

A Trial for Spider-Man

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Some of the most noticeable structures in Scarborough, a Toronto suburb and part of Greater Toronto Area (GTA), are its multi-storied apartment buildings. Since we decided to immigrate to Canada from Bangladesh, hoping to offer a better future to our next generation, things were never the same. The long journey from Dhaka to Toronto that included eighteen hours of flying time was the longest we had ever travelled. The new life in our new country was overwhelming by every means. The hoops that we had to jump over just to be able to rent a small apartment on the twenty-second floor of one of those high-rise buildings was a true awakening. Back in Dhaka, a computer programmer working for a multinational company, my life wasn't particularly appalling. Despite enjoying healthy remuneration, I was proudly living with my parents, in their three-storied house, along with my wife Shili and infant son Zaki. Housing in Dhaka – a bustling, sprawling, traffic congested and crime infested city of tens of millions of people - is expensive, though not out of reach for well established professionals. Nevertheless, my parents insisted us to live with them. Traditionally it is not considered embarrassing. Our new apartment in Scarborough, just five floors beyond the roof, was literally the first home that we ever considered as truly ours.

The first day in the apartment was kind of scary; especially the attached balcony with four feet high concrete railing with several noticeable cracks was not something that we considered safe. I suffered from acrophobia, to elaborate - any

height more than thirty feet sent me to a shock, my feet trembled, visibly, my head spun uncontrollably. As I still braved to take a peek below leaning over the balcony it seemed that the building was bending forward and I was about to lose my footing and slid down to the guaranteed death. I sprung back inside the apartment never again to indulge myself with such luxury. My better half had a laughing feat on my expense. She was exceptionally courageous for an otherwise timid woman and height had no impact on her. Yet, when I bolted and locked the balcony door making it essentially inaccessible she didn't object. A few days later we found a flock of pigeons had snatched away the opportunity and made several nests there. This, once we allowed ourselves to get used to the foul smell of the abundant droppings, quickly turned out to open up a window to the nature. Eggs were laid; babies were born, right in front of our keen eyes. Never before had I thought looking out through a bedroom window would offer the nature at its best so up close, right in our backyard - in a way.

Like all multi-storied apartment buildings in this part of the town ours was home of six to seven hundred families, surpassing total number of apartments by a large margin as many of the apartments were happy nests of multiple families, usually blood related. One mover had once told me that during one of his jobs he had found six families living in an apartment – no bigger than one thousand square feet. He swore that he counted twenty-two people - ten adults and twelve kids. At first it sounded ridiculous and heavily exaggerated but later we realized it was a common case in areas like Scarborough where South East Asian people flocked. While many could find it tough to digest we had little difficulty understanding the concept behind this. Save, save and save. After a few years most bought houses and moved out of the apartment buildings permanently. The savings definitely showed the path of prosperity. However, the inevitable question might rise - why the building

management allowed it? After all, the three pages finely printed rental contracts clearly stated that only and only one family could live in the rented property, the apartment. The answer was simple. Lately many renters were moving to houses, thanks to low interests, competitive housing market and less stringent buying requirements, the apartment rental business wasn't as good as it used to be.

Years passed by quickly. Things had never been easy since we landed here but it moved. Life went on amid all the struggle that we experienced in this new world, as I tried to find my way through the confusing job market with its clearly discriminatory unwritten corporate policies that frequently overlooked highly educated and experienced new immigrants for suitable positions. I attended evening classes after my regular day time restaurant job where I worked as a busboy. I had come a long way from being snobby about low paying jobs and now saw it as an intermediate step to my ultimate goal – a corporate official job. Uh! How much I missed sitting on a comfortable revolving chair working on a computer. Life was different here but not unacceptable. As I saw my tips at work grow gradually to a level where it was healthy enough to contribute in my expenses the inevitable idea of owning a house emerged spontaneously. Not a day passed by when we didn't discuss the possibility and even dared to browse through the colorful booklets the housing developers dropped in plentiful on the floor of the building lobby.

It was hard not to. After a few years in a congested apartment, it was just natural that a sane mind would look for better viable options that offered more freedom and flexibility. There was definitely a hidden satisfaction in living among a population that offered diversity at its best - a true melting pot, but it also came with its share of problems. People showed a general tendency to ignore the simpler things of life like compassion, cleanliness and mutual respect. It barely surprised

anybody when last night's leftover from pizza to meat loaves found their way to the stairs, elevators, and corridors. Shili swore that she had once smelled even human urine on the staircase. There was a garbage chute on each floor but strangely enough the garbage always piled up around it, often high enough to initiate a reluctant visit by one of the grudging building maintenance crews. In addition, there was this ominous presence of noise pollution that had become an inseparable part of our lives. Waking up at three in the morning only to discover that the undue interruption was due to a cranked-up music box in the neighborhood had become a regular thing. Once upon a time I loved romantic Hindi songs – the Gazals. The continuous overdose that I received for years from the Gazal lover who lived right under me had uprooted my passion for all love songs. And then there was that endless agony with the elevators. The building had three of them - one never worked, the other one frequently revolted forcing the third one to bear the enormous load. Waiting half an hour to board an elevator had become way of life.

One night, once Zaki went to sleep, we – man and woman – called for an emergency meeting.

“How long like this?” Shili barked. She had to wait twenty minutes for the elevator just that morning while Zaki screamed his head off.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked innocently.

“What's that suppose to mean?” She snapped. “How many times have I told you to buy a house?”

I shrugged. “It takes money; a lot of it.”

“I heard we could buy one with just 3% down payment.” She had done her home work.

“True, but we'll have head full of grey hairs before we pay our loan off. The interest would be a killer.” I spoke my mind loudly.

“If we wait we'll have grey hairs even before buying one.” She shot back.

“We need to save some money to put larger down payment. You can’t have it all.”

That was a blunder.

“What did you just say? Are you suggesting I squander? Have you seen what the other wives do? You dare to say things like that because I am so considerate...”

Sometime later, after plenty of loving words and a dose of my especial romantic routine when she finally calmed down the night had progressed further down in its path to dawn. We were both tired, discouraged. None of us wanted to dive into a situation that promised overwhelming financial burden. We decided to resort to more imprudence and as a result hoped to enlarge our savings. There was no other way to do it. Shili looked awfully determined and even took the effort to create a balance book right then with the columns neatly drawn and the headers nicely written. Every expense had to be noted and categorized. For any saving strategy to work we needed to understand our expenditure better, we both agreed, a rare occurrence.

The first few weeks went trouble free. We stuck to our plan and diligently listed all expenses under categories like housing, grocery, entertainment etc. We even drew up a plan to cut back our entertainment budget to nil and grocery costs to half starting from the following month. You had to give up something to achieve something. We both understood that. The spirit was strong, determination was sky high. That’s when the trouble started. It came abruptly, giving us little chance to prepare.

We bought our groceries from the local Food Basic store, once or twice a week. Zaki, who was now four, took especial interest in fruits. This was very pleasing to us, considering how many kids were hooked to high calorie fatty foods and struggled to keep their weights off well before they could spell the word ‘weight’. Fruits, in the contrary, had fewer calories and had

beneficial vitamins – a great combination. However, the following week our visit to the grocery store took an unwanted turn. We had happily stuffed our cart with apples, grapes and nectarines, Zaki’s favorites, and moved on to the cereal section. Mother and son both feasted on cereal after sunrise, unlike me, who had to wait well into the day to build up an appetite for food. Defying all laws of healthy life style, I had diligently ignored breakfast, practically all my adult life. As a result, this cereal episode was something that was very personal to the duo, while I browsed through jelly and jam section, checking out calorie contents, one of my hobbies.

They both knew what they wanted and usually zoomed through the cereal aisle. Not this time. When ten minutes had passed and the duo didn’t show up I became suspicious and walked to the neighboring aisle to check on them. Soon I found the two engaged in a tug of war over a cereal box, the son hung to it with his arms wrapped around it tightly while his mother tried to pull it away from him. What was that all about? I felt the need to mediate. Zaki had picked a cereal that he wasn’t used to eat, Shili explained, he still wanted it only based upon the fact that it had some worthless pictures of a so called super hero. A good look at the colorful box revealed the ultimate truth – it was surrounded with flashy pictures of Spider-Man. Since the first Spider-Man movie had rocked the moviegoers the market had been flooded with products that bore the images of the splendid superhero in his fascinating red and blue costume in eye catching poses. Obviously, the mother had little patience for such pretentious display. The son, on the other hand, looked just about ready to declare a full war over it. As if to prove his intentions beyond any reasonable doubt he brought in his awfully strong lungs in the battle and started to scream at the top of his voice.

“I want Spider man! I want Spider man!”

Shili tried to reason, “Don’t be a fool. That is just a

picture. The serial that comes inside that box is no good.”

Zaki wasn't letting such useless logic to deviate him.

“I want Spider-Man!” He howled.

Shili shrugged in utter frustration and looked at me for help. Oh no, not me. If anybody was looking bad for troubling a cute little guy let that be the rude, thoughtless mother. The dad would rather accept the role of a nice, smiling man with a heart of gold.

“Let him have it.” I said, indulgently.

Son smiled at me like the way sun comes out from behind the cloud after a rainy morning. Who knew that tiny victory would soon come back to haunt us? When we realized the mistake, it was already too late.

The following weekend we visited one of my old friend's house to celebrate his only son Joy's fifth birthday. It had been a little while since we had had an opportunity to be in their presence. However, in our busy lives a few months gap wasn't totally unacceptable. We spoke on the phone and regularly wrote electronic mails. We stayed in touch. Nevertheless, this time around, as we stepped inside their house we realized things had changed, quite drastically, something neither of us expected, Shili or me. We were clearly surprised and quietly shaken as we noticed the ubiquitous presence of the dreaded Spider-Man, posters to figures - in all size and shape, from walls to the floors. The indulging parents, no different than us, had planned an all Spider-Man birthday, and to make it a true success had bought everything Spider-Man – from toy cars, costumes, hats to table cover, paper plates and even the napkins.

We were truly terrified. Zaki and Joy were close. With the exception of short living skirmishes every five minutes they were otherwise ideal friends. We knew this barren display of Mr. Spider-Man was bound to imprint a deep impression on Zaki's young mind, one kid's passion was about to be passed onto

another. I felt hopeless. Why were some parents so inconsiderate? I wondered. My friend did well as a software developer. Perhaps it was his way of declaring success to the world. He had the strength to bring the coveted super hero to his young child – there was a clear sign of ego in it. Regardless, I couldn't stop wondering how these companies were even allowed to allure such innocent kids with their provocative marketing efforts. Why did we have governments? What were they so busy doing when such injustice continued?

There's no shame in admitting that what I felt bubbling up inside my mind could be passed on as contempt, as I apprehensively observed the quick lessons that Zaki received from Joy. We made it a point to cut short our visit with a lame excuse and got ourselves out of there before much damage could be done.

Couple of days had passed by quietly. Fearfully we stayed watchful. No nagging or pleading for Spider-Man toys yet. We relaxed with a sigh of relief. Perhaps he was too young to totally absorb the idea of an enchanting super hero.

Winter was approaching quickly. Zaki's last year's winter jacket didn't fit him anymore. Few days later we went to the nearby shopping mall in the evening. Shili was a picky shopper, often navigated through store to store for that perfect something, obviously me with a tired Zaki on my shoulder shadowing her. Hours passed by while Shili struggled to choose a winter jacket for Zaki, frequently demanding my honest opinion and rejecting even when I gave my full approval, which was every time she asked. We travelled from Sears to Bay to old Navy, without luck. She was determined not to give up and we continued in our endless journey from store to store.

Suddenly we noticed in front of a specialty clothing store a five-six years old boy of Chinese descent was rolling on the ground as he cried and screamed at the top of his voice. His helpless parents looked at each other, clearly in total loss in the

face of such hysteric act. It didn't take too long for a crowd to gather around; curiosity and compassion flew in abundance. The attendants from the clothing store scurried out to investigate. Soon the mystery was revealed. The boy had just been in that store and picked a tee shirt with an image of Spider man, which he pleaded his parents to purchase for him. When that went unheeded he resorted to something that worked. The parents jointly added that the boy already had two shirts with almost similar printed pictures. Every time he saw another one with slightly different color variation he demanded to have it.

A group of elderly shoppers had joined us to the show. The heart wrenching cry and all that rolling and shaking proved too much for them. While most limited their sympathy into deep sighs and wet eyes a few decided to speak up and appeal for the unfortunate boy.

"Come on guys. Get him the shirt. How expensive can that be?" An elderly woman was the first one to plead.

I stole a quick glimpse at the price tag. Thirty-five dollars. With tax it would be a little over forty. Not a negligible amount by any means. Grandma, if your heart breaks for the poor boy so much then why don't you buy it for him? I thought.

The sales girls who worked in the store were young. All this screaming and commotion and the crowd that gathered outside the store started to make them a bit nervous. Not knowing how else to handle the situation, even they started to gently press the helpless parents of the boy who continued with his tantrum, perhaps with more vigor, now that he had a house full of spectators.

"Get him what he wants, please." The girls pleaded. "If this goes on for too long we'll lose our customers. "

"Someone might call the police." Another girl cleverly added.

Possibly the word 'Police' did the trick. Many new immigrants are wary of the legal complexities and fears the wrath of the law man could fall on them for apparently harmless reasons.

Especially the myths about losing children to the social services on the basis of child neglect and abuse is a fearsome one. Nobody in their sane mind wants to get into trouble with law on that ground. The helpless parents gave up and paid for the tee shirt. The distressed boy recovered instantly; up on his foot he held the tee shirt high with a victory dance, his joy rippled through the crowd, forcing spontaneous smiles into the satisfied faces of grandma and grandpas.

The parents gave away a thin, meaningless smile before quickly pulling the boy away from the store and the crowd.

I had just let go a breath of relief when I felt a gentle pull on my hand. It was Zaki.

“Dad?”

I coughed. “Yes?”

“I want that shirt too. Jonny have two of them.”

Shili was about to roll her eyes and lash out at him when I whispered to her “Did you like that show?” She struggled to keep her cool. Zaki wasn’t known to put up a tantrum but there was no guarantee that it wouldn’t start right there. We had just seen how stupid the parent’s looked. We did as ask.

Once we were back in the car, our dear son had quickly changed into his newly bought tee shirt and was smilingly ear to ear. I forced a smile while his mother glared at him. “Blackmailer!” She muttered.

Zaki had been going to school since last September. This was Zaki’s first time away from home without any of his parents being with him. Shili was a stay home mom and there was no reason to put him to daycare. We weren’t sure how he would do in school. He was one of the youngest kids in his class. Nevertheless, to our amazement we found him to be very happy at school. While the bigger kids returned home with teary eyes, he was always full of excitement. This in turn gave me something to tease his mother.

“He must have been bored to death in your company. Now I rarely see him complaining.”

The mother gave me a fiery glance.

“Don’t talk silly. How many hours in a day do you spend with him? For the few hours he stays in school I get some rest as well.”

I wiped of the smile and somberly said, “Didn’t we have a plan for half a dozen kids?”

I had to run to escape from the attack of her deadly pinches.

“What do you take me for?” She lashed out. “Do you think I would spend all my life just raising kids? I have good education. I’ll look for a job.”

We both knew her Masters degree in Botany from Dhaka University wasn’t going to be good enough for her to find a job here. If she wanted to work in the area of her interest she had to go back to school.

Anyway, as we started to get really comfortable with Zaki going to school something worrisome happened. One day he came back from school with tears rolling down his cheek like a pair of spring creeks. His mom was devastated. School was about ten minutes walking distance from home. Shili walked him back and forth to school. On their way back home Zaki sobbed unstopably all through the way. A lot of pleading later the mystery was revealed. One of his class mates had a Spider man bag and he didn’t. Why didn’t he? As soon as I returned home from my work I was faced with this universal question – why the other boy had something that he didn’t, especially when it was something as wonderful as a spider man bag? I must have hesitated to find a suitable answer because son took up the opportunity to decide his next action. “Dad, you have to buy me that bag now.”

I coughed. “It’s too late. All stores are closed.”

“You are lying. We went the other night. All stores were open.” He instantly replied.

Never undermine the intelligence of these little people. Next, we reasoned, scolded, pleaded, begged – nothing worked. Instead he started to cry. He had to have the spider man bag or he couldn't possibly go to school the next day. Shili got upset and yelled some with no impact. Finally, we ran out of patience and headed to the mall. Luckily, we found a similar bag. Once purchased son held it dearly, smiling with all his teeth revealed. There went some more of our planned savings.

At the end of the month, once Zaki went to bed, we husband and wife got our balance book out. We had listed all our expenses diligently for all through the month. We spent hours grouping the expenses into distinct categories to get a clear picture of our costs. Rent – \$1050, grocery – \$405, Car insurance and gas – \$310 ... Most of it was usual expenses. There was no way to do without them. But the category that instantly got our attention was something very disturbing. Spider-Man – \$220.

In Toronto if a middle-class family with one income could save four-five hundred dollars at the end of each month they had a lot of reason to consider themselves lucky. This was especially true for the new immigrants who almost invariably engaged in low paying jobs as I was. In addition, the federal and provincial taxes were kind of high in Canada, and there was that ever-presenting effect of rising prices of essentials. In the midst of it all, the new troublemaker namely Mr. Spider-Man, wasn't welcomed, obviously. Shili and I exchanged grim glances. After some more basic mathematics we found our saving last month was 158 dollars.

Mili grimaced. "If we move at this speed, I'll be ninety before we have enough money to put up 25% down payment for even a rotten shed."

I bitterly said, "Forget the house for now. We need to have a strategy to beat this Spider-Man guy." She shrugged in frustration. "After Spider-Man there will be

some other man. Everybody is aiming at the tiny disposable income that we have. There are no places to run.”

I threw away the balance book. What was the use of all these calculations?

I stealthily checked out my better half. There was no immediate objection. I quietly let go a deep breath of relief. Spider-Man was bugging me, admitted. Nevertheless, I couldn't stop myself from thanking him just a tiny bit. There couldn't possibly be anything more boring than trying to balance your finances. When all these giant corporations were failing left and right why a minuscule speck like me was even bothering to do the unthinkable?

Thank you, Spider-Man! I quietly rejoiced my new-found freedom. All charges are dropped. You are free to go.