

Sahil & Samira

written by: NJ



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Sahil and Samira

It all began with that shoe on the wall....

A shoe on the wall shouldn't be there at all!

--Dr. Suess

Samira was looking puzzled at the mouth of a shoe staring back at her. It was her favourite pair. It was purple with white rhinestones along the mouth and the edge of the shoe. It had a slight heel and a strap that normally fastened it to her foot. But now the strap, though fastened was attached to the shoe, which was attached to the wall. How?

“Mama!” she screamed. As she felt the anger bubble.

The sole of the shoe had been stuck to the wall. Samira tried to pull it off but it wouldn’t budge.

“Mama!” The ear splitting screech woke up the cat who was fast asleep under a car at the end of the street.

“Mama!” The screams were getting more high pitched. Sahil, jumped at the first call. The second call made him grin, the third one made chuckle with glee. “Mama!” she continued to scream as she stomped out of her room and down the corridor to her mother’s room.

“What is it Samira?” her mother was rather annoyed at being disturbed. It had taken careful planning to allow her an hour of rest, to catch up on her reading, and Samira had just interrupted her first five minutes.

Samira stormed into her room, “My shoe is.... seksull” she squealed. “What?”

“My....shshosukall” Samira was screeching.

“I have no idea what you are saying,” said her mother as she return to her Agatha Christie. Mr. Poirot was just about to reveal who the killer was.

“Sahil!” said Samira, through clenched teeth. “He....” she couldn’t get her words out.

“He stuck my favourite shoe to the wall in my room.”

“What?”

“I said...”

“I heard what you said. I just don’t believe it. How could he possibly stick a shoe to the wall?”

“Come and see for your self!”

Mama grudgingly put down her book, and followed her daughter to her room. Her mouth fell open as she entered her daughter’s room and found that, there was indeed a shoe stuck to her daughter’s wall.

“Sahil!”

The call went out, as mama went to the wall to figure out how exactly he had attached the shoe to the wall. The sole of the shoe was fastened to the wall. Had he used supper glue? Where had he got that from? The superglue had been locked away in a box, which had in turn been safely tucked into a cabinet at the top of the linen closet. It took mama a ladder to reach this cabinet. Sahil was all of five years, there is no way he could reach it. So how did he get it? How did he glue the shoe?

“Sahil!”

No response.

“It’s my favourite pair. Now it’s ruined.” Tears filled Samira’s eyes and tethered at the brim, threatening to rain down. Her nails were digging deep canyons into her palms.

“OK wait. Don’t get too upset, let’s figure out how he did this. Sahil!” yelled mama as she spun around to go looking for her son.

‘Why do I need to read mystery books? I have my hands full, trying to figure out the inner working of a five year old and ten year old’s head,’ thought mama.

“Sahil!”

Sahil was not going to be caught in a double storm. He knew his sister would be upset but mama was another story. He was scared of mama!

One time he had climbed carefully onto the kitchen counter and crawled noiselessly to the fridge to reach up to get the ‘good’ cookies that were kept on top of the fridge, for safekeeping, when mama had seen him standing on his toes at the edge of the counter in the kitchen and had screamed and pulled him off the counter away

from the cookies. Not only had he got a thrashing, but he was forbidden the good cookies. Her punishments not only hurt, but they deprived him of all the things he loved most- chocolate cookies!

He didn't think Samira would involve mama! Samira and he, had been pranking each other for the last week. It began around five days ago, when school had closed for the holidays.

Sahil had been bored, he had been sitting around the house looking for something to do. When he chanced upon the dinning table. Strewn across the table were little packets of chili flakes, from yesterday's pizza. The pizza was well spiced and they didn't end up using too many chili packets. The rest of the packets had remained, and no-one had cleared it off the table yet. The wheels in Sahil's brain began to turn. What could he do with so many chili flake packets?

When Samira returned from her friends house that day, she carelessly pushed the door to her room open and stepped in. It took her a minute to realise what had fallen on her. Initially she thought it was dust and had let out a small yelp from being startled. But when her eyes began burning, she realised it was something more po-

tent. She ran to the bathroom and splashed cool water in her eyes and nose. It took her five shampoo washes to get all the chili flakes out of her hair. Sahil had enjoyed the little scene.

The next day Sahil woke up to the sound of Samira practising her dance. It got louder and louder. The banging of her feet on the floor and the ‘Ta, Tai, tai, ta....’ Music that accompanied her rhythmic footwork. He tried shouting above the din, but he knew that his sister would not stop. So he stumbled out of bed. His foot was cold. Then he slipped. Splash into the big tub of ice water that his sister had placed along the side of the bed. Her payback for yesterday. Sahil was too stunned to scream. Instead he flopped around in the tub of cold water, slipping and sliding along until he was finally out of the tub and onto the warmer ground.

“Samira.” he yelled, as he emerged from his room soaking wet.

The house was filling with warm smells of the day. The dal being cooked, the rice being boiled, the ripe mangos from the tree outside the window and his favourite smell- the cooking of halwa. But Sahil had no reaction to these smells. Normally on a holiday, it would be these smells that would

wake him with their warm embrace. His heady dreams would make way for delicious meals. During the holidays, he woke up after everyone else finished breakfast. He would eat what one would call a brunch- breakfast and lunch rolled into one. His holidays were fun and filled with adventure, when his friend Rohan who lived two floors down was around. But this year Rohan's family had decided to go to their village in Tamil Nadu to spend their holidays. So this vacation was going to be a lonely one and Sahil had to find new ways to entertain himself. Normally he would spend sometime with his family visiting relatives, or going on family outings to the Gateway of India or to see a cricket match at Wankhede stadium. But this year, his father was travelling abroad on work and so all the regular holiday plans were dead. His mother was, in his opinion, too stressed out!

“You need to take a chill pill mama!” is what he had said when she had scolded him for painting the wall near the kitchen with mud. However, his suggestion seemed to aggravate her further.

So when he heard his mother call out for him, he knew he had to disappear, at least for a few hours, until everyone had figured out how to get the shoe off the wall and their anger had ebbed.

Then if he showed up, it wouldn't be as bad as, if they were fresh with emotion. But the problem was he couldn't sneak out of the house. His room was at the back of the house, and to get to the front door he would have to walk past his sister's room. He'd surely be caught. Where could he hide? His room was so tiny, he would be easily found if he hid under the bed, or his study table, and his cupboard was full of clothes and would be uncomfortable to spend a few hours in. He grabbed his tablet and earphones and sneaked out of his room.

Mama, examined the shoe. She frowned. 'It has to be super glue,' she thought. 'I better make sure he hasn't superglued his fingers together.' "Sahil" she called as she went to find him.

"Sahill!" screamed his sister. As she stomped behind her mother. Samira was normally the calm and more reasonable child of the two. When her brother had drenched her in chili flakes, she had remained calm even though her eyes burned even three days after. But she realised that her brother was bored. She had overheard her mother on the phone with her father saying that Sahil was bored and lonely. And even though she

fought a lot with her brother, she loved him dearly, and wanted to make his boring holiday a little less boring. Which is why she had decided to play a trick back on him. It had taken logistical planning to get the big tub into Sahil's room without waking him and it took a lot more to fill it with ice. Savita didi, the live in servant, had helped her. She normally stayed out of the fights between the siblings, but she had also rubbed yogurt into Samira's scalp to calm the skin when she had chili flakes in her hair. So she was game to play a prank on Sahil. Savita didi, normally always took Sahil's side - "because he's younger" was her excuse. But she always helped Samira with anything she needed. Samira was around six year old when Savita didi came to stay with them. It was around the time Sahil was born. She had come to help her mother manage the house. She had stayed, and both Samira and Sahil had come to love her like another mother figure.

Mama and Samira stormed into his room. But it was empty.

"Sahil!" called mama as she turned and went to look for her son in other parts of the house.

"Sahil!" echoed Samira, as she followed her mother. She secretly felt gleeful, knowing her

mother couldn't possibly be kind to such a heinous act. She would revel in his punishment.

School had always been easy for Samira. She always was at the top of her class. But last year, she had moved to the fifth standard and had started new subjects like history and geography in addition to science and environmental studies. The increased workload, had affected her confidence. The first term was tough and Samira didn't do as well as she normally did. It had shattered her confidence. Her grandmother who had come to visit her around that time, saw her struggle, and to cheer her up had bought her a pair of beautiful purple shoes with rhinestones. Her grand mother had sat her down and explained to her that it was ok to fail, if you learnt from your failure and prevailed the next time.

The next semester had been better and now, Samira was sure that she would be back at the top of her class. When she saw the shoes her grandmother had gifted her stuck to the wall, her heart broke. The shoes had been a symbol of her grandmother's encouragement and faith in her. Now, that Sahil was going to be punished for his

crime, (because in Samira's eyes that is exactly what this was- a crime) Samira felt pleased.

They went from room to room looking for Sahil. But he wasn't there.

"I don't know? Has he gone down to play?" asked Samira.

"No he's supposed to be here at home. Savita!" called mama.

"Ji, didi?" Savita didi had just finishing up cleaning the dishes in the kitchen. She had heard all the shouting and screaming, but had thought that the sibling were just having another fight. It was common, especially during the holidays, when the two had nothing better to do. So she ignored it and continued with her work. "Have you seen Sahil? I can't find him."

"Sahil was in his room," replied Savita didi.

"He's not there," said mama as she spun around to have another look. Samira and Savita followed her. The three checked under the bed and table and even inside his cupboard. Flats in Mumbai tend to be small. By Mumbai standards, the Kumars lived in a big flat. It had four bedrooms, a living space, a kitchen, a store room cum helpers

rooms and three bathrooms. The rooms weren't very big, but big enough to fit a bed, cupboards and a small study table. The living room was spacious enough to fit a sofa, two armchairs a television console and two cupboards. But the layout of the house, didn't really allow too much privacy. The living room was attached to the bedrooms through a long corridor, off which the rooms sprouted. It started with Samira's room on the right, followed by the extra room on the left, then Sahil's room on the right again and the corridor ended in mama and papa's bedroom. There was one bathroom between Sahil and Samira's room, that the siblings shared.

Since Sahil had not passed them, when they were in Samira's room, mama decided to have a look in her room and the guest room. They checked under the bed, and in the bathroom, even under the study table. They went from room to room looking for Sahil. As they left each room despondent, their fear and concern rose. Mama could now hear her heart beating in her ears. Samira who had begun this quest angry and out for revenge, was now being to feel guilty. The feeling of guilt is a strange one. No-one ever really knows how to avoid it. It creeps up on you like a thief in the night and without warning steals any sense of calm and assurance you have.

Samira was beginning to feel the guilt spread. It started as a small seed in the pit of her stomach and was growing by the minute. It had taken over her insides and was now spreading to her skin, like a bad rash. Tears were welling in her eyes and even though she had been furious with her brother a few minutes earlier, she was now feeling terrible. Savita and mama were getting more concerned and that was upsetting Samira even more.

“Go and check if he’s playing downstairs,” ordered mama to Savita and Samira.

“Check with Ritu aunty, if she’s seen him, on your way down.”

Mama picked up the phone and began calling all of Sahil’s friends. Twenty minutes later Savita and Samira were back. They had asked the watchman, and a group of children who were playing down stairs and any people they thought might know where he was, if they had seen him, but to no avail. Mama also had no luck.

Mama’s voice broke as she said: “Let’s check the house one more time before we call the police.”

Samira's heart sank. She couldn't hold back the tears from cascading down her face. "Sahil!" she screamed as she ran from room to room, the terror in her voice so evident, that anyone hearing her would have run to her rescue. Mama followed her. They check the living room, kitchen, bathrooms, Samira's room, Sahil's room the guest room, Savita's room and finally mama's room. There was no sign of him. "I think I'll call papa first," said mama, her face screwed in a horrible knot. She went to her cupboard to get her cell phone. She took it out and began dialling her husband. Tears were falling on the keypad as she willed herself not to cry and be brave for her daughter. Suddenly she heard a small thud. It came from her husband's cupboard. Without waiting to wonder, she threw open the cupboard door and lying there, covered in his father's clothes, was Sahil with a pair of earphones in he ears watching something on his tablet.

His mother wrapped her arms around him and pulled him out. His mother first hugged him. Then she slapped him so hard, he could barely stand. She then picked him up and hugged him again, and as she squeezed her son she said: "If you ever do that to me again I promise you it'll be the last time. You are grounded." She then returned

to her Agatha Christie and picked up from where she left off.

Samira who had been chanting for his head less than an hour ago came running to him and hugged him and kissed him and said: "Sorry!"

Sahil was very confused.

Savita didi came and looked him over carefully, then she asked him: "Do you want to eat some halwa? Come I've made some for you."

The slap he had been afforded still stung, but the prospect of halwa sounded good and Samira wasn't really upset about the shoe anymore. All in all it was a good day!

The cat who had been displaced from her cozy spot under the car returned to it to escape the heat and finally went back to sleep.

Samira went back to her room and sat on her bed for a few moments. She was so relieved that her brother was alright. Then she looked over to her study table. On it sat her favourite picture of her family. The frame had been painted blue. She hated blue!

"Sahil!"