

A Family Party

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It would be hard to find a family in GTA (Greater Toronto Area) who don't have at least one party during the weekends. Birthdays, marriage anniversaries and religious gatherings are just some of the common events. When none of those are happening then several families may just get together for impromptu parties. After a busy week if the weekend do not present an opportunity to vent out my whole week feels ruined. Okay, I admit, there's another equally important reason for my urge to have such family parties. Our three year old son Zaki happens to be our only child. While he is generally quite entertaining often we – my better half Shili and I – do get exhausted having to play not only the role of his parents but as well as of his friends, uncles, aunts etc. trying hard to eliminate the void in his life as all of our relatives lived far away from us. During the weekdays when school are open the kids keep busy. Parents work, kids study, little time for socializing. The weekend is a different story. The adults seek adult company, the kids of kids.

On this particular evening we were headed for the adobe of our senior friend Jahir and his wife Sufiya. They had vehemently refused to admit that there was any special occasion for the party – a common practice to discourage guests from bringing expensive gifts. However, rarely such camouflages worked as Shili knocked on her secret sources and found out that there was indeed a reason for the party. Our hosts were poised to celebrate their 25th marriage ceremony. Gifts were bought. Generally prudent I wasn't particularly crazy about such acts but I guess every good thing come with a price tag.

When we reached Jahir bhai's home - a townhouse with rows of homes - it was already crowded with dozens of cars taking up every bit of parking spot around the place. Reluctant to steer away too far for a legal parking space I double parked. I planned to inform Jahir bhai just in case the other car needed to get out.

Sufia bhabi cordially received us at the door. Pleasantries exchanged we entered their specious living room only to be surrounded by the gang of the kids who rushed in. This gang consisted of Johnny, Shafeen, Raphin, Iti, Bithi and several other kids who I could vaguely recognized. Usually quiet and weary Zaki lightened up instantly. Lately Shili had been working diligently to bolster his social skills. Usually in our circle that meant starting with a measly 'Salam' or 'God Bless you' in Islamic way. However, often making the little ones to do just that turned into an impossible mission. Tonight, just like any other times, the little guy outright refused to utter anything - no matter how much her frustrated mother tried. He wasn't alone. The air filled with the passionate urges from the keen mothers.

"Go ahead dear, say salam to everybody.'

"What's going on? What did I teach you?"

"Say Hi. Please!"

Etc.

The gang instantly froze with total silence following. The childish faces bursting into excitement just moments ago turned blank. Then slowly a few mumbled something ineligibly.

Johnny's mom Seema snapped, "Get the hell out of here! When are you hooligans going to learn etiquettes? Can't you even wish a simple salam? Did you guys just lose your voices? Turn up the volume. Say Assalamu Alaikum. No sleepy 'sa..ma..kum."

This brought some half hearted chuckles but no further improvement on the greetings. Once the gang disappeared into the house with their usual vigor Shili shrugged off her disappointment and joined Seema and other ladies. I went on to

join the other lads who had gathered there before us. Among several men of middle aged stature I was happy to see some of my close friends. As we met on regular basis we were comfortable together and usually found interesting things to discuss. I noticed some of the families had brought their older kids in the party. Personally since I had turned twelve I thought it was quite embarrassing to accompany my parents anywhere. It was a true pleasure to see these young folks had the heart to come to this party.

Jahir bhai had two sons. Amol older, Atol younger. Both of them had completed their education in commerce and had joined their family business of importing and exporting. Both were amicable, gentle. Time has changed and while just receiving a spontaneous greeting from older kids feels satisfying I actually had a full length conversation with these two. As the party progressed I took special interest in knowing the other young men and women present. I am always fascinated in knowing the upcoming generations.

Monjur bhai and Amina bhabi were both agriculture scientists by education and experience gained back in Bangladesh. Since coming to Canada they had been working as building managers. There wasn't anything wrong with the job particularly but the disagreement between their education and profession could be the cause of heartache for the weak hearts. Things aren't supposed to be coming in a platter for new immigrants – it is generally understood. They never complained. They had two children. Daisy – their daughter was studying in journalism in one of the local universities. Riyad – their son was studying in Ottawa, four hours away on car. The parents visited him quite frequently while the young man was kind enough to return the favour at his whim.

Jayed bhai was working as a manager in a departmental store. He was probably a police officer in the past, in our home country. He would not say anything clearly but he surely looked happy and content in a life that evidently did not have anything

to do with bribes. His wife Nina however was yet to get used to the life that lacked all the helping hands that she had back home and grudgingly complained at every opportunity. They had two sons – Bashir and Imon. Bashir had been studying to get his PhD in Applied Science while Imon had taken up a temporary job in Indonesia after completing his graduation. He had just returned home after completing his engagement there and was considering multiple full time job offers. Having a degree from a reputable university definitely can make things brighter, especially for the ones who paid any attention in their studies.

However, there are no reasons to believe that everybody would want the same type of success. Some young men may wonder - what is success anyway? How would one measure success? Why waste time studying for years? Asif - Shihab mama and Bela mami's eldest son - with his ear rings and goatee looked like the horrifying dacoits that we read so much about during our childhood. There have been too much gang activities around this area in the recent years. I surely hoped Asif haven't signed up with them. His reluctance to education has been a well known fact. He has been working as a cashier in a McDonalds for a little while now. Most of his jobs had been short living. How long McDonalds would interest him that was something we wondered about.

Soon, like every other time, us men got engaged in arguments over Canadian politics. My knowledge in politics had always been very limited but that never stopped me from jumping into discussions. In a nearby dining table Sufia bhabi had arranged all kind of delicious foods. Sensing the presence of saliva dangerously increasing under my tongue I had to quit in my worthless argument. I waited patiently for the call of dinner. The appetizing odour of the food started quite a commotion in my stomach.

That is when I received an invitation to play hide and sick.

Not sure exactly when and how in the past I had the slip of judgement to play hide and seek with the little gang.

However, the outcome of such mistake hadn't been very good. Since then in every family gathering this gang seek out for me. I became their perennial seeker while they were obviously the hidiers. That was given. The problem was owing to high frequency of family parties which evidently meant plenty of fattening food my midsection had been bulging for a while now and chasing this gang up and down was no more convenient. Yet refusing to play was not a readily available option. Jahir bhai's house was three storied. After several trip up and down I gave up and collapsed in a chair. The gang tried their best to get me back up but I resisted. This was going too far. Finally, frustrated Marufa bitterly said, "Uncle has become old. Look at all the gray hair he has."

That hurt. I only had a few gray hairs in my sideburns. That surely couldn't be considered as a sign of oldness.

Once the kids disappeared I furtively looked at the dining table. It was overwhelmed with all kind of eye popping, mouth watering delicious foods. How long does a man have to wait for a meal? My patience was about to break. I felt like singing out the famous song of Tagor, "Open the door o' dear; why make me wait so long?"

Who knew the door was about to get totally nailed.

I heard a big commotion generating from the family room where the ladies had gathered. Rushing in I was appalled to find out our hostess Sufia bhabi have passed out. She had diabetes and possibly high blood pressure. All the cooking she had done earlier the day to feed her guests must had been very stressful on her. After plenty of water splashed on her face when she did not come back emergency services was called. The ambulance showed up in no time. Not sure if it was the red-blue lights of the ambulance or the cold air but right before she was to be loaded into the ambulance Sufia bhabi became awake, immediately jumped out from her stretcher and looked around with total surprise.

"What's wrong? What are you all looking at?"

It couldn't have been more than five minutes after the departure of the ambulance when she passed out for the second time. However water did its magic this time. She was awake but unable to get out of her bed. In all these chaos the food had turned ice cold. I doubted if I was the only one among all guests who felt the churning in the stomach known as 'hunger' but nobody surely wasn't saying anything, not at a time like this. Not knowing when we'll be out of this troubling situation I allowed myself to grab couple of chicken roasts stealthily at the first opportunity that came. I then secretly slipped out to the backyard and obliterated them in record time.

Delayed but not omitted dinner was eventually served. Sufia bhabi forced her out of the bed and looked after the proceeding with shaky legs and apologizing words. Jahir bhai flanked to her in this quest just in case things get uncomfortable again.

The party broke late, around half past one in the morning, like all our family parties. Surprisingly we found all the kids, regardless of their age and size, fully awake and in high spirit. Under normal circumstances this was way beyond their bed times. However, once in the car and strapped securely on their seats they usually dozed off. Today was no exception. Zaki was asleep before we barely passed the nearest curb.

As we drove back a healthy late night traffic kept us company.

This city never sleeps.