

Topic: Displacement and Hope (Surrogacy, Adoption, Diaspora and Immigrant identities)

THE SQUATTING ACCIDENT

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When you are in your teens, you are probably the most brave and adventurous kind. So we developed this weekend adventure sport. Every week one of us would find out a squatting spot and the five of us would squat there for the weekend.

We called ourselves the Fantastic Five, yeah, I know a little cliché, but there's a reason behind the name. We met at a foster home. The five of us had bounced from one foster home to another and two of us had been to correctional centres a couple of times so well, we weren't the usual kids. That settled. We were at Rudy's Home for kids, a pretty decent place for people like us. There were twelve of us living there in the summer of 2012.

How did the five of us click? Jeff and Javier had been to correctional centres together, Javier had a crush on Era. Era and Ira were twins. Alex was Ira's guy. So that was the link. Who am I? Well I will leave that to you. It isn't always that you get to read a story like this, and this is the best way to maintain the ambience — the ambivalence.

So we decided to squat at Mr. Marlowe's on the 34th. He would be gone for two weeks and we wanted something good that weekend, we had had a tough week at school. Yeah, Rudy believed that we should all go to school and learn something, no matter what we end up as, in the end. He felt a little education was always necessary.

Squatting is illegal. Really very illegal. And those of you who don't know how to be the perfect squatter, here is the master tip — always use a camera. That way you will know where things were and you can leave the place exactly as it had been. You displace a bath sponge and you are doomed.

This one squatting changed our lives forever. We weren't a newbie on the job, nor were we amateurs, but this one was one massive blow. We reached the place after 11 in the night and slid the kitchen window open. A thin knife and the window latch is a cheesecake. Alex's job was to click pictures. That was 2012 and Jeff and Javier already had a high tech camera phone. They were the best muggers I had ever seen. They were, well, "awesome". That camera phone is a treasured trophy at Javier's home now.

So, Alex went in and clicked the pictures. Era and Ira were in charge of the food and Jeff and Javier were in charge of the perimeter. Someone had to keep a watch while others got in.

When we all got in, we saw Alex standing with the camera near the fridge. Javier pushed him aside and started looking in for something to drink. He closed the door and saw what Alex was staring at and he froze there too. There was a picture of Jeff with a woman who looked similar to Jeff and Mr. Marlowe. Jeff was an orphan, he had never seen his parents and this “other Jeff” looked exactly like Jeff who was standing at the window trying to figure out if any of the neighbours were awake and staring, at the house that had suddenly lit up.

Javier gestured him and he came over. Era and Ira were busy figuring out which room they would take and which would be for the guys. Jeff saw the picture, and turned away. No one spoke about the picture ever. We all knew about it, we spent two days in that house, but no one mentioned it. Jeff was not the sort of guy you could ask questions to and the only person who could do that was Javier, and if he hadn't been answered, well, that's the end of it.

Next weekend we didn't find a new house, so we went back to Mr. Marlowe's. That Saturday night, as we slept, we heard a sound. Ira was on the watch duty, so we were instantly signalled and we hid. We had figured out a safe spot. You always have to keep that in case of emergencies. We watched from our safe spot the “other Jeff” and the woman come in.

Now could it get any stranger? Well, yes. We were all hiding in the “other Jeff's” room and suddenly Jeff, just walked straight in front of him, with his pen knife out and pushed him against the wall. Javier gestured him to keep quiet. If I say the atmosphere was tense that would be an understatement, a huge understatement! Everyone held their positions for a complete five minutes. No one spoke. Then Jeff said — “Name!” “John”, he choked. Javier placed his hand on Jeff's shoulders and Jeff turned and walked out through John's window. The rest followed. Era took one last look at him, while Ira nudged her. They left. Alex was the last one to have left if John hadn't suddenly developed courage enough to jump him and yell. If you have lived at foster homes, you know you are not weak, but John was the exact same built as Jeff, the only difference was the personality, so his freaked panic stricken huge body didn't pose much of an obstacle to Alex. He struggled, but he managed to throw him off, but what happened was that the woman came in, panicked further and hit the alarm.

If you have been a part of a pack, you will know that the pack never abandons you. Jeff stepped back in and as Alex slid out the window; the woman saw Jeff and froze. A police car stopped outside. Jeff gestured Javier and the rest to leave. No one questioned his authority, but like I said, one never abandons a member of a pack, so the rest hid. The police knocked at the door, the woman said something and they left. Jeff and John stared at each other. The woman looked at him and said, “Jeff”.

Whaaam! That's how it felt. The rest was the usual Q&A and a few loud sounds and a few tears here and there, and a shocked John looking from Jeff to his mother. When Jeff came back, he didn't talk to anyone for two days, even Javier was ignored. Then as the four sat on Rudy's lawn, Tuesday evening, staring at nothing, with a soft breeze blowing; Jeff came and sat beside them. He had a picture in his hand. All peered at it. There were four adults and two babies. One was John's mother, one was a doctor identifiable through the doctor's scrub she wore and the other two were probably a couple. The couple had a baby and John's mother

had one. The picture had the caption “The Browns, Jeff, Natasha, John and Doctor Rose, 1997”.

I will skip the details. Here the gist — Jeff and John were twins. Natasha was their biological mother. She had given up one of her kids for adoption and the Browns had adopted him. So how did they die? Obviously Jeff wanted to know that. If you were in Jeff’s shoes you know that’s one thing you can’t stick a pin on, more so since Natasha had already given him their last known address. Jeff declared he was going to check out the address. All decided to accompany.

It is 2016 now. I can tell you that Jeff was the strongest guy one could ever meet. He saw the Browns the next day. They were those kinds of folks who are very practical and straight forward. They said “You are not blood; we wanted one of ours, so we gave you up for adoption.” They pointed at the kid playing on the play station. He was a surrogate kid. He had their genes. Javier bashed the guy’s face. The woman’s yell died as Era slapped her hard. The kid obviously knew nothing. He was on a mission that involved a lot of firing and knifing and yells. Nothing penetrated those costly soft and spongy headphones. But Jeff somehow never got over it. He had faced a lot at the correctional homes and the foster cares. But he never got over this. We found him next morning at his favourite spot in the garage. He had OD-ed. He had the camera phone with one of the pack’s squatting groupies. When did he sneak out? How could Javier miss him sneaking out? Well, Jeff was the best mugger and dodger, so we can’t blame Javier.

We all have burdens to carry. Javier is an “illegal” migrant from Mexico. He doesn’t remember his parents. Era and Ira are born of an Indian surrogate mother. Their legal parents had died and their relatives didn’t want them because they were not “blood”. Alex was just a regular orphan. Jeff, if he had known that he wasn’t alone, that there were others with a history like him; may be, he wouldn’t have OD-ed. There are two kinds of troubled teens one sort keeps their problems to themselves and they appear perfectly at ease with the adult world. Another kind intentionally blocks the sad parts of life by never talking about it. We were from both the groups. So, none of us got to share our past till Jeff jolted us to the realisation that we are strongest with our vulnerabilities.

Then again, very few can actually handle being weak when all their life they have existed as iconic invincible super-heroes. Era thinks he was selfish. Javier thinks he failed Jeff. Alex blames himself for choosing the squatting location. Ira feels they should all stop thinking all the shit and for once, be happy that at least one of them got to go the way he wanted too — all high and doped up and in ecstasy.

After all, no man can be called happy till safely dead!