

Common Bond

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 tall pole 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 firm voice demanded attention: “I will take that spiked drink off. It definitely cannot be for the lady.” The easy command did not interrupt the party but drew a boundary line. The drink was gone from Michael's hand before he could protest.

Quite a few heads turned towards them but the din of the room absorbed the new energy. The situation appeared volatile and brawl invoking. However no one joined the hulk or Michael nor did they intervene but nearby conversations had a perceptible drop and all ears tried collecting sound waves emanating out of this spot. People were on red alert for action – bodies straight and on attention mode. It was a miracle that nothing erupted with such tension. It must have been the hulk's stature or calmness that assured of orderliness and control. Who was this giant so full of authority – a Sheriff or a Police Chief? Michael was taken aback for an instant and then he bounced back, belligerent. He could utter only a few words, as a weak retaliation: “Fuck off. Are you looking for a fight?” The giant shook his head – no, and 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? Her pounding heart was loud and her mouth mute. One moment she was with a friend and the next moment with a criminal. Was she to trust

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Michael or a colossal stranger – a choice between devil and a lesser devil? Who was the lesser devil?

Meanwhile, Michael furiously red-faced left the party in a huff.

Raga knew of date rape, of people violating acquaintances and friends but thought such things were distant – they happened to others - she was careful and choosy. At first the disbelief weighed down on her and then a doubt sneaked in. Did the giant really see Michael fixing her drink when the room was so crowded? Was it his extraordinary height which cleared his field of vision?

Disbelief, fear and shiver stewed in her body. Her feet became heavy and fixated to the spot. Raga had hundreds of questions and not a single move. This surely was the narrowest escape, a hair away from terminal disaster. Luckily, the titan had caught Michael-low-life just in time.

Michael 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. The observational tower stood 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 scene.

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That was two months ago. Then one Sunday afternoon when Raga entered the dog park, she found the same familiar profile. The big savior guy was sitting on a bench, smugly playing with his Great Dane, all calm and kind. People like this did not get involved in a scuffle, yet he had challenged Michael, almost starting a melee. Was he a fighter of social ills? Raga shivered as she recalled the events of that day. Luckily, 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 compassion and benevolence.

Introductions followed and their small talk revolved around their dogs that were totally opposite in appearance.

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

“Are you tired? Huh?” - Walt drew on the worry lines of his giant Buddy’s face.

She told him about her life after Michael:

“I pour my own drink from a sealed bottle and I go out on dates with Spitzer, my dog.”

He smiled and nodded with understanding: “Dogs are very soothing. Buddy is my sole reason for being out and in touch with life.”

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? Raga played Walt’s words on repeat a hundred times and found meaning where there was none. He had said Buddy is my sole reason... Did it mean his outings were just Dog Park? Will he be here on work days too? He had introduced himself with his full name: Walt Williams – did it not

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mean that he was eager to connect? Small talk or big clues – Raga used every bit of information to make a loose time table of likely chances of meeting Walt at the dog park. Mostly, the educated guesses worked and the meetings became fairly regular.

Buddy usually stayed at the fountain at the park and Spitzer at the structures while Walt and Raga stood watch under the Maple, chatting. 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 worried about him – was he getting too old for this chore? ...And then later on when I met a neighbor, I knew there was no delivery of newspapers on my 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 – Walt’s caring came through. His thoughts on dogs almost bordered on a soul-mate kind of connection. Theirs was a relationship bonded with the strongest glue. Eight years of togetherness – a relationship with sustainability built in. Till death do us part?

If only she were the recipient of such sensitive attention! Did women interest him at all? How was Raga to connect with a person who was honorable and cordial but subtly unavailable? As a concierge she dealt with people well. Her open smile, approachability and her listening power opened them up but the same traits were not working with Walt. She tried a different tactic: “Walt, may I have your email? I will send you a dog video you will absolutely love.” That afternoon she spent hours looking online for some decent dog video. Finally she came across one with a man sitting on a sofa and a Pug tightly hugging his arm. The man disentangled himself after a few moments and moved a foot away, leaving the Pug offended. The Pug bridged the gap and snuggled again. The process repeated itself till they reached the end of the sofa. The video was hilarious and Raga was sure it would open out Walt a little. Right enough Walt replied, “Such an affectionate dog! I too place a high premium on steadfast affection – in fact more than love...” Raga read through the email and pouted, “If you want affection, why not go for it? It is knocking at your door.”

Every time Raga heard a Buddy story she felt he 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 ordinary, getting scared of car rides and enjoying his butterfly chase. He was not meant for psycho-gymnastics.

Spitzer was a dull dog and its owner Raga, a stupid fool – that’s what she was with her mind on autopilot heading towards Walt every day hoping for a changed outcome. Every night she dissected her feelings – was he a hero to her because he had saved her? Did she like him because he was a challenge? Would she lose interest if he were to cozy up? – Probably not. She truly liked him even if this relationship was boundary-drawn friendly and platonic. Alas, the trustworthiness, honesty and raw husband-materialness in Walt would remain out of bounds –

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unused and unappreciated. Walt showed kindness to all – strangers and even to the homeless person at the park for whom he brought sandwiches and chap-sticks. His solidarity with humanity was visible – understanding nods, warmth and a kind acceptance. However, she remained outside an invisible fence at a respectable distance. This far and no further.

Despite her resolve to the contrary, Raga copied Walt's behavior - changing her dog park just because Walt had started taking Buddy to trails. Spitzer never took to them – 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 basic 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 Great Dane and it must hurt him a lot. Still, this park is much better than being indoors.”

Spitzer, who had run towards the tunnel, came back and sniffed Buddy, pawed his legs and then with a sudden aloofness, sadly looked away. 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.

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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.

The unexpectedness of the death was so unacceptable. Yes, Raga knew old Buddy would be the first to die but not so wicked suddenly. Shouldn't Walt have said something about it? Did he know? Doesn't one need to be sick to die? Have cancer or liver failure? Sure, Buddy was Arthritic but not fatally arthritic. His body lay warm on her. She held his paw and murmured: "Wake up, please wake up."

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 crumbly 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.

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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, a last warm shower. 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 red 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 and dizziness filled her.

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.

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

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 even though she believed herself to be his closest link, not a dog. What if he withdrew back into his cocoon?

Suddenly Buddy's absence became an all-consuming worry. Would Walt stop coming to the dog park? 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? She was eager to hear his story – what took him this long – but suppressed her curiosity and anxiety. Jump-starting gives a jolt.

“Raga, I tried a million times to talk to you. I have practiced in front of mirrors and in my dreams – saying the words when I am extremely calm but no matter what I do it is always hard.” He reached for his Whiskey bottle and immediately apologized.

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“Oh no, I was almost pouring a drink for you after you specifically told me you do not accept drinks from...”

“Walt, I would like a drink today. I need to calm my nerves,” Raga breathed, “It has been an eventful day, to say the least.”

Walt poured a drink for her and sat down on the bar stool, visibly fidgety – stood up, scratched the counter, sat down again and massaged his neck. Why was he so nervous? How could Raga make it easy for him to talk? She said: “I expected you to fall apart today but you have inner strength. You were fairly calm about Buddy’s death. Did you see it coming?”

“Yes and no. Buddy was old so it is not very sudden in that sense but one is never prepared for death. I thought I had some more time with him” said Walt shaking the ice cubes in the drink.

Once again Raga could see the silence stretching. Understandably he was miserable today. She asked: “Should I leave Spitzer here and come back for him tomorrow?”

“Don’t go Raga,” said Walt, “I need to talk to you about something very important. Whatever I am going to say is not easy. Promise me, you will weigh in everything I say seriously and answer me. You can take as much time as you want.”

Wow! Was he going to propose? At a time when he was so miserable? Did he want to combine the end of one significant relationship and the beginning of another one on the same day? Shouldn’t he find a festive time for a new chapter? But no, Walt exploded into words:

“Raga, I am going to say it quickly in the hope that I will say it all... I have known you enough to talk to you openly now. I have gone through so much of pain for you. I always wanted

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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 a very low 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?

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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. Immediately Raga thought of how Walt had saved her from ruin once. It was her turn to save him and be a real friend when he was so vulnerable.

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 life time of struggles.

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."

"Your honesty is so incredible and I am bowled over by it. Did you know I am so much in love with you? You have offered me what I always wanted – marriage to an honest, kind and honorable man. You are everything I need in a man and yet I have to say No to you. I understand my sexual drives and I will not be able to live a celibate life – a life-style full of day-to-day frustrations. I can see clearly how it will shape my life and I am not willing to take that path. I might be the biggest fool to walk out of this deal but I cannot accept it. I am sorry – very, very sorry – it hurts so much to say this but I have to say I love you and goodbye in the same breath..."

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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.
