reaching the forest. The space between the trees was filled with a heavy mist. They were getting tired, but Raimi did not stop. Luis suspected they must be very close and that was the reason the boy kept going. Then Raimi disappeared right in front of him; he was swallowed by the vegetation. Luis stopped and took a few cautious steps forward. As he got closer, he could see Raimi lying on his belly among the leaves. His body was racked by spasms. Luis knew he was dying. How many more people must die just because the universe revolved around his luck?

He knelt down and turned the boy around. Raimi looked like he was being strangled. His face was reddish and purple, his eyes stared into nothingness, his hands were shaking. Then these involuntary spasms slowed and stopped. He died. Luis hung his head and sat on the ground. He was sitting in the woodlands of the Andes, all alone with a dead Inca, without knowing where he was or which way to go on. It was getting dark, time moved on, and all the while Gua was waiting for him to return, as were Camila and Marcos much further away. His clothes were dirty. His mouth was dry. And he was the luckiest man on Earth.

Luis pulled himself together. He got up and hoisted the boy on his shoulders. He was not particularly strong, but then Raimi was not particularly heavy, either. The sun was about to set and the valley was veiled in portentous greyness.

Luis carried Raimi for half an hour before reaching the village. Then it started to rain. Villagers came out to greet him and took Raimi to one of the adobe huts, ushering Luis in as well. Everyone was dressed as if they were still living in the 15th century, and he felt like a visitor from

the future. They were true Incas, not modern people. Luis was overwhelmed by a mixture of shock, respect and curiosity. It was hard to believe that what he saw was real.

When he looked around, they did not seem either happy, or friendly. Most of them carried blades and weapons. Others had coiled ropes, waterskins and tools Luis could not identify.

One of them started speaking Spanish, and that shocked Luis even more than their looks did.

“Raimi, what happened?” he pointed to the dead boy.

“Snake,” Luis answered and made a serpentine wave with his hands.

“Yellow?”

“Yes. And black.”

The Inca nodded and told the others something in Quechua. For some reason, Luis felt he was not their leader, but he might have been the oldest in the hut.

The Incas carefully covered Raimi’s body and escorted Luis to another, bigger hut with a stone foundation, though the upper parts were made of branches and roughly worked wood.

The hut was lit by the yellowish flutter of a single torch. An ancient man was sitting inside. In the dim light, his wrinkled face looked like a death mask carved of wood. He addressed Luis in Spanish.

“What’s your name?” he asked. His voice was deep and rough, and it made Luis shiver, but all in all, he trusted the old man more than he ever trusted the priest.

“Luis,” he said and thought that should be enough.

“My name is Hawka,” the old man said. “Why are you here?”

“I have a coin with me,” he said and took it out of his pocket.
“An Inca coin.”

Hawka's eyes widened a fraction, but Luis still noticed it.

He recognized it, he thought. He knows what it is!

"A coin," the old man repeated.

Luis held it out to him. Hawka hesitated at first but then took it.

"Tell me the story!"

Luis told the gist of it, that he was lucky, but whenever he had good luck, someone near him had bad luck. Raimi died because he escaped a falling rock. Hawka thought for a moment and then he started to speak. Sometimes he said a few words in Quechua but one of his fellows translated it to Spanish. There were a few words that were not translated but Luis could understand what he said and did not like it one bit.

"This is a lucky coin. Priests made them for the emperors to use in war and power. In older days, Incas understood powers of nature. Priests could influence luck. Spirits of ancestors helped. The coin is a symbol. Understands human, understands spirit. Connects emperor and spirits and nature..." Hawka lifted the coin and in the yellow light of the torch it looked even older, more valuable and entrancingly mystical. The old man carried on. "Coin was with emperor until death. Went to earth with him. Brought ill luck on people who wished ill for Sun King. But ill luck is different for you. Coin does not work for you."

Luis considered what this could mean. Maybe the ill luck fell on those who wished him harm. But it did not sound plausible. Marcos? The passengers of the plane? No, it was not right. The coin did not work for him? Probably, but why? The old Inca seemed to read his mind and answered his unspoken question.

"World changed. Nature changed. Powers are different. Spirits are angry. New man is bad to nature. Does bad to nature. Luck coin

brings bad luck. It collapsed, that collapsed,” Hawka said a word none of the Incas knew in Spanish, but Luis could deduce it was *balance* that collapsed. The powers of nature which the coin could once control, collapsed, and this made the coin function differently. The coin of the Sun King worked differently five hundred years down the road in the hands of an investment advisor, Luis thought, and that was hardly surprising. But to think it became so harmful... But who could say it worked well even in the past? Perhaps the Inca priests could never make a proper lucky charm, only a cursed one like his.

Hawka added another sentence that made the entire picture clear.

“Coin demands sacrifice for luck. Any sacrifice.”

Luis understood it now. Perhaps in the ancient times, it harmed those who were against the emperor. The spirits of the ancestors helped it, and they knew who the Inca’s enemies were; but he was not special, and when he had luck, anyone around him could have bad luck. The coin, the spirits were satisfied with anyone.

“How could I get rid of it?” Luis asked.

“Coin feels. Coin knows you. You are its master. Coin is yours alone. You cannot throw it away.”

The bitter thought that he had to die to protect his family and all the other innocents around him crept back into Luis’s mind again. He had come all this way in vain; nobody could solve his problem. The coin was a curse and there was no absolution. He asked the question he knew he had to ask.

“Can I kill myself?”

“Yes,” the old man said and nodded, which dipped his entire face in shadow. His ancient eyes glinted faintly, but they reflected truth,

not danger. Luis could feel he was not lying. “The coin does not protect you. It protects your luck.”

Luis felt a little relieved but was happy he did not try to kill himself earlier. The thought that the Incas could be wrong crossed his mind, but they looked like they knew what they were talking about. And he did come to know the coin’s powers firsthand. The events he went through could not have been a string of pure coincidence.

Perhaps there was another way out but he did not have the time to find it. The risk was too great and he feared Camila’s and Marcos’s health and lives were at stake.

“I want to get rid of it,” Luis said.

“You can only get rid of it through your death,” the old Inca answered and handed him the coin.

Luis never wished for anything. He did not want great things out of life, only small pleasures. He did not wish for riches, at least not any more than all the others for whom a great fortune and the carefree life money could bring were out of reach. He wished he had not picked up the coin. Had he let it be swept down into the sewers, perhaps it would not have had the power to hurt anyone. The passengers aboard the Airbus would be alive, safe with their families, friends, clients. Marcos would not have broken his leg, their house would not have burned down, they would not have millions of pesos, and he would still be a struggling financial advisor. But would it really have turned out that way, had the coin not intervened? Luis could not bear to think of that.

He made peace with not seeing his family again. They would never find out what happened to him. Poor little Marcos would grow up without a father, just as Luis did, even though he promised he would never leave his son the way his father had left him. But it did not matter; what mattered was that they would be safe. Maybe ill fortune would not haunt them and at least he would leave them a nice house and a stuffed bank account, thanks to the coin.

It occurred to him that perhaps the Inca did not know what he was talking about.

Hawka and a few strong men escorted Luis to a cliff by the village at dawn. In the morning light, Luis could see that the village was built on terraces cut into the hillside. Most of the houses were made out of mud with branches and dried leaves for roofs, but there were a few stone houses with wooden beams above them, paved roads, stables and plantations.

The Incas seemed to be a tad too eager to assist in his suicide for Luis's taste, but he could not blame them that none of them offered to try to kill him. Hawka told him they would see him to a place where he could step over into the realm of the dead and that there was nothing more they could do for him. The rain stopped overnight and left a pleasant fragrance in its wake.

"The coin," the old man said. "Hold it, but don't grab it tightly, or it will follow you in death." Hawka handed a small, wineskin-like pouch to Luis. "Drink this. It helps."

One of the men crouched down by the edge and peered into the ravine before turning his attention on Luis.

You want a front row seat, right? Luis thought, but he did not mind it. He drank the liquid Hawka gave him and handed back the pouch. It had no taste and he found it scarier than if it had been as bitter as bile or if it had burned his throat as he swallowed. What could it have been? Snake venom? Drug? Alcohol? Would it kill him or just make him more relaxed? He did not feel anything yet except for a slight queasiness, but that was due to the altitude.

The cliff gave a rare view of the bare hills, and the valleys covered in lush forests. Luis nodded and stood at the edge of the cliff. A veil of mist shimmered between the peaks, looking for a way out to freely float away. The first rays of the sun blinded Luis and caressed his face with warm fingers. He looked down. The ravine was at least two hundred feet deep, and it kept calling him with its rocks and the dry debris at the bottom.

"Certain death," Luis thought. "These Incas aren't joking."

Luis turned back to the old man standing peacefully a few feet away from him one more time. There were three other Incas with him, the same three men who greeted and escorted Luis the night before.

RONIL CAINE
COIN

“What does the inscription say?” he asked. “The text on the coin. What is it?”

“It means ‘Luis’s luck’. It was written in an ancient language only the priests knew.”

“And you can read it?”

“No, but every coin has the name of its master. Legends say so.”

Luis did not doubt that. He nodded and said thank you in a small voice to all the Incas with him, and to his life, to the world and to the gods, hoping maybe they existed and could hear him.

It was time. Luis stepped to the edge of the cliff and closed his eyes. He decided to jump off with his eyes closed: he thought it would be just a moment afloat in the air and the end would hopefully be too fast for him to feel any pain. He held the coin between two fingers. He focused on the sunlight one last time. He enjoyed its warmth. He thought about Camila and Marcos and took a step forward.

For a moment, Luis almost stood mid-air before gravity pulled him down. With his eyes closed, he felt like he was swimming towards the sun, he was floating, nothing and no one could hurt him anymore. He did not feel anything around him but the sunlight.

He turned over in the air and slammed into the cliff. He opened his eyes cautiously. He was hanging on a rope. He did not plummet to the bottom. His eyes filled with tears of relief, confusion and fear.

His right leg was held by a noose and three Incas held the other end of the rope. Did they put the noose on his leg as he stepped off the cliff? Or before that? They saved him. They stopped him. But why?

The three men at the end of the rope and Old Hawka were standing above him and peering down over the cliff's edge. They did not laugh; it was not a joke. They pulled him up carefully and Luis plopped down onto the stones. The old man gently put his hand on his shoulder. Luis was shaking like a leaf. He prepared for death and the fact that he was still alive seemed unreal to him. He shivered, even though it was not cold, and his feet were shaking so badly he knew he would not be able to stand up for quite a while.

“Where is coin?” Hawka asked. His voice was quieter and friendlier than before.

Luis looked at his hands and searched his pockets. It was gone.

“I can't find it. It's gone,” he said and started to laugh despite himself. His tears spilled over and ran down his face. Hawka rested his hand on his shoulder like he meant to support him or give him strength. “I dropped it...”

“You lost it,” Hawka said. “No more coin. But you could not just throw it away. Coin feels you. Coin knows it’s yours. It knows your death.”

Luis considered this. From the moment he found it, the coin stuck to him like a parasite. It even had his name on it. It helped him, but it destroyed everything around him. He was not able to throw it away or lose it consciously, but when he gave up his life, he could drop it. The coin or the harmful spirits behind it knew he would die, and the connection was broken. But was it even possible? Or was he just swept away by a strange stream of coincidences from the very first moment, and only his strange trial could end these accidents?

He went through the events of the previous few moments. The Incas brought him to the cliff because they could control events here. That man did not crouch by the edge to get a better view of his death, but to put the noose on his leg as he stepped forward. The three men came to hold the rope. The old man, even though he could not have been sure his plan would work, tried to help him and succeeded.

“Changing nature is bad,” the old Inca said and took his hand off Luis’s shoulder. Luis was already better, and the sun rose in its full splendor over the valley. “Coin is curse. Plays with forces of nature. Plays with forces of Mama Pacha.”

Luis nodded and let the others help him up. He wondered how much time would have to pass before he could reach into his pockets without fearing the coin was there.

“Now go your way!” Hawka said. “Anqas leads you to other village.”

Luis wanted to hug the old man but restrained himself. Instead, he asked one last question.

“What was it I drank?”

The old man started to laugh, and the three men laughed along with him. Hawka's face smoothed out as he laughed, except for the deep crow's feet around his eyes. His laughter was raspy, but it made Luis feel better.

"Yaku," he said. "Water."

Luis laughed with them and took another long look at the land around him. They would never see each other again and he would not have the chance to pay them for saving his life. His heart constricted at this thought, but he pushed down his bitterness and subdued himself up. He got a second chance; he had to make the most of it.

"Thank you," he said. He waited a few seconds, thinking the old Inca would clasp his hand, but he did not. Luis turned around and followed Anqas.

It was a long way home, and Luis had time to reflect on his life and what had happened. He felt as though a heavy burden was lifted from him and could hardly wait to see his family again. He hoped he would have good luck on his side—but if not, he would settle for ill luck to avoid him.

The End

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