

An Afternoon with Hashem Family

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We hadn't visited Trina and her family for a while. Her father Hashem - a small, skinny and cheerful man – was my wife Shili's distant cousin. However, he was hardly the reason why we eagerly planned for such visits. He had three daughters: Trina the oldest was ten, Pushpa six and Urmila three. Couple of years ago when Hashem family had first arrived in Toronto we rushed to see them. That was my first meeting with the family and Shili's after a long time. Hashem bhai (brother) had been away from Bangladesh, our home country, and was working in Malaysia as a teaching faculty in a university. During that first meeting in Toronto both of us – husband and wife – were quiet taken by the three cute and angelic girls. We had always desired our first child to be a precious and patient girl but instead we were blessed with a boy – Zaki, who was now four – and accepted him with all his tantrums and restiveness.

Hashem bhai, a dream host, were known to go a distance to treat his guests. You ask for a mere glass of water and he would bring you a feast. Shili wasn't much for such excessiveness and every time she caught him going overboard she furrowed her brows and scolded, "Hashem bhai, don't be a show off. I can't tolerate that at all."

Hasham bhai had known her since she was a little girl herself and had clearly been very affectionate. Her every scolding kicked off varieties of wide smiles accompanied by a sure display of paper white teeth.

Shili found it even further annoying. "What's the smile for?" She was sure to snap.

This usually made him break into high pitched laughter.

Anyway, on this fine July afternoon, a Saturday, we dropped by at Hashem family's two-bedroom apartment in Mississauga on a short notice to wish Puspha a happy birthday and hand over the gift that Shili had purchased for her.

Couple of months ago we had received a special invitation in the occasion of Pushpa's sixth birthday where we could not attend as I had to travel to Montreal on a project work. After returning home I heard the day was celebrated with plenty of fun stuff. Trina and her sisters loved to dance. Their mother Julekha bhabi (sister-in-law) had a fascination for cultural stuff. In her youth she was known to have taken lessons in music and dancing. She tried her best to pass on her skill to her daughters. However, that probably wasn't quite needed. Owing to all the Bollywood musical style movies which are so ubiquitous in our homes that even the little ones learn how to dance Indian style even before they can walk straight. By the time they are past toddler age the girls are already dressing up and acting up like the beautiful and glamorous Bollywood heroines.

Trina and the sisters had a few apprentices. There was a family from North West part of Bangladesh who lived in the same floor. Their eight-year-old daughter Daisy was a diehard fan of Trina. She was known to spend most part of her days in this apartment.

Najra, who was six or seven, lived at the floor right above. They were from Pakistan. Both of her parents used to work during the day; hence after school Najra stayed with Trina until evening when her parents returned. According to Julekha bhabi she (Najra) was so comfortable in this apartment that most days she didn't want to go home.

Trina's Cultural club consisted of Daisy, Najra, Pushpa, Urmila and of course herself. It had already been brought to our attention that the girls not only gained expertise in Indian dancing but had also acquired essential skill set in acting as well. Due to our absence in the grand event - Pushpa's birthday party - we had missed out the especial show that the girls had presented. Our visit seemed to have given the gang a chance to

re-enact the whole celebration. Not only we ended up watching the one-and-a-half-hour-long video of the birthday party in its entirety but soon found out that the talented group was preparing to repeat part of the show in our honour. At this development I felt quite worried fearing this could eventually worn me out but outside I remained all smile – ear to ear.

Trina and her team went on to spend a good half an hour only to dress up. Colourful dance outfits called *ghagra* were yanked out of the closets where they were hung from sturdy hangers and after some shuffle and scuffle among the younger ones to sort out who was going to wear what things eventually calmed down though not before the peace was shattered briefly with the howling of Urmila. They rehearsed for a little while behind the closed door of one of the two bedrooms.

In the meantime, Julekha bhabi went on to start her very own cooking bonanza with the kid's favourites pulao (butter rice) and korma (butter chicken) – two special preparations. It took little imagination to realize where she might have gotten the idea from. Sensing Shili's wrath was about to fall on him Hashem bhai skillfully allowed himself out of the apartment mumbling something about inviting parents of Daisy and Najra to dine with us. Both families worked during weekends and there were little chance of them showing up – we thought. Not so, not today. It must have been some sort of auspicious day because both families were docked at home. Our original plan of dropping by for a short visit had now all but gone. Anticipation of a grand meal, the ensuing cultural show, friendly chitchat with Hashem bhai and his two friends I had just met - everything was going just great. Though, the bright summer sun outside tried its best to excite me, rebuking silently for anchoring inside the four walls when I could be outdoor, enjoying the warmth of the short living season. I needed little tanning as one might already have guessed but I was addicted to the sun and my summer days spent mostly outside. I pulled my attention off the sun and waited patiently for the show. We were already too deep into it

and leaving wasn't an option any more.

As the bedroom door where the rehearsal was going on in full speed opened slightly to allow us a glimpse into it I found the girls chasing Zaki, clearly their attempt to have him slip into a ghagra wasn't going too smoothly as he vehemently protested declaring repeatedly that he was a boy and was not about to put on a girly stuff. Then somebody cranked the music up and the door closed – to my relief. I hated loud music. It was nice to find out that at least the children were having a great time.

Daisy's father, Muhabbot Ali, was an easygoing, fun loving man. Even before we had been fully introduced he started cracking jokes in his local dialect, every time breaking into uncontrollable laughter. Not fully knowing that particular dialect I barely understood what he was saying but still wanted to be polite and half heartedly chuckled which sounded more like snorts.

Najra's parents Niaz Muhammed and Nazma had the looks of devout Muslims. Niaz was middle aged, mild mannered and wore a long beard. Nazma wore pitch black burqa that covered practically all her body except a small gap where her eyes were. She had quickly disappeared inside one of the bedrooms and I did not even hear her voice. Imagining how she must have been feeling under that fully covered garb in a hot day like that I was slightly taken aback. Muhabbot brought me back to reality with his loud laughter. Must be another of his jokes.

Finding Niaz who didn't even speak the same language chuckling happily I looked at him curiously. "I do not understand a word," he responded, "but I still laugh because it makes Muhabbot bhai happy."

Muhabbot overheard it and didn't look very happy about it. As a result, he tried to translate his jokes into English. But his English was only a slight improvement from his Bengali dialect. After struggling for a little he gave up on his jokes and engaged in small talks. Hashem bhai translated as needed basis and we

were able to make a meaningful conversation. I learned that Muhabbot was a big businessman back home. Since immigrating to Canada, he had started a food store. The business was sort of okay but they had to work hard. Between husband and wife, they spent most part of their days in the store. Sometimes two young girls came to work for them. Today was one of those days.

Niaz was part of higher management of a large drug company back home. Since they came here he was working as a night guard in an office building located in downtown Toronto. Not a bad job for a new immigrant but not something he wanted to continue doing too long. He was taking a course on Quality control and was hoping to get an office job when done.

Trina appeared at one point and interrupted our discussion to declare that the cultural show was about to start and we were to applaud for the performers.

Before the applaud had stopped the air filled with the sweet sound of the ghungur (ankle bracelet) as the performers danced in unison to the stage – the tiny space between the TV and the sofas in the living room where we sat - and started their first dancing routine. Zaki and Urmila were about to ruin the whole dance with their inexperience – to put it modestly - and were quickly taken out of the pack, which actually backfired as they screamed and shouted in protest forcing the whole show to a halt. Taken aback with this unexpected development Trina had to unwillingly cut short the planned program to make room for a talent show to allow the agitated toddlers an opportunity to show their materials. Urmila was the first one to take the stage and instantly won the audience with her stumbling dancing moves.

Zaki had a general tendency to go against the wind and when his turn came he refused to perform and declared he would instead draw something. Once he was supplied with paper and pencil he drew something that one could pass as a distant cousin of Spider-Man. He had been an avid fan of the Spidey and drew all sorts and sizes of frescos of him inside our

apartment. I must say he had improved over the years, thankfully, considering we had to bear the unsightly walls. His mother however was not very happy with this artistic ability. There is this consensus among many that the connection between an artist and addiction to drugs is given.

“He is definitely going to be a big artist someday,” Pushpa affectionately said.

I could see Shili’s face clouding. Not a chance.

Finally, it was dinner time, my favourite activity. Recently as I started to grow a love handle Shili had been quite critical of me and food. She had very keen eyes and could detect tiny differences in my size and shape. Careful not to fall on her radar I stealthily ate to the content of my heart. The curries tasted great, pulao delicious and a tamarind chatny (relish) just out of the world. I was in a festive mood and allowed myself the luxury to slip, just this once.

After dinner the girls pressed me to do something amusing for them. Now, it was my time to panic. I had always looked good in the audience and rarely on stage. I was still haunted by the memory of the mishap that happened decades ago during my boyhood when I was sent on stage to recite a poem called *Mary’s little lamb*. I had spent days memorizing it and practicing before all the mirrors that I had access to and yet when I found myself standing on the podium looking back at an audience of several hundred people, I froze. Eventually I had to be yanked out of the stage leaving the whole audience cackling. Since then I had never returned on the stage. Trina begged but I skirted out of it. Kids are equally nice and cruel; they never forget the embarrassing things. I wasn’t about to take another risk at this point of my life.

Hashem bhai saved me from this jeopardy. He pulled out a collection of poem by the famous Bengali writer ‘Nazrul Islam’ and recited several poems. He wasn’t very good at it but that didn’t seem to discourage him by any means.

Julekha bhabi, in her attempt to make our experience

even better, went on to make a huge homemade cake. Unfortunately, the oven did not fully cooperate and the thing didn't turn out very well. The kids were eagerly waiting for the cake and they seemed to get turned off by this disappointment. Hashem bhai's big smile and the commitment to replace the 'worthless' oven did very little to change the gloominess of the young faces.

Pushpa looked particularly depressed. "There are so many nice cakes in the stores!" She said almost mournfully. "We never buy those. Since we came to Canada we have become so poor!"

Her words dropped like a bomb. Shili and I were both caught unprepared for such turn of event. Poverty had never been an unusual event in any of our lives. Born and raised in a poor country like Bangladesh one must endure the constant reminder of poverty in practically every moment of the day – on the streets, in the slums, in the villages or cities equally. It was never something to despise. However, when a kid so dear to us spells it out then the impact becomes something totally different. Not knowing what I could do to help the situation I proposed to quickly get a cake from the nearby store to which both Hashem bhai and Julekha bhabi objected vehemently. We learned that in Pushpa's real birthday cake worth 70 dollars were purchased from a reputed store. Today Julekha bhabi had tried a self-made cake only because her cakes always turned out very good, better than the store-made ones. For some unknown reason the thing didn't turn out right this time – could be the oven, could be the dough. She scolded Pushpa with silent eyes.

Pushpa looked at her father for some support in this dire situation.

Hashem bhai loved his daughters with his life. "She didn't say anything wrong." He lightly said. "When we lived in Malaysia we had a big house, company car and even a driver. Since we came here we do not even have a car. The girls can't go anywhere. My dear Pushpa, did I put it right?"

Pushpa nodded half heartedly.

“Dad used to make so much money in Malaysia.” Trina added. “We bought all kind of stuff.”

“Why did you decide to come here Hashem bhai?” I inquired.

Hashem bhai laughed meaninglessly. “For the kids, of course. The job was good but the schools weren’t. Most were in Malay – a local dialect. I wanted the girls get an education in English. Everything we do is for the kids, isn’t it? However, I am thinking of going back again. I might still find another job there, if I try. What do you say sweet hearts, do you want to go back there?”

He looked at his daughters for support.

“No-o-o,” was the combined response.

Now it was my turn to be surprised. “Why not?”

“Schools here are so much better.” Trina and Puspha responded in harmony.

This came with an air of relief to me. The temporary hardship could not shatter the happiness that these kids found in other areas.

“We all are in the same boat.” Niaz said. “My family also complains about many things but we must look at the future. By the grace of Allah my girl is getting a good education, someday she will be a successful professional.”

Soon we found ourselves engaged into an in-depth discussion about the pros and cons of immigration.

The kids went on to get busy with their own set of games.

Women gathered back in the bedroom and discussed whatever they discuss – possibly kids, husbands, saris and jewellery.

When the offer for a second round of coffee came from Julekha bhabi our party had to break. It was already evening and Muhabbot had to go to the store. Niaz also had nightshift. Clearly, he wasn’t crazy about his current job but this was better than most other choices available. Before leaving he smiled

weakly before saying, "There were many problems back home too. I had to resort to corruption because I had no other choice. But moneywise things were good. "

"How many times did I tell you not to come?" Nazma snapped from behind her burqa. "Never listens to me. How about now? Grass on the other side is always greener."

Hashem bhai chuckled, clearly finding it very amusing. "You are right, bhabi. What a nice way to put it! I love it."

Niaz shrugged. "So, I jumped out of a frying pan into the fire, what's the difference?"

Once all the others left it was our turn to make the move. We hugged and kissed the three girls, promised to visit them again very soon and started back our drive home. Deep inside both of us must have had felt a little pity but at the same time we also knew someday these girls would become very successful and would surely be looking back at these struggling days with affectionate memories which was sure to enhance the joy of their success by manifold.