

Common Bond

By Jayanthi Rangan

6 Sanderson Road

Lexington, MA 02420

Jayanthi_rangan@hotmail.com

(words: 3155)

Common Bond

By Jayanthi Rangan

The big guy from across the room charged straight at Michael who was carrying two drinks – red wine for Raga and a beer for himself. The hulk shot towards them more as a focused security person than someone navigating the crowd at a party. Raga saw the huge guy and immediately felt scared for Michael than for herself and stood frozen in time, trying to understand the stranger's behavior towards her date.

"Hey, hey, *you*" The soft voice was firm and demanded attention: "I will take that spiked drink off of you. It definitely cannot be for the lady." The drink was gone from Michael's hand before he could protest.

A few heads turned towards them but the din of the room was overpowering.

Michael was taken aback for an instant and then he bounced back, belligerent. He could utter only a few words: "Fuck off. Are you looking for a fight?"

No. The giant slowly squished a napkin in the wine glass making the content useless.

The verdict was in: Michael's party was over and he had the exile-notice handed to him.

Raga could not breathe. Was she watching a movie? Was she to trust Michael or a colossal stranger? Was this a choice between devil and a lesser devil? Who was a lesser devil? Her pounding heart was loud and her mouth mute. One moment she was with a friend and the next moment with a criminal.

Michael furiously red-faced wanted to pull Raga and leave but was blocked by a menacing and big mountainous obstruction. He left in a huff all by himself.

Raga had heard of date rape, of people violating acquaintances and friends - but did not think of herself as a victim. She was careful and choosy about friends. Didn't such things happen to others? At first the disbelief weighed down on her and then a doubt sneaked in. How did the giant see Michael fixing her drink when the room was so crowded? Was it his extraordinary height which cleared his field of vision? Was he simply trying to put Michael down?

Raga had hundreds of questions and not a single move. Disbelief, fear and shiver stewed in her body. Her feet were heavy and fixated to the spot. Luckily, the titan had caught Michael in the act. What a low life Michael was to even think of violating Raga just because she had accepted his invitation to an unknown party. Now he had left her and vanished. Raga, stranded in a strange part of the city found it impossible to come to terms with the situation. How did she ever call Michael a friend, a date? Had she overlooked signs? Was there any? Should she run out alone or trust the big guy? Was it safer to stay at a party where she did not know a single soul? She had pickled herself good either way.

Raga plopped in a chair nearby. For a long time the giant stood there silently, not uttering a word. The observational tower stood out from the crowd, comfortably silent as though his presence alone was assurance enough. When finally Raga made a move towards the door, he asked her to wait and called for a cab. He was without a date and yet did not offer to drive her home. *Was she steady enough to go home, on her own?* Raga nodded relieved to escape the disastrous scenario.

That was two months ago. Then one Sunday afternoon when Raga entered the dog park, she found the big savior guy sitting on a bench, smugly playing with his dog - all kindness, not a person to get involved in a brawl. Then why had he challenged Michael at the party? Was he caring enough to fight for her or he always fought social ills? Raga still felt lucky that this unusually tall and knock-kneed guy was around at the party to help. She thanked him for the save and wondered how she ever overlooked his overpowering feature – the soft crinkled lines that spelled humanity and compassion.

Their small talk revolved around their dogs that were sniffing each other.

“No, Spitzer” Raga tugged the leash of her Maltipoo.

“Are you tired? Huh?” - Walt ruffled Buddy’s fur.

Their first meeting was a chance event for sure but even afterwards the meetings remained *mostly* coincidental (for there were no dates/times mentioned) – it was all calculation and guess work for Raga. *Last Saturday he was here at ten. Shouldn’t he come this Saturday too?*

Soon enough Raga had a loose time table established of likely chances of meeting Walt at the dog park. Every time there were kind words from Walt, dog anecdotes and weather stuff but no personal exchange – no mention of the ill-fated party. Their meetings remained joyous, entertaining and frustratingly dead-end - romantically. Raga wondered why Walt did not ask her out even after many powwows. Was something wrong? Her personal queries often met with a half-smile or a distinctly neutral comment. The only common bond was the dog.

“You would not believe this. Buddy gets the morning newspaper for me. Yesterday when I asked him to get the newspaper, he went out and came back without one. I asked him again

and he brought it this time. I was slightly worried about him – was he getting too old for this chore? Was he healthy?

“And then later on when I met a neighbor, I knew there was no delivery of newspapers on our side of the street. Buddy had come back empty mouthed because there was nothing for him to bring but later on my urging a second time, he had gone across the street to get the only copy he could find – my neighbor’s.”

Raga laughed and thought about his stories. They always showed off Buddy as the best dog in the world. Yet there was always more to them – his caring came through. His thoughts on dogs almost bordered on a soul-mate kind of connection. If only she were the recipient of such sensitive attention! Did women interest him at all?

Her Maltipoo was an adorable puppy especially acquired when she had come to this new city – to be her only friend. Yet Spitzer did not shine in her esteem. He was special and she doted on him and thought of him more often than she thought of her friends and family. But her Maltipoo getting scared of car rides was hardly a story. She could not tell Walt about how he chased butterflies. Spitzer was just an ordinary dog.

February, the cold seized every conversation. It was alive this winter. Walt felt the woes too but as usual had a dog story to tell: “The room above my garage froze and the pipeline burst. The water buildup was enough for swimming. Buddy looked at the dirty pool and pulled me to his food tray to show me the water there. Was he consoling me? Did he have humor? I do not know but it certainly felt good to have him around.”

His dog had soul; an uncanny humanized sensitivity to Walt like a therapy dog— or maybe Walt had sensitivity to Buddy. He found meaning in every action of his dog. Raga's pup was different – innocently bouncy, not meant for psycho-gymnastics.

Raga wanted Walt and Buddy to be her family – live with her and play with her. But the self-satisfied duo had no place for her in their domain. She had taken for granted that Spitzer belonged to her –but lately, he too had joined Walt's camp. Walt often held a treat and Spitzer jumped to get it, rolled over and came back again for the jump. Raga's lazy Maltipoo had shed his luxurious and sedentary life style in favor of dog tricks. Walt connected with dogs and made their personalities bigger. Raga was not sure she loved or envied Walt more.

Raga played with the idea of stealing Buddy. This was no easy challenge because the dog would probably swim back from Antarctica to be with Walt. Theirs was a relationship bonded with the strongest glue. Eighteen years of togetherness – a relationship with sustainability built into it. Raga's obsession with Walt and Buddy intensified. She tried a number of ways to involve Walt in her life but the relationship remained boundary-drawn friendly and platonic. All the trustworthiness, honesty and raw husband-materialness that she saw in Walt remained out of bounds – unused and unappreciated. Raga's body language spoke volumes about her desires. It made love declarations over the air waves but Walt was at a different frequency.

Raga copied Walt's behavior - changing her dog park just because Walt had started taking Buddy to trails to run leash free, dig out caterpillars and bark at the turtles. Spitzer never took to the trails – always afraid of the surprise encounters with strange people and big unknown dogs. She finally gave in and settled for the good old dog park in favor of fancy trails. Walt was

going to be just a dog park friend, nothing more. Spitzer, with his lofty name would still remain her very ordinary dog.

Then one day as she entered the park she found Buddy near Walt's feet, not running to fetch the ball and not chasing the Frisbee. He was perhaps meditating (in Walt's language/story). Walt acknowledged her with a nod and Spitzer with a back rub. She noticed the harness for Buddy's hind leg. Was he in pain? Was this a new story? She let Spitzer loose and tried to listen to Walt's dog stories without jealousy.

"Yes, Arthritis has set in" Walt acknowledged. "I carry him most of the time. He is old, very old for a dog and it must hurt him a lot. Still, this park is much better than being indoors."

Good, she did not steal Buddy. Carrying his arthritic weight would have needed gym muscles. Spitzer who had run towards the tunnel, came back and snuggled with Buddy, pawed his fur and was trying to draw him into a play. Buddy did not move a centimeter nor did he open his eyes or twitch a muscle. It seemed like he was in a different world altogether. Just like the owner, Raga thought.

Walt touched Buddy, affectionately at first and then with alarm. Soon his touch became frenzied as though desperately looking for his pet's vital signs. Buddy was scooped up like precious cargo but Walt almost lay in a crumpled heap - the essence of life had drained from both. There were high pitched snuffles from Raga. Her connection with Buddy was broken so abruptly – no token snuggling and no affirming paws. She felt empty as though she was dead too, no longer a human presence. Death seemed to be so highly contagious and spreading like an epidemic in this park. Spitzer too, appeared to be dying with his confused mourning yelps.

She did not know how they all landed in Walt's house. Were they not in a dead zone? Buddy was definitely dead and on her lap and she had held Spitzer close too, but she did not recall Walt driving. Did they take a cab? She looked at Walt's red eyes and saw him age instantaneously. Did he tell her that he was dying of Arthritis? No? Who was dying of crumbling bones?

Even in her confused and sad state, it was clear to her that Walt lacked a partner – his house screamed of a solitary taste and dog toys. His clothes closet was open and starkly recognizable without any hidden skeleton – as far as Raga could see. The furniture was big as though specially made for Walt – giant rocker, extra-large bed and tall and sturdy bar chairs at the kitchen island. Chasing Spitzer around had given her a glimpse of his house and living.

Walt decided to bury Buddy near the back door. He started digging while Buddy lay on his blanket in his room as though napping. Raga joined Walt in digging, clearing dirt and heaping it sideways. Together their eyes added moisture to the pit. Raga couldn't understand her own reaction. Why was she so emotional about a dog who would not accept her as a BFF?

"You know this is the second dog I am burying?" Walt asked.

"No, I did not know that. Did you always have a dog?" Raga wanted Walt to come up with more dog stories. Any story – even of Buddy chasing butterflies would do. He was talking about his past – *please keep talking*. Raga saw possibilities now and real hope.

"No, the first dog I buried belonged to a neighbor. I used to walk her dog when I was ten. That day when I went to walk the dog, I saw the white Pomeranian in a pool of blood on the coffee

table. The neighbor, a quilter had plunged a sewing scissors through his belly when he had attacked her suddenly. She had called it self-defense, a thoughtless and instinctive action but I saw it as a deliberate and heartless one. Surely there was a better way to deal with an attacking dog...

"I brought the dog home and buried her under the patio, safe from plunging scissors and overreacting humans."

Raga felt the scissors pierce her stomach – sharp pain.

The ditch was fairly big now and they both carried Buddy and placed him with his head away from the house as he had done all the years taking his guarding seriously. Walt added Buddy's favorite ball and a chewed up shoe next to his paw.

Raga finally felt the relationship move a micro millimeter forward. Was Walt coming out of his insulated cocoon? Was this *The Ultimate Thaw*? It felt so personal to share the burial – a tender moment they might recall in the coming years.

Walt appeared emotional. He talked about his belief that dogs were the closest links to humans. How else could such deep affection be explained?

Raga wanted to hug him, agree with his thinking but couldn't. What if he withdrew back into his cocoon? He had been guarded – why would a death make him pour his heart out? Raga wanted to be *his* closest link, but that was not to be. Was it her escort at the party who put Walt off or was it her?

Suddenly Buddy's absence became an all-consuming worry... Would Walt stop coming to the dog park? Did he have other friends? His relationship with Raga so solely hinged on a Canine bond. Was this the end? How could she hold on to Walt? – To hope?

Raga wanted an excuse to see Walt again but could think of nothing beyond dogs.

"Walt, do you feel like having Spitzer around for a few days?"

"Yes, I need a friend." Walt answered: "Will you too stay back?"

Raga was stunned silly. All these months she had waited for an encouraging, friendly and personal word from him. Did it have to be a dog's absence to bring forth this invitation?

"Raga, I have known you enough to talk to you openly now. I have gone through so much of pain for you. I always wanted to ask you out but had to patiently build a foundation of affection so that you would not think of me as a freak when you hear my story. Many times, I felt I had so little to offer that I did not dare show my feelings. I would like nothing better than you staying here with me, always. You will get lots of caring and affection, an asexual marriage and delicious chicken wings – that is the limit of my offer." Walt half smiled and half stared, his face charged with optimism and tokens of prayers.

His was not a simple smile. Even the half smile was smothered with a narcotic pull. Raga felt her world light up with a festive brightness. Was this how Buddy felt with Walt's attention? Was this how humans felt towards Walt, the kindest soul on Earth?

Then it sank in - Asexual marriage? Did he really say that? Was there such a thing? How could Raga take this proposal seriously? But Walt was earnest. He talked about his Aromatase deficiency causing perpetual growth, bone pain and most of all an absence of sexual desire. The only thing Raga understood was that there was a reason for his epic frame. It was hard to believe his story and skepticism glowed on Raga's face.

“It is true. It is surprising how many problems this small little enzyme’s absence can cause,” said Walt. “Believe me its void was felt by every cell in my bones. Deep down the whole body knew the odd growing pains.”

Couldn’t he take a pill for this deficiency? These days they had drugs for everything –why not for Walt’s condition? Raga knew low libido. Depression had once taken away life force out of her, leaving her without a desire to get out of her bed. Brushing her teeth was a big chore – outing, dating and making love were unthinkable. Was his condition anything like that? Was their *asexuality* alike?

An *oxymoronic* asexual marriage was ungraspable. Did it mean sharing the same ecosystem but not as a unit? The canine common bond was gone but a new commonality linked them together – provided a context for human stories to surface, opened more avenues to fortify their relationship. Raga thought some more about the potential of such a deal and decided that this common bond did not necessarily bring them together. It explained a lot and it spread a blanket of understanding but beyond that what did it do? Could a marriage survive on kindness, caring and good food? Humans were sexual beings, weren’t they? Could a marriage like this ever work? This was a cupid’s arrow laced with a potent hurdle. Love had come wrapped up in an impossible cloak!

She had looked at Walt all this while with tenderness and very softly forced the words out: “I understand this asexuality – I have gone through it myself during my depression years. In fact the evening you saved me, I had gone out to prove to myself that I was “normal” after ages of not dating. I want this normalcy so much, that nothing else can work for me. I have to say *No* to you. I am sorry – very, very sorry – it hurts so much to say this but I have to...”

Spitzer, the ordinary dog could not make much of the moment and followed Raga to the waiting Uber. Raga did not look back. Walt would understand - she painfully recalled his words on Buddy's neutering: "We oversimplify their lives and ours too but mostly we channel their affection selfishly towards ourselves."

That was canine channeling of love – straight-forward and single-lane.

Raga's love was an expectations maze and a highway with too many toll booths.
