

Fat Always Floats to the Top

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By : Juggernaut

There is nothing like life experiences. What goes around, comes around.



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By

Subba Rao

“ Why does fat always float to the top of water, Samantha?” I asked.

“ I don’t know, dad, and I don’t care,” she said.

“ Take your time and think,” I said.

Then, I went into our kitchen, brought a cup of water and placed a piece of butter into the water. Then I asked my daughter her observations.

“ Yeap, I see it floats,” she said, in a matter-of-fact way without much interest.

“ You know why?”

“ No, and I don’t want to know,” she said. That was her style of learning.

“ Because, fat is lighter than water,” I said.

“ I don’t care if it is lighter or not,” she said, watching TV. Our education class ended for that day.

With my background in chemistry, I could have given her more details, but she was only ten years old. A piece of fat dropped into water, floating to the surface, was a simple physical phenomenon that could be seen by anybody with good vision. My thoughts traveled back into the past to scan some inexplicable human behavior that did not make sense at that time but later, as time passed, I understood it all fit into the simple phenomenon such as how fat always float to the top.

The zoo and botanical garden at Queen’s Park in Trinidad was not a great place for amusement or fun. Once, a mentally derailed person jumped into the lion’s den at the zoo and offered his food; rice and peas to the animal. The confused lion with its powerful paw knocked the crazy man dead before the zookeeper could save him. The lion left the corpse intact, and withdrew to a corner for somebody to come up and cleanup the mess. This incident was big news and improved the zoo’s poor attendance for a while. Once, I visited the botanical gardens to find Raw Beef Plant, named after its deep reddish color bark, for a small sample for my research work. After walking around, I found a few of those trees in the park. The park manager, while sympathetic to my unusual requests for a piece of the bark, refused on the grounds that the tree could be harmed, even by peeling off a few inches of bark. Each tree was almost two feet in diameter and thirty feet high. After my repeated requests were rejected, I came out of his office dejected, since I badly needed the sample for my research.

As I walked through the park, an East Indian groundsman came behind me running and said, “ Man you can have a small piece of bark, it won’t kill the plant.”

“ Are you sure, your boss said it was against the rules?”

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“ I am an Indian just like you, naah. Look at my hair, straight like yours. Come with me, I will cut a piece for you,” he said.

I followed him towards the Raw Beef Plant with hesitation.

With a cutlass (or machete, a heavy long knife), he cut a small piece and gave it to me in a brown lunch bag.

He refused the lunch money I offered as a gift and just walked away with cutlass in his hand whistling an old Indian melody. I felt so humble by his generosity and kinship. Here was a man who did not know who I was and yet went out of his way. His gesture was based on simple thought process; he identified with me because I came from his ancestral home.

Ms. John an old woman of African decent worked as a janitor in the same building where I worked as graduate student. Every morning, her son, a short stocky man in tight clothing, dropped her in front of the laboratory and again picked her up in his small Morris Minor, a British-made car, in the evening. Ms. John in her regular uniform, a leaf green or rusty brown skirt, slowly climbed the steps to get into our laboratory carrying a big bag containing an assortment of things.

Almost every day, she left a fruit such as banana, orange, sapodilla, or mango in a wrinkled brown paper bag on my desk for me. This she did for almost four years while I worked as a graduate student. Other students in the laboratory always asked me, “ How come Ms. John gets something everyday for you and not for us?”

My only answer was, “ I don’t know,” and then I placed my hand on my heart and said “ perhaps good heart.” Frankly, I really did not know the answer myself.

Ms. John was a kind old lady and I was not even a native of Trinidad. I came from overseas as a graduate student and yet within a few days after I arrived, we developed a fondness for each other. She sometimes sat on the laboratory stool to rest her head on one end of the broomstick to relax. She suffered from blood pressure or some kind of ailment for which she took some medication. I always took time, even few minutes, to talk to her; inquiring about her health or something like that, unlike other graduate students.

Once, she left a few pieces of circular-shaped, thick round white flat bread in a plastic bag on my desk. In a hurry, I tried to take a bite. It was hard and unpalatable. I knew it was something edible but needed some preparation so I asked Ms. John what it was.

“ Oh, I thought you would know it, it is baamy, made from cassava flour; first you soak it in milk for few minutes prior to frying on a skillet, and eat with bulljol (fried salt fish and tomatoes), it tastes good, I tell you,” she said, with a smile showing her loose dentures.

“ You don’t have to bring every day something for me, Ms. John,” I said fondly.

“ I don’t bring anything fancy, just a fruit once in a while,” she said, walking slowly with her broomstick.

A few years after I left Trinidad, I was told that she died from chronic illness. I always remember her saying to me, “ You work hard naah, you don’t skylark like others.” Skylark is a local expression for playing the fool. Ms. John figured out that I was different, I was not sure in what way. Perhaps unlike other students, I acknowledged her presence and treated kindly. And, she reciprocated. The result was mutual affection and respect.

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Tom White, a student from England, and I were both post-graduate students in our department, and both applied for a job supported by grants from Tom's native country. At the time of job interviews, I had completed my graduate work and The University Academic Committee had already approved my thesis whereas Tom was still working on his. Though we were equally qualified, since my thesis was approved and immediately available for the job, I expected to be selected. After the interviews, Tom was offered the job.

After Tom accepted the contract, the University Academic Committee rejected his thesis and he was asked to repeat some portions of his work for re-validation. The project for which Tom was selected could not get off the ground since Tom had to continue his graduate work. The selection committee had no choice but to give Tom a year of absence from the position even before he started the work.

It was absurd that I was sitting unemployed with sufficient knowledge to do the work in the department, and yet the person selected for the job was on leave even before he started. The selecting committee members in selecting the candidate for the job were highly educated, no non-sense professionals and yet used simple reasoning in decision making; the job went to the person from the country of origin of the funding agency. Here, the well-trained minds acted in a simplistic manner to arrive at a decision that was too obvious. It is like throwing a piece of fat into a pail of water. What did anybody expect? The fat flowed to the top of the water.

Dr. Kumar came to the campus as a senior research scholar from Minnesota. Everybody noticed that he was working hard to maintain his American accent acquired during his short stay in the United States. He was originally from a Province in India known for droughts, floods and bandits. The bandits had abandoned their business since they couldn't compete with bureaucrats and politicians in the local government. He told me once that he was a Brahmin but married a Christian girl since he didn't believe in caste or religion as did many Indians. His tolerance and broad-minded approach toward inter-religious marriage forty years ago was commendable coming from the Province known for religious prejudices.

At the beginning, for some reason, Dr. Kumar expected a special treatment from the department staff, perhaps because of his American education. Some technicians called him a "Yankee" behind his back. He made his technicians work very hard. Trinidad society for the most part was laid back and liked to fete (dance and be merry) throughout the year. The Calendar year in Trinidad had three seasons, Cricket, Christmas and Carnival; in short 3 C's. Most visiting staff to the campus quickly joined the local crowd to celebrate the 3 C's throughout their tenure, though some leave on their own or get fired or stay put for ever.

Dr. Kumar was one of a kind, who resisted joining the crowd to his peril. He became a loner, working harder and harder in the lab and drinking rum, harder and harder at home. During one summer, he took a short sabbatical out of the country. He asked Jim O'Brien, a graduate student from Ireland to take care of his car, a Ford Escort in his absence. Crazy Jim went wild with that opportunity.

One evening, crazy Jim invited me and Ramoutar, a Trinidadian student to go with him to Maracas beach, one of the better beaches on the northern coastal areas of Trinidad. We traveled in Dr. Kumar's car with Crazy Jim at the steering wheel. I sat in the back seat scared of Jim's driving shenanigans particularly when he was drinking and driving at the same time. It was almost midnight at the beach. Crazy Jim and Ramoutar were drinking rum and coke while I settled for plain coke. In the moonlight, two or three girls splashed water in provocative way and challenged us to join them. Both Crazy Jim and Ramoutar saw an opportunity but I smelled a rat.

"Let me and Ramoutar check out those girls first, if we get lucky, then you can follow us," said crazy Jim and without giving me a chance to reply, they both undressed and ran into the water.

I was sitting on the sand with their wet clothes strewn around me. Then, I heard some loud cuss words coming from the bushes not too far away. Three rough looking East Indian men with long hair and beer bellies,

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apparently drinking in the bushes behind us, went running toward the water hurling obscenities at Jim and Ramoutar to get away from their women.

It was a set up. I didn't expect lonely girls swimming at midnight and asking strangers to join them. Both Crazy Jim and Ramoutar, embarrassed, muttering something, crept back toward me, dripping water. They felt stupid for running like that and exposing their selfish instincts to grab the half-naked girls for themselves. On the way back, they begged me not to mention this episode to anybody in the department.

I sat in a crouched position in the back seat while Jim drove on and off the pavement. The back seats were stained with food and liquor. The floor was littered with empty beer cans, bottles, cigarette butts and condoms. The seat belts were torn apart. At one stage, Ramourtar steered the car away from hitting an electric pole and kept shouting at Jim to calm down and get a grip on himself. That was the last time I went out with Crazy Jim. During the next few weeks, Jim wrecked the old car by driving everywhere with his friends, on the beaches, on and off the pavements, hilltops and through dangerous slopes. The car was beyond recognition by the time Dr. Kumar returned from the vacation. The funny thing was, Dr. Kumar hardly knew crazy Jim before he handed over the car keys for safekeeping. Dr. Kumar knows me as a compatriot since we were both originally from the same country, though for some reason, my relation with him started on a sour note.

Twenty years after leaving Trinidad, I accidentally met Dr Kumar in Chicago and I mentioned crazy Jim and the car-wreck incident. Dr. Kumar looked at me suspiciously with a smile as if he learned something from that even though he never revealed what it was. What had surprised me was Dr. Kumar, a highly educated man for his simple thinking process, left the car with Jim because of his nationality.

Doc was not a real doctor but a cabdriver and a part-time mechanic in rural Eastern Trinidad. When I was introduced to him as a doctor, he asked if I was a real doctor and could treat his sick wife Drupathi, a pale woman standing next to him. I tried to explain that I was not a medical doctor but a doctor of science, but his wife kept pointing to her stomach complaining how it hurt all the time and the doctor at the local hospital was of no help. I sidestepped her questions politely and asked Doc, "How come everybody here calls you Doc?" He scratched his head and said sheepishly "I fix cars naah, and people down here call me Doc"

Drupathi, Doc's wife, in a hurry prepared Roti (Indian flat bread) and curry- chicken for me, and gave me sorrel, a slightly sour-tasting and yet pleasant drink. Their house was a typical rural Trinidad home build with concrete blocks. The ground floor had no partition walls, and was a multipurpose area used as a car garage and workshop, for washing and drying clothes, a gathering area for drinking rum, feasting and partying, and sometimes conducting Hindu religious ceremonies. The upstairs was the living quarters and the galvanized metal roofing also served the purpose of collecting rainwater for storage to use for bathing and all-purpose washing.

Doc's eldest daughter kept staring at me; perhaps my accent attracted her attention. The other three children were livelier and kept asking questions about Indian movies. One of the Doc's sons, with bright eyes and his hair cut close to the scalp asked me why the movie stars were always fair skinned though most Indians are brown or dark. It was a clever observation. "They put on lots of makeup to look pretty, you know," I said. "But the villain is always dark-skinned, like you and me, yes?" They all laughed.

Doc was so honored meeting me, he said, I should go hunting with him that night and have a late-night cooking at Roy's rum shop. I had never been hunting in my life, let alone shooting an animal. Roy, an East Indian owner of a small grocery and liquor store nearby, was one of those Indians with fair skin, walked sideways in slow motion carrying his short, fat body as if he was walking on skis. "Daddy," another member of the hunting team that night, was in his late twenties, but for some reason everybody called him "Daddy", and when I did, I can see he was happy from his broad smile and he shook hands with me at

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every opportunity.

The hunt started after 10 PM. I asked Doc, "what we were hunting?"

"Manicou, the meat is sweet, sweet, you know, all we have to do is stew it with tomatoes and some soy sauce, and Roy is the best cook around," replied Doc with a twinkle in his eyes.

Was a manicou a large animal or what? I was curious.

"Naah, it is small animal that climb trees using its tail and preys on poultry you know, that's why it's meat taste so good," said Daddy licking his lips with tip of his tongue.

Doc's two mongrel dogs came along with us to track the manicou. After walking in the bushes for a few hours, the two dogs started barking at a tree. The men, using flashlights searched the tree. Doc was excited to find the animal and without any prior notice gave his gun to me and shouted, "shoot it".

"Doc, never before have I held a gun in my hand, if I miss the animal, it might escape and the entire evening would be ruined," I said and gave the gun back to him to shoot. He fired only one shot.

When a manicou dropped to the ground, I realized the animal was a large ugly- looking opossum, I would never touch that either living or dead, let alone eat it. With a knife, Daddy ripped the animal stomach and threw the inner organs to the dogs. He threw the meat into a plastic bag for cooking at Roy's place. We all walked back to Roy's store. Somehow, I managed not eating the manicou stew in Roy's storefront house. As a Brahmin, it took me several years to break the taboo of not eating regular meat like poultry and lamb, but I could never bring myself to eat opossum. That was my first and last hunting trip.

Apparently Roy inherited the shop from his uncle who had no children of his own. Roy never attended high school, was soft-spoken, and very friendly. People suspected that he was impotent since he never married nor had a girl friend. He started drinking rum early and developed more of a liking toward rum than women. Nobody knows whether impotence made him drink hard or hard drinking made him impotent. His small shop at the street corner catered simple groceries such as rice, flour, cooking oil, sugar, salt, salt fish, canned food, and liquor to the people around the area.

Whenever I visited Roy's store, I made myself comfortable sitting on a stack of hundred-pound rice or flour bags. Roy either stood with his fat hands resting on the wooden worn-out greasy counter on the other side, or sat on a wooden stool, but always with a drink in one hand, even while serving his customers. Over ninety percent of his customers were east Indians and the rest were of African decent and mixed race or dougla people. An old Native Carib Indian woman often visited the store. Young people provoked her by calling her "Agouti" just to hear real cuss words from her. I understood from Roy that "Agouti" was a large rodent, hunted for meat in the area. She begged for free drinks of rum or beer from the shop customers and I suspected she entertained them with her real cuss words, from easy provocation from people around her.

During one of my subsequent visits, "Daddy" once showed me lyrics for a calypso he was working on. This was how it read:

### Caroni Women

Your kiss is sweet like cane juice, Caroni Women.

Your sweaty hug is sweet and sticky like dark molasses, Caroni Women.

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I love your dark dangling long hair, Caroni Women.

I like the way you look when you bend down to plant rice, Caroni Women.

I love your Roti and Bigan Baaji, Caroni Women.

Pullori, jellabi, kachori, I love everything you cook, Caroni Women.

Getting out of Caroni swamp is easy than breaking up with you Caroni Women.

No matter what anybody say your are cool, Caroni women.

â That was good, Daddy. But, the lyrics and melody sounds familiar to me, may be I heard it before,â I said hesitantly, not to disappoint him.

â Well, the melody is the same in any calypso, you know. It is work in progress; I am still working on the lyrics. Once it is played on the steel band, this will be good for the Road March competition next year you know, I am telling you,â said Daddy and shook my hands as a promise of assurance.

I visited Doc, Daddy and Roy a few times during the end of my student career, and before I left Trinidad for good. I had a feeling that these men with limited formal education felt honored liming (going around) with me because of my university education and I being from India, the country of their forefathers. I enjoyed their fellowship and downright honesty. I was grateful to Doc and his family for their hospitality and Roy for offering me free drinks in his store and Daddy for his kind friendly gestures.

Several years after I left Trinidad, I returned to attend a scientific meeting. I couldn't wait to meet my old friends only to discover that Roy died from cirrhosis of liver, Daddy managed to leave for Brooklyn, New York and currently operates a small Roti shop serving East Indian dishes. Doc died from natural illness and his family moved away. The corner store where Roy spent his short-lived life was abandoned and dilapidated. Tropical vegetation took over the wooden building. When I asked about Agouti, the old carib woman, people laughed and said, â Man, she dead long time ago.â

I worked in Jamaica for some years, a great place to live particularly in the interior regions. The Civil Supplies Department in Kingston was in charge of providing furniture to overseas visiting specialists as an incentive. One day I went to Kingston to meet with Mr. Lafayette, a brown-skinned Jamaican of mixed race, in charge of delivering furniture. After going through the list I needed, we waited for the truck to arrive to haul the furniture to my home, which was just over two hundred miles away. Lafayette asked me whether I could go with him to a nearby parlor or a street corner shop for a sandwich.

As we sat down, he said, â would you please order a drink of white rum and milk, that goes well with corned beef sandwich for me.â

I brought him a drink and sandwich and I brought myself a soda and sandwich.

â White rum is good you know, brown rum gives me headaches,â said Lafayette and gulped the entire contents in one shot.

He ate large chunks of sandwich for each bite saying â Ya mon, milk is good you know, it will tone down the hot liquor,â and then looked at the bottom of his empty glass as if expecting me to order more.

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I ordered a few more drinks of rum and milk along with the sandwiches. He swallowed the drink and ate the sandwich, alternatively; liquid and solid. His cheeks bulged and fell flat like waves at a coastline as he took big bites anxiously.

There was a pool table and a skittles table in the parlor. "You know how to play skittles?" Without waiting for my reply, he rushed to one end of the table and started explaining how to play the game.

It took some time to understand while he was beating me in every game. Once I understood and started playing skillfully, Lafayette got animated and started yelling "You scamp, you know how to play the game from the beginning, you just pretended as if you don't." I was embarrassed while other bystanders were looking at our game.

The liquor was working on him. So, I intentionally lost games to cheer him up. I had no choice but to bear with him until the truck arrived that evening. By that time Lafayette got a grip on himself and came to his senses, and started addressing me as "Bossi." I paid some money to Lafayette for later drinking and left with the furniture truck.

I remembered Lafayette the other day, when my daughter read loudly "Government of Jamaica" on the handle of a butter knife in our house in Iowa. When we left Jamaica several years ago, the butter knife was inadvertently packed with our own cutlery. I never noticed it until, my ten-year old read the vanishing words on the knife with her good eyesight. I doubt Lafayette is still alive, but he impressed me with his animated actions and words while playing skittles. I didn't mind when he started cussing me under the influence of white rum. He was a simple man with simple thoughts.

Outwardly, intellectuals or highly educated people may present themselves differently than common folks but inwardly they are all simple-minded and act accordingly. This would become apparent in some situations like a physical simple phenomenon of fat flowing to the top of water. For me, it took some to understand this human psychology from my experiences with highly educated professors, colleagues in graduate school or rum shop owner, car mechanic and an old janitor full of affection.

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