

Total Loser

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It was a beautiful sunny summer day and there was no reason for any of us to believe that it could somehow turn into a pleasing nightmare. If you are having difficulty grasping the idea of a nightmare being pleasing just wait until I have taken you through it.

There is little doubt over the fact that summer in Toronto is awfully short. There is so much to do but so little time. One of our favorite activities has been to visit beaches, usually in large groups. We are firm believers of plurality. Anyway, on this particular day we - six families - headed for Darlington Provincial Park conveniently located near the Town of Courtice, not too far from Toronto. This was our first visit to this park despite the fact that it was literally next to our home in Ajax – a Toronto suburb, less than twenty minutes away. Once again Tagore, the Nobel winning Indian laureate, proved himself right as he had skillfully written in his poem: We have seen so much but not the drop of mist that collects on a blade of grass just off the porch.

It was already past noon when we finally made it to the park. Getting the kids ready, packing up the essentials including but not limited to food, cloths etc. and the morning becomes a matter of past. But the summer days here are satisfyingly long with light hovering around as late as 9 in the evening. A little late start wasn't going to ruin anything. We had plenty of time.

Darlington Park is located by the shore of Lake Ontario. It has a nice sandy shallow beach, perfect for kids to go crazy. Just west of the beach is McLaughlin bay, a water body that is heavily forested in most sides and separated from the larger waves of Lake Ontario by a narrow patch of sandy zone with a

small opening. This is why there is barely any current in McLaughlin bay most part of the day. In the area where the bay meets the beach water is so calm that it has become a popular spot for a leisurely rowing experience. The park authority has built a boat rental stall near that location – something that I had noticed as soon as I arrived there. They had mostly wooden canoes with a few foot paddle boats.

Proud owner of an inflatable boat and a pump I carried both with me wherever I went in summer. Inflating the boat usually took less than five minutes. No question it was not meant to compete with the fancy looking canoes but it floated just fine and carried three people without any problem. Instead of wasting money on canoe rental I used it wherever situation permitted. Such saving may seem insignificant but over time the savings did look good. Anyway, considering the fact that we paid such a large portion of our income in taxes any kind of savings worked.

Along with the boat I carried a tent with me as well. Thanks to modern technology - a complete tent setup can be carried in a small bag. Parachute cloth with fiberglass poles – a tent can be set up in just minutes. A very useful thing to carry if there are little kids in the party. They almost evidently need to take an afternoon nap. The tent worked as a nice, safe shelter. Sometimes ladies joined them as well to avoid the scorching sun. Most of our wives, if not all, are devoted Muslims and go to the beach with most part of their bodies covered. Among all the scantily dressed women enjoying the bright sun in a beach they look like Christian nuns. Sometimes if they feel like they may walk along the beach occasionally stepping into the water to get their feet wet. No amount of deriding can make them steer away from this routine. Often when everybody else is out there in the water or on the beach enjoying the beautiful sunshine these ladies escape in the privacy of the tent and rest or nap. My better half is no exception.

Liton mama, who is my university friend Ferdaus's

maternal uncle (mamu is the term for maternal uncles), and his brother in law Elis had joined us in this day out. Both are in their early forties and have children of tender age. As soon as I set the tent up they anchored near it. Displaying enough sign of intelligence, I almost always - situation permitting - set the tent near the sand so that the kids can play while being in the line of sight of the parents who don't want to have anything to do with sand, sun or water and can rest near the tent.

Ferdous and Hasan - two of my close friends from university lived in the big city and had joined me with their families in this expedition, pun intended. All together plenty of kids, all of them looked excited, happy and eager to get on with the beach routines. We quickly snacked on the food that we carried in and while kids and men ran to the beach women took shelter under a tree near the tent. The sun was blazing, water was warm, a breeze blew - it was very soothing for both the body and the mind. After spending a good hour in the beach - swimming, digging and numerous water wars with the kids - when we returned to the tent our appetite were sky high. Our ladies, each excellent cook, had brought cooked delicious food from home, which they gracefully served. Each participating family brought predetermined food items to be shared with others - a tradition that we follow diligently to keep the overall experience interesting and appetizing. I am a sucker for potlucks as it always delivers much more varieties and flavors. My mouth watered up just smelling the delicious foods. A devoted consumer of food I have been trying hard to rein in on my eating habits lately as I race past 40 and noticed the uprise of my midsection. However, rich, delicious food and counting calories do not go together. I try to keep such unwelcome thoughts far back of my mind during these outings.

After the meal, better described as a feast, we spent some time discussing our next plans - go back on the beach or go for boating. Lightly baked under the scorching sun I was secretly fostering the hope to be able to get an afternoon nap

inside the tent and recoup but the kids weren't about to let something like that to happen. They were dying to be on the inflatable boat.

Once inflated I put the boat on the capable shoulders of the kids and led them to the McLaughlin bay pushing through the unusually heavy foot crowd. Hasan along with his two daughters followed us as well. His older daughter Tapoti was fourteen, the younger one Obilia – the little dancing star of Toronto's Bangladeshi community was 4. Both of them seemed eager to hop into the boat. My two kids – Zaki and Far had been at the forefront. Ferdaus's daughter Ivana who was eleven held up the center of the boat. Far behind came in a turtle pace the wives of Ferdaus, Hasan and mine – namely Munni, Jerin and Shili. Liton mama and Elis had shown their interest in joining us at the bay but not before their young ones had a chance to take a short nap so that they could rejuvenate. Ferdaus was walking along the beach chasing his one-year old son who had some kind of extraordinary fascination for water bodies. Once the boy had enough he would join us as well.

McLaughlin bay looked like a huge pond. At one end it was narrow but as it moved eastward it eventually widened up to a distance of quarter of a mile end to end. The boat ramp was next to the boat rental place. It was packed with boats trying to get into the bay. We tried in vain to find a spot to float our boat. Realizing things wasn't about to get any better as more people flocked in the boat rental place we moved further down the shoreline and found ourselves a shallow and isolated spot. The current was very mild in that part allowing various types of Water lilies and several other water plants to grow in abundance. Many of them had bloomed profusely.

The chaos and confusion that followed once I had floated the boat might surprise or even shock some but I had seen enough of that. The kids started a noisy bickering trying to settle the riding order. I knew something like this would happen, it almost always did. The boat could take three adults or four-five

kids if they could fit in. However, I carry only one adult life jacket and two for kids. That limitation worked well to manage the load. I was the boatman leaving room for two kids. As the bickering continued I waited patiently hoping for them to settle it themselves. After several more minutes of screaming, yelling and crying they finally calmed down. After some more discussions they all agreed that Ivana and Far would go first, Zaki and Tapoti next and then Obilia with her dad.

The first two trips went quite well. I have two oars. They can be inserted inside two rings attached to the boat for better stroke. In calm water it is quite easy to control the boat however with current it can become very challenging. I have been doing it for a while and have sufficient expertise to handle rough situations. I took the kids around for a little bit, got them close enough to the water lilies so that they could pick one or two up and then dropped them to the shore. Tapoti had been very eager to row so I allowed her to try it out for a little bit. Initially the boat went in a circle several times but then she seemed to get the hang of it and the boat stabilized. It was good to see her enthusiasm. Rowing is harder than it looks. However, what followed next was not something I was prepared for.

Hasan and Obilia's turn was next. The problem arose with Hasan. He was a good swimmer but I still did not want him to ride without a life jacket. I could give him mine but he had never done any rowing and did not look comfortable with the idea of managing the boat all by himself. However, equipped with the brief practice that she got just minutes ago Tapoti looked quite confident and offered to take over the boat from me. Assuming there weren't much that could happen in such calm water I allowed this young lady to captain the inflatable. Obilia knew nothing about swimming but she had little fear of anything, let alone water. She was the first one to jump in the boat and settle in one side. Hasan struggled into my life jacket and very carefully climbed into the boat. With her passengers boarded Tapoti, now the captain of the boat, pushed ahead with

a stroke of her paddle. The boat slid through the calm blue water of McLaughlin bay effortlessly. Happy to see that the father and the daughters were out to have a really good time I picked up my fishing rod and walked a short distance away along the shoreline in search of a good spot to try out my luck.

After walking a few hundred yards I found a little opening in the densely grown bushes and small trees giving me just enough room to cast. I tried for a while with no luck, not even a single bite. I moved even further down the shore, away from the boat ramp. I could not see Hasan and his daughters on the boat from where I stood and assumed that they must have had returned to the land by then.

Suddenly I heard Shili calling out for me. Call of urgency. I ran out of the bushes. She looked worried. What she told me that didn't sound like something to be awfully concerned about. Yet just to see it in my own eyes I accompanied her back to the boat ramp. What I saw was exactly what Shili had described. The inflatable was floating about couple of hundred yards from the shore with Hasan and his two daughters on it and seemed to be slowly drifting away.

"How did they manage to go that far?" I asked rather curiously. "I thought I asked them to stay near the shore."

Jerin bhabi who was watching the development very anxiously responded, "They didn't want to go. The boat just floated that way."

"The wind has been strong." Shili added. "They are trying to come back to the shore for a while now but to no avail. Why don't you rent a boat and help them back?"

The boat rental would close at six. It was ten minutes to six.

Shili rushed me. "What are you waiting for?"

I was not very keen on wasting a whole bunch of money on the rental, unnecessarily. Okay, they were a little away from the shore but wasn't really in any kind of immediate danger. Little Obilia was even smiling and waving cheerfully. Obviously,

she was not sharing the anxiousness of her father and older sister to return on land. Two of them had been rowing diligently at least for twenty minutes and both were tired by now. Father and daughter might even have had a little argument over the odd situation as I could hear Tapoti breaking into short burst of rants at random interval. The distance was considerable and they spoke in a dialect used in Sylhet – a province of Bangladesh, but still just looking at Hasan’s nervous face I knew things were tense. I felt kind of bad for him. It really wasn’t his fault. If Tapoti hadn’t shown so much confidence I would have never allowed two inexperienced persons to paddle the boat.

” Why are you just looking? Do something.” Shili was getting impatient.

Jerin bhabi was at the verge of breakdown. ” How could you let my two jewels go with that mad man? Who knows where the boat would end up floating? Can’t you do anything to save them? “

Still not sensing any real urgency I understood I had to take some measures or I could end up in bigger trouble for just being on the shore. I tried to attract their attention by waving and yelling at the top of my voice. Once getting their attention, I tried to give them a lesson on rowing as I noticed they were rowing incoherently resulting into the uncontrolled drift. After several minutes of shouting back and forth I had to stop as it wasn’t going anywhere. Hasan and Tapoti tried their best to follow but neither the spin ceased nor the drifting.

At this point I first noticed the crowd that had gathered along the shore to enjoy the show. Most clearly did not consider the situation to be serious as they laughed and chatted. A few video cameras were yanked out of their bags and turned on. It won’t be a surprise if this whole thing was uploaded in the internet. Now a day’s a video of somebody sneezing can become sensational and get a million hits.

Helpless, I went to rent a boat. Unfortunately, the stall had just closed. Luckily few of the park employees from the stall

were still in the area. I asked them for help and learned that in situations like this a formal rescue team must be disbursed. They had a motor boat to be used for rescue missions. However, we would have to wait as the crew had another more urgent task in hand. It was such a beautiful summer day that people had crowded the park in exceptionally large numbers. As a result, a pipe broke in the public washroom flooding it. They needed to take care of that first. The trio sitting on the boat looked healthy and secured inside their life jackets. There didn't seem to have any immediate need for them to be rescued.

The park crew left one guy behind to bring the rescue boat down to the water. Once returned they would attach the motor and off would they go.

"What kind of people are they?" Jerin bhabi bitterly said. "How could they just leave like that when two kids are in such danger? Brother, why aren't you doing something?"

I tried to soothe her with my best smile. "Don't be so worried. What's the worst can happen? They would float to the other side."

"Then?"

"Our rescue team would go and rescue them. Bhabi, you are worrying for nothing. Everything will be fine."

"I wish you had some common sense." She blasted. "What do they know of rowing a boat? How could you let them go all by themselves? Shame on you!"

"Now you know, bhabi." Shili added, hinting how irresponsible I was in everything I did making her life so miserable.

I gave her a nasty look, at least tried my best. What the world is turning into? Nobody let go any opportunity to demean others.

Hasan and Tapoti had given the rowing a little rest. After a few minutes rest they had picked up the oars again and were paddling around the boat vigorously. As both of them paddled in random directions the boat had little choice but to simply spin.

I shouted asking one of them to stop. They misunderstood me. The rate of paddling increased.

“It’s better if you didn’t say anything at all, brother.” Jerin bhai bitterly said. “Every time you say something things are turning worse.”

I kept quiet. Who had dreamt something like this could even happen? I noticed the current was getting stronger in McLaughlin bay which worked slightly in our favor as it started to push the boat toward the shore on the other side. However, I was doubtful how much help that would be as the shoreline on that side were forested and had no proper opening to climb out of the boat. Yet the depth of the water was less near the shore and so was the current reducing the risk of drifting away into the deeper water. Nevertheless, waiting too long to rescue them seemed like a poor choice and I felt quite annoyed thinking of all days the flooding in the washrooms had to happen today and that also around the same time when we needed some help.

The park crew returned after about twenty minutes. The flooding wasn’t as bad as it sounded. They left one person behind to handle it and returned for the rescue job. It was a big relief. They struggled a little bit to carry the heavy engine from the boathouse to the boat and get it placed properly. The main problem however, started when they tried to get the engine going which obviously would roar and gargle but won’t start. That definitely wasn’t something that the hundreds of spectators who had waited patiently had expected. Naturally nobody was happy. A deluge of sarcasm headed toward the nervous and anxious crew.

“What a rescue team!” Somebody joked with the crowd cackling.

“We’ll need another rescue team to rescue this team.” Somebody else added with the crowd bursting into laughter.

It kept on coming with people becoming more creative.

Around this time, I noticed Tapoti had had enough by now with paddling and she had taken her oar out of the water,

waiting for the rescue to happen. Hasan was not about to give up. He continued to paddle and owing to some magical forces managed to guide the boat near the opposite shore. Of course, they were still not in any position to get out of that wretched thing but at least they were now in shallower water. This achievement must have been quite pleasing to Hasan because he was grinning contently.

Jerin bhabi went berserk. "Look who is smiling! Doesn't he have any shame? One million people are standing here watching this drama, some are also recording, and he is smiling! Shame! Shame!"

I had to struggle to keep myself from chuckling. I had no desire to become the next target of her resentment. Our rescue team had been trying diligently to get the engine going. Who knew why, perhaps just to make the crowd happy, the engine finally roared into life. The crowd applauded loudly as the young crew blushed. It was quite clear that they had not ever been involved into such rescue effort. This was safe water and I doubted anybody really needed a true rescue mission here.

It wasn't before another five minutes had passed that our rescue team completed their routine checks as per present protocol and moved ahead. This resulted in a sarcastic applaud and another round of sarcasms - apparently lead by some of the elderly ladies who had gathered.

"Let's pray that the rescue boat don't get turn over mid river. What a wreck!"

The crowd roared into laughter. In a nice late afternoon coupled with a comfortable breeze from the lake most people must have been feeling quite relaxed, especially realizing it was all about to end in a good note. Jerin bhabi gave them a hard look.

"I can't believe how heartless these people are! Why are they laughing? My two children are floating away who knows where and these rascals are laughing their heads off! Shame! Shame!"

Everything is well that ends well. The three-member rescue team of ours hooked up the inflatable boat and started to pull it back to safety. Jerin bhabi, heavily relieved, brought out all kind of cameras from her carry-on bag and started to take snapshots and videos in plentiful. She was an avid member of Facebook and it took no telling where all these images and videos were going to end up.

“I told you everything will be fine.” I took this opportunity to tease her. “What were you so upset about? Look, they are all in one piece.”

“Thanks god, I got my kids back.” She could barely resist her joy.

“How about the daddy? You are not happy about him?” I joked.

She rolled her eyes. “After all the embarrassment he caused? He can stay in that boat.”

I restrained myself from extending that conversation. The embarrassment part could not be ignored. The rescue boat returned to the dock with my poor inflatable on the tow. I helped the inflatable to a shallow section where Hasan and the kids could step out on the ground without getting wet. Once on his feet - safe and sound - Hasan was quick to brush away all the embarrassment. He even went on to mention, “We were doing just fine. There was no need to send the rescue team.”

I thought it would be Jerin bhabi who would give him what he deserved. Not so. It was Tapoti who barked, “After all these years you still don’t know how to manage a small boat. What a total loser you are!”