

# The Watermelon Saga

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This happened a few years back. I had just gone through a major change in my life. To be more specific - after getting into trouble with my pervious boss, the assistant boss, the semi boss and the boss's boss I was left with no other option but to move on. Fortunately, I was quick to find another engagement. I was greatly relieved being able to move out of the hot lava.

The new job was in downtown Toronto, same as the previous one, in fact in the same area. I continued to commute using the bus - subway combination, something that worked well for me as I lived in the suburb.

My office was on the eighteenth floor of a building that sprawled over a large area with its ground floor packed with all kind of stores – from fast food to shoe repair. Often, I ventured down during lunch break and walked around the store lined corridors that connected to the labyrinth of Toronto's underground walkways. Particularly fond of the grocery stores I liked to watch the neatly arranged fruits in nice piles – apples, pears, oranges etc. Sometimes if I saw good discounts I even bought some and carried home after work.

One day I had walked into a grocery store during my routine stroll when I noticed a bunch of watermelons were piled up inside a wooden crate – nice, round, shiny. I was instantly drawn. Pushing past a group of Chinese elderly folks who were crowding the watermelons I made my way near the crate, picked a round one up and was about to depart when I was rudely stopped by one of the old men. He shook a pointer right on my nose aggressively and spoke in mixed Chinese and English which if translated would mean something like, “What kind of idiot are you, man? Don't you have any knowledge about watermelon?”

This is a sure dud. Put it back, right now.”

Alarmed I quickly put it back. Looking at their wide grins I knew I was about to do something really stupid. “Which one is good?” I innocently asked.

“Which country did you come from, you idiot?” The pointer had returned. “How can you not tell a good melon from a bad one? Watch me. ”

The offended old man picked up a watermelon from the crater, carefully slapped on its midsection and listened to the resulting sound keenly. After a second and third slap the useless melon was returned to the pile and a new one was picked. This went on for a while, with the elderly men engaged into noisy consultation after each sampling. Finally, after at least a dozen watermelons, the group unilaterally agreed on one and handed it over to me. Thankful I paid six ninety-nine and carried it back to my office with the plan to take it with me on my way home. I knew the sight of a whole watermelon in a public transportation could tickle the sense of humour in some people but I was ready to take the risk.

On my way home I met Azam bhai, a good friend of mine who worked for another company hosted in the same building. We both shared a keen interest in fishing. Looking at the watermelon resting on my arms he broke into roaring laughter. “What is going on here brother? Dressed in office cloths but carrying a watermelon! What were you thinking? Do you have any idea what all these people are thinking about you? Shame! Shame! Ha...ha...ha...”

I quickly looked around and inevitably caught several people smirking at me; especially noticing an attractive woman staring at the melon in a way that could be perceived as *awe stricken*, my heart just sunk. “I know. It was a stupid idea. I just couldn’t control myself. It looked so good!”

Azam bhai was resourceful. He had solutions for everything. He religiously brought a backpack to work. All that ever came inside it was a small lunch box. He quickly took it off

from his back. "Put the melon inside this. It is quite strong. It can hold it."

I was relieved. The watermelon fit into his oversize backpack quite nicely. I carried the bag on my hand for a while but eventually as my hands started to hurt from all the weight I hung it on my back. We got up in the train in King Station and stepped out in Bloor Station. We had to switch train here. This junction is relatively big and always crowded especially in the evenings as the office-goers return home.

The first thing that I noticed after stepping out of the train was the presence of police officers. Just a few days back there was a bomb blast in London subway. In Toronto people were more or less apprehensive as well. Canada had been very cautious about its role in the world politics but yet people with agitated minds were not particularly known to be rational. I was aware of the fact that many subway stations, particularly the larger ones, were being guarded by armed police. I had seen a few officers from a distance on my way back and forth to the office but hadn't paid much attention. However, standing several yards into the platform and facing a group of four armed officers standing right before me I had little choice but to do just that. Looking at their tense body language and over cautious posture I was instantly alarmed. The grainy image of a young man in a backpack picked up in the video cameras in London who were later found to be one of the terrorists flashed through my eyes. No wonder the backpack on my back with the watermelon inside looked suspicious. Azam bhai must have realized the mistake just about the same time. He whispered under his breath, "We are dead! Don't even think of moving. One stupid move and they are going to shoot."

Before I had a chance to respond him the police officers surrounded me in a half circle, keeping considerable distance. The big white cop who stood facing me tried to look tough and brave despite his visibly trembling fingers on the butt of his gun as he commanded, "Stop! Don't move. Not another step. Raise

your hands.”

I shrugged with a broad smile. ‘No, no, no, it’s not what you are thinking.”

Azam bhai muttered, “Are you nuts? Why are you talking? Just raise your hands exactly the same way I have – all the way up.”

I ignored his warning and attempted to clear up this ludicrous mix-up. However, before I could even open my mouth all four officers joined forces and barked, “Raise your hands. Now! Don’t move!”

What a travesty! There must have been several thousand-people passing through the station who all froze, instantly identified the source of trouble and were undoubtedly ogling at my backpack. Totally freaked out I wondered whether I should be howling or roar into laughter. Me? A terrorist? Just the mere mention of them gave me goose bumps! Unsure what would be safe I instinctively followed Azam bhai and raised both my hands up, way up. “Officers, you are mistaking...” I started, still hopeful of a peaceful ending.

“Take it easy! T-a-k-e it e-a-s-y! “The short black officer who possibly also had some Indian heritage urged. “There is no need for such acts here. This is Canada. It is a peaceful country.”

I smiled with my cutest impression. “Watermelon! Just a watermelon!” I said.

Not sure if there was something in my voice or the word *watermelon* had any hidden meaning because at this point all four officers had drawn their guns. My heart rate spiked to something not experienced ever before. Azam bhai whimpered, “Look how much trouble you put me in. I just want to see the faces of my children for one last time.”

He spoke in Bangla, our mother tongue. A bad choice indeed as the foreign tongue worked only to exacerbate the suspicion of the officers, two of whom - the younger ones – had their legs visibly trembling now as they did their best to maintain a tough face. The cumulative restlessness that seemed to have a

grip on the law officers got me quite worried at this point. I could feel a ribbon of coldness slithering up my vertebrae. My legs started to feel slightly lighter, in preparation to submit to uncontrolled shaking. Consumed by the turn of events I only hoped those two young cops didn't get into a shooting feat. I gulped in the stupid smile that had apparently worked in so many other situations and started to explain the watermelon saga as calmly as possible but who was listening? Well, if not the officers the crowd definitely was. Not sure exactly what choice of word had triggered it but they had started to disburse at a rate faster than light – of course away from the watermelon and poor me and Azam bhai. The stampede and the resulting chaos worked a magic into the mind of the pale skin officer who suddenly found his lost wisdom and was able to keep his voice steady as he shouted, "Put your backpack down on the ground."

Fearful but happy in a way believing that finally the events were moving in the right direction my hopes rose. If I could just take that stupid backpack off my back and showed these brave hearts the offending stupid watermelon everything could just get back to normalcy and life could go on. Not so fast. As soon as I touched the backpack four guns pointed at me. "Slowly! Very slowly!" Came thundering warnings. I did as asked, to the letter. Very slowly I placed the backpack in front of my foot. My poor watermelon!

"Move back, very slowly. No tricks." Shouted the Black officer.

Tricks! If I lived through this ordeal I would donate money to the poor as a gesture of gratitude to the Almighty or whoever, I pledged. We, Azam bhai and I, obediently took a few steps back. Guns still drawn but the officers looked slightly relaxed, now that the suspicious package was on the floor and the suspects away from it. Attempting to snap up this opportunity to clear the air for a second time I quickly said, "There's just a watermelon in the bag. I bought from the grocery store near my office and taking it home. It is not a bomb or anything like that."

Using the 'b' word turned out to be a mistake of grand proportion as it instantly pushed the officers back to the defensive mode.

"Do not move! Do not move!" Shouted the officers, together.

Move? Us? We could be guilty of stupidity but definitely not bravery. Not sure whether it was caused by the trembling ground as the passengers continued to rush out of the platform or by the thundering screaming the backpack that was resting on the concrete quite peacefully suddenly started to roll toward the train line, which was located five to six feet below the platform. A fall from the platform would be a sure crashing end for the watermelon - I realized.

I politely said, "Can I get it? It's going to burst."

Burst! I meant break. What a horrible choice of word, particularly at a time like that.

The officers dived on the platform. "Do not move. Everybody on the ground. Bomb! Bomb!" They went in a screaming frenzy. Naturally.

Before my helpless eyes the watermelon rolled down the platform to the ground below and shattered into many pieces, shooting out of the backpack. A quick glance at it and I was taken by a maddening anger. The Chinese elderly men made no mistake in picking the right melon. The deep red juicy core of the unfortunate fruit clearly displayed the promise to be ridiculously delicious. I glared at the officers in my vein attempt to burn them to ashes. Relieved and relaxed now that the truth had been revealed the officers rose to their feet brushing off the darts of their elegant dresses while also managing to issue shy, apologetic smiles.

I snatched this moment to exhaust. "I told you, didn't I? Why wouldn't you guys even listen to me? Now fix my melon. Put it together, please."

Azam bhai looked at me with exploding eyes. "What are you talking about, bro?" He whispered in our mother tongue.

“Forget about the watermelon. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

I must have been possessed because I totally ignored him and repeated my demand perhaps with a slightly raised voice. “Please put my melon together, now.”

The Caucasian officer looked at me helplessly. “How do you put a broken melon together?”

I wasn’t ready to get discouraged by such technicality just yet. “If you didn’t know how to put it together then why did you let it break?”

The officers looked at each other – confused, unsure. Opportunity to grill not one, not two but a group of four police officers in public wasn’t something that comes too often. Determined to squeeze the last bit of satisfaction out of it I exerted some more strong words before making my departure, obviously followed by Azam bhai who patted on my back with a big grin on his face the moment we got out of their sight.

“Well done, bro! Consider what happened to Iraq. America and their allies destroyed that beautiful country just like that watermelon. For what? To get rid of Saddam? Wasn’t Saddam their agent? Why won’t the terrorists bomb London? Do you expect them to bomb on my head? Useless Blair. Didn’t I tell him not to attack Iraq? Think about all the people who are getting killed their everyday. Good that you said a few strong words. Put Iraq together! “

“Can you put aside all these Iraq, London stuff?” I bitterly said. “My six ninety-nine just went down the drain and you are more worried about people thousands of miles away.”

Azam bhai looked very hurt. “Shame on you, bro. Thousands of people died and still dying and you are lamenting about a stupid watermelon?”

When upset I tend to lose my mind completely. “I don’t need to listen to such big words.” I was rather annoyed. “In your whole life you have been blowing storms in a coffee cup. Have the world change?”

Trembling in anger he quickly took out seven dollars from

his pocket and forced it into my hand. “Fine, take the money then, the whole seven dollars. But next time choose your words more carefully. And don’t even think of calling me to go for fishing with you ever again.”

While I didn’t really agree with him on the matter of Iraq the concluding statement about fishing got my attention. Fishing buddies are not easy to come, not in my circle of friends. That very evening, I gave him a visit at his house, returned his money and apologized for my thoughtless comments. In return he agreed to come with me for a fishing venture the coming weekend.