



SNORKEL

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Shruti looked at her mother and said, “All right, if you so wish. But don’t force me to say ‘Yes’ if I don’t like him.”

Her mother sighed with relief. She didn’t want this issue to cause tension in the family. Parenting was not always an easy job. Especially not so in an Indian household where one is caught in the tug-of-war between orthodox tradition of the elders and the rebellious modernity of the younger generation. Trying to find a suitable match for her daughter seemed more difficult than she had ever imagined. Being a NRI (Non Resident Indian) living in USA did not help either.

Watching the emotions run on her mother’s face, Shruti couldn’t resist the impulse to get up and give her a big hug.

“Ma, why do you worry so much?” she asked.

“You’ll understand that only when you have an unmarried daughter of marriageable age,” her mother replied in a tired voice.

Shruti smiled. She reached for her coffee and gulped it down, casting a swift furtive glance at the wall clock.

“Bye, Ma!” She said. “Papa, Bye! See you in the evening,” she shouted as she rushed out of the apartment.

As she neared her college, her gait became more agile. She loved this place with the open spaces, the trees in the campus, the library and the classrooms where she had studied her M.A. Honors in Psychology.

“I think that I am one of the luckiest people to have been offered this chance to work in the place that I have loved so much. Dear God, thank you for this Counselor’s job that is also as

satisfying as it is rewarding. I am probably one of those rare individuals to whom work doesn't seem like work. Thank God I am not bogged down by the burden of tension in the workplace," she thought, remembering that a good number of her clients came to her with such problems.

As she entered the foyer of the building, she saw a group of students, dressed alike in black and seated on the steps. A few seniors seemed to be stalking around them with the air of slave masters.

"Crap!" thought Shruti. "If there is something that I hate about this place, it is this tradition of putting freshers through this ritual of subjugation."

As she moved past the group, she remembered voicing her dissent to the Dean and other senior faculty. Nobody had taken her seriously. "Oh, they are just getting to know one another," and "This way they are ensuring that seniors get some respect," were the kind of justifications thrown towards her.

"Well, at least I have done my bit," she thought as she pushed down that strange, heavy, nameless feeling a which threatened to pull blackness all around, a feeling associated with the knowledge of injustice being done to others and not being able to do anything about it. Her steps became heavier as she approached her room. Her fingers fumbled as she took out the key to unlock the door.

Her first client entered almost immediately and pulled her back into the realm of involvement that Shruti loved so much, that of guiding an unhappy mind towards balance and fresh air.

That evening, Siddhartha came to dinner, invited by Shruti's parents. Introduced and recommended by mutual friends, he seemed to be a good, eligible match for Shruti. "In fact," Shruti mused, "He seems a little too good for me."

Siddhartha had a PhD in Public Relations and was working in the Mayor's office. He was the youngest man in the Mayor's team. For an NRI to have achieved this status in the United States was in itself an amazing fact. It was reputed that his brilliance had made him upwardly mobile and enabled him to be in his present position, second only to the Mayor himself. His pay packet was considered to be in the highest bracket. It was said that presently he was very busy campaigning for the party elections. But this evening, he had taken the time off especially to come and meet Shruti and her family.

Shruti had chosen to dress casually for the occasion, according to her own judgment, turning a deaf ear to her mother's pleas and persuasions of wearing a silk sari and diamond jewelry.

“In any case, this is not likely to work out,” she thought, “For he, like most Indian MCPs, will probably prefer a demure, non-working, door-mat of a girl.”

When Siddhartha walked in through the door, the thing that hit Shruti was his aura of power and confidence. His eyes almost immediately located Shruti and held her gaze for what seemed to be a very long time. He strode smoothly and easily towards her, held out his hand and said, “HI! I’m Siddhartha. Though initially I had doubts, I am now glad that I have come.” Thereafter, whether he was conversing with her parents or with Shruti herself, his eyes seemed to be communicating with Shruti on an entirely different plane, irrespective of the actual words spoken.

“Why are you trying to mesmerize me?” asked Shruti at one point of time, when her parents were out of hearing range.

“Have I succeeded?” he asked in return.

“What?” asked Shruti, startled.

“Have I succeeded in mesmerizing you?” he asked, looking intently at her.

“Your ego is sky high,” observed Shruti, “I don’t think this alliance will work out”

His eyes locked into hers in what Shruti had already started to identify as ‘The Siddhartha Signature Gaze’.

Then he laughed and said, “And why not?”

When it was time for him to leave, he turned to Shruti and asked, ‘So when do I get to see you again?’

Shruti’s mother gave a visible and audible sighed of relief. Her daughter had passed the test. She was liked by the most eligible bachelor in the Indian NRI community of Los Angeles.

Siddhartha and Shruti started going out together. Shruti found herself beginning to look forward to these dates. They went to restaurants and discovered each other’s food preferences. They went to movies and held hands and enjoyed pop corn. They went to the clubhouse where Shruti sipped her cappuccino, while Siddhartha plunged into the pool. Siddhartha, she noticed, took care to pamper her with his attention. She wondered how far he would continue to do so after marriage. “In any case,” she thought, trying to be realistic, “How many husbands, Indian or other, pamper their wives?” It was also difficult at this stage to imagine Siddhartha not pampering her.

And so Shruti gave her assent. Her mother went into frenzy with the wedding preparations. She called up all relatives and friends to proudly announce that her daughter would be marrying Siddhartha, whom everybody knew to be the prominent political honcho.

Siddhartha slipped on an exquisite emerald and diamond ring on Shruti's slim finger on the day of the engagement. "I liked this very much," he said softly, "Do you?"

"Yes," she replied, "It really is very pretty. But you should not have spent so much."

He held her gaze. "Only for you. As are these," he said and put a file before her.

"And what is this?" she asked.

"I got a new Insurance policy done today. "In case I die, you will get one million dollars".

"One million dollars is not enough for a human life" said Shruti, "So please keep your millions to yourself and stay alive for and with me."

He smiled and hugged her. "I have no intentions of dying now or in the immediate future. I want to live with my fascinating wife and experience the concept of 'nagging' that my married friends talk about," he said. Then he pulled out another set of papers and put them before her. "That was evidence of my love for you. And now you sign here and seal the bond of our eternal love for each other," he said.

"What are these papers, Siddhartha?" she asked.

"Your insurance papers. If you die, I get a million dollars," he said. Then, looking at her, he laughed, saying, "Now do not go and die on me. You are of more use to me alive than dead."

The discomfort must have shown on her face, for Siddhartha's tone suddenly became serious.

"You need not do this if you do not want to. I just thought that insurance was something that everyone ought to do. But if you don't want to, it doesn't matter." He got up.

"No, no, Siddhartha, it isn't that I do not want to sign these. It's just that ... oh crap! Give, let me sign and get done with it," she said as she reached out for the papers.

"Are you sure you want to do this? Is this going to be an issue between us later on?" he looked at her intently with 'The Siddhartha Signature Gaze'.

"Oh! Quit nagging" she said, taking the papers from his hand and scribbling her signature.

The day of the wedding came closer and so did the wedding guests. Relatives from India came loaded with heavily embroidered as well as zari saris, lehengas and cholis. Weddings were occasions when the extended families met and revived family bonds. Cousins sat with Shruti chatting, joking and teasing. "Weddings should be more frequent events," thought Shruti, so thoroughly did she enjoy the family get-together.

"Shruti, when do we get to meet your handsome prince? Only at the wedding?" said Rooma. Being the youngest sister of Shruti's mother, Rooma was popularly designated by the younger generation as the favorite aunt.

“Okay! I’ll text him that his battalion of in-laws is waiting to have a go at him,” laughed Shruti as she picked up her cell phone.

But during the wedding ceremony itself Shruti fell overwhelmingly solemn. The Arya Samaj priest explained the ancient Sanskrit vows in English and Shruti found herself understanding the gravity of commitment and nurturing of relationships in marriage. She turned to look at Siddhartha but he seemed to be lost in his own world. ‘Maybe I am taking these ceremonies too seriously,’ she thought.

The wedding reception was full of laughter, gaiety, song and dance. She reached for Siddhartha’s hand and tried to coax him into joining the wonderful madness. He seemed reluctant, but ultimately allowed himself to be pulled into the fun.

‘Are you happy, Mrs. Siddhartha?’ he whispered into her ear.

‘Why do you ask, Mr. Shruti?’ she laughed back.

‘Because I want to discuss honeymoon plans with you,’ he replied.

‘Oh! And what are your plans?’ she asked.

‘Gloucester, Massachusetts,’ he said. ‘Heard of it?’

‘What’s there in Gloucester that makes it eligible for a honeymoon destination?’ asked Shruti.

‘We’ll go snorkel diving, Shruti. And watch lots of dazzlingly colored fish and laze in the beautiful water. I hope to be lucky enough to see a shipwreck. Wikipedia says it is possible.’

‘But I don’t know swimming, Siddhartha, let alone snorkeling,’ Shruti exclaimed. Then, seeing the look on his face, she hastily conceded, ‘Tell you what, Siddhartha, we’ll go there. I’ll sun bathe while you snorkel. Yes, let’s go to Gloucester. I’ve never been there. It’ll be exciting. But I’ll have to extend my leave. I hadn’t planned on this. Why didn’t you tell me before?’

‘Because it just occurred to me. Don’t worry. Just wait and see how exciting it will be,’ Siddhartha said.

Siddhartha arranged for tickets and hotel lodging with surprising speed.

‘What are you, a magician?’ asked Shruti.

‘Watch me,’ he replied, looking at her with “The Siddhartha Signature Gaze”.

As they walked arm in arm on the beach, Shruti breathed deeply and said, ‘This is real magic.’

‘There is more magic beneath the waters,’ said Siddhartha. ‘Come with me, I’ll teach you snorkeling,’ he said.

‘But I can’t swim,’ Shruti protested.

‘I’ll be there with you. What are you afraid of? Come on, this will be fun,’ he said.

The next day Siddhartha put on the snorkeling equipment and then turned laughingly towards Shruti, overriding all her qualms. Within no time at all Shruti found herself wearing snorkel gear and striding to the sea, holding Siddhartha’s hand. As they entered the waters, passersby looked at them, with amusement and with admiration. They made a marvelous couple and Shruti was well aware of it. Then she began to concentrate on Siddhartha’s instructions, all the time keeping a tight grasp on his left arm.

As they went beneath the calm waters, Shruti remembered the sense of joie de vivre that pervaded her senses. As they went further and further away, Siddhartha pointed out the picturesque marine life all around. Shruti couldn’t help feeling amazed at how ignorant she had been all this while about the pleasures of snorkeling. Then Siddhartha was slowly loosening her grip from his hand and telling her with gestures that now she should be on her own. She wildly resisted with her gestures, but Siddhartha was slowly and steadily moving away. She tried to grab his hand and almost managed to do so, but seemed to miss by inches. Don’t go, don’t go, she was screaming, but did he hear her? Panic gripped her, paralyzed her almost and then she was not sure of what happened. She remembered trying to recall the swimming movements Siddhartha had demonstrated just a short while ago. She remembered seeing some rocks and hoping, praying, forcing and willing herself to reach out and grab and hold on. For how long? She does not remember. There were shapes moving in the distance. They were coming closer. They were human shapes. She gestures and waves with all her might. She doesn’t know whether they have seen. The shapes come closer. Human hands touch her. She grabs them with a vice-like grip. Then they are moving away. Surfacing. She is being pulled on to the beach. She has blacked out.

There are concerned faces around her. A plastic glass containing water is offered to her.

‘Siddhartha. Where is Siddhartha?’ she cries and weeps. Someone notes down the name of the hotel. Someone says something about a search party being sent into the sea for Siddhartha. She has no idea of the time. She looks at her watch and is unable to understand. She is shivering. And then there is someone coming in from the sea. It is Siddhartha.

She sees him walking nonchalantly and is furious.

‘Where have you been?’ she screams. ‘I thought you were dead.’

He stops, seems to be transfixed to the ground. He is looking at her and the people grouped around her.

‘I had just gone looking around,’ he says.

She can’t speak from shock. Someone else is saying, ‘She doesn’t know swimming. How could you leave her alone and unattended under water?’

‘I thought she was fine, enjoying herself,’ says Siddhartha.

The other person is persistent. ‘But two hours? It is two hours since we have brought her up. How could you leave her unattended for two hours when you knew that she couldn’t swim?’

Siddhartha does not reply. He is looking at every face. Then he looks at Shruti.

The thought hits her like a one-ton hammer.

‘Did you want to kill me, Siddhartha? Did you want me to die?’

Each second seems elongated immeasurably before he says, ‘Since the thought has come to your mind, we cannot stay married any longer. This marriage ends now.’

Shruti has changed her place of work. She has moved to Utica University. She still counsels students. And when she feels up to it, she counsels herself and tries to guide her unhappy mind towards balance and fresh air.