

Nagin

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Mayur Didolkar

 juggernaut

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*To my father, Sharad Didolkar
He worked hard, sacrificed a lot and rarely complained*

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The Snake in My Neighbour's Garden

Later on, Kunal would wonder whether it had started when he saw his neighbour, Rasika, partially undressed, or when he saw a snake crawling inside her house.

Rasika was a battered housewife. Kunal was a fifteen-year-old who couldn't look away from a half-naked woman.

Events moved with an inevitability that was hard to deny.



Kunal's father was the regional sales head with a private life insurance company and his mother was a freelance software consultant. She had stopped working full-time to help Kunal and his younger sister, Harini, with their studies. The three-bedroom row-house they lived in was still under mortgage, though Kunal's father often talked about speeding up the loan payments.

That morning in June, Kunal stayed home from school because of a throat infection. He was seated on the chair by his bedroom window, bundled up in warm clothes, a well-thumbed copy of *The Lord of the Rings* balanced on his thighs. He had just finished the chicken soup his mother had made him and was thinking of snuggling into bed again when he casually looked out of the window and spotted Rasika in the passageway leading to her kitchen.

She was wearing just a petticoat, a towel loosely held against her breasts. From Rasika's wide-open kitchen window, Kunal had a good view of his thirty-five-year-old neighbour as she tugged at a sari from an overhead wire. She stood on her toes, and propped her towel on one shoulder. Kunal could clearly see her rather large, slightly sagging breast and what he was pretty sure was her nipple. Once she got hold of the sari, she turned around, her bare back now visible to Kunal. Water droplets trickled down her back and Kunal felt his throat close. His earlobes were on fire. He noticed with a mixture of amusement and revulsion that the *LOTR* on his lap was moving a little. Kunal felt a crazy laughter bubbling up in him. He knew he was not supposed to look at a woman like this. He knew he should force his eyes away from his topless neighbour. She was his mother's friend. He called her 'aunty'. It was not right.

But his eyes remained glued to her and the droplets of water on her back grew larger and larger, till he realized it was the tears in his eyes. For some inexplicable reason, the sight of a half-naked, attractive woman was making him cry.

Rasika walked into her bedroom. Kunal could still see

her reflection in the mirror in the passageway. Then she shut the bedroom door and put an end to his peepshow.

Kunal heard a door shut in his own house, and jumped up, knocking down the soup bowl. The loud clatter brought his mother, who had just returned from the vegetable market, rushing upstairs.

Kunal quickly jumped into bed and pulled the blankets around him as tightly as he could. When his mother came into the room, he told her he must have kicked the bowl by accident in his sleep. His mother mussed his hair and asked him to go back to sleep. She returned with a broom and a dustpan and collected the broken shards.

As soon as she walked out, he ran into his bathroom to masturbate.



Kunal knew Rasika had some trouble with her husband, Jugal Chauhan, who travelled a lot for work. Despite being married for close to ten years, they were childless. Jugal occasionally came over to Kunal's house to have a drink with his father when both men were in town. Rasika and Kunal's mother, who attended the same gym and yoga classes, were not exactly close, but were good neighbours.

Good enough neighbours for Rasika to confide in Kunal's mother about the beatings Jugal administered when he was in his cups.

Kunal overheard his parents talking one Sunday morning, a few days after he had spied on Rasika. They had gone over to Rasika and Jugal's place the previous night and the two

men had had a few drinks. As Kunal's father nursed a mild headache with his morning tea, his wife chided him for encouraging Jugal's drinking.

'I told you he hit her the last time we went to their place and you guys had more than just a drink,' Kunal's mother said.

Kunal was in the living room, trying to focus on a novel on his new Kindle – a gift from his father on his fifteenth birthday three weeks ago. Even amidst the noise from the television that Harini had on, Kunal's ears perked up when he heard his mother's voice drop down an octave. He missed the brief reply his father gave and then his mother said again, 'I know, but why encourage such behaviour?'

'He is a grown-up, I can't say no if he wants a drink. And if he is batting his wife around, she ought to go to the police or at least to her folks. I don't see how my having a drink with him is enabling his abusive behaviour.'

Harini got up as the ad break came on during her favourite show and skipped out of the room. Kunal turned down the volume of the TV.

'–such a man?'

A sigh and the sound of a cup being set down rather forcibly on the table.

'Asha, that's not for us to judge and I have told you in the past not to get involved with neighbours' personal lives. We don't know their history, we don't know the background—'

'Oh, so you are saying there might be some justification for Jugal to beat her?' His mother's voice rose a little.

'Don't be stupid. All I am saying is getting involved in another couple's problems is to invite trouble upon

ourselves. As for the drinking part, yesterday was after almost three months. If that is too soon for you, all right, I will stop. Now can we change the subject, please? This is the last thing I want to talk about when I am hung over. Not to mention the absolute disaster of a quarter-end our company has had.'

'But what kind of neighbours are we, living like ostriches? You know what he did to her last time, that poor thing op—'

Harini was back in the living room and had turned the volume up, higher than before, and Kunal lost the thread of the conversation.

That afternoon he ran into Rasika on his way back from cricket practice. He noticed a fading bruise just beneath her left eye and some swelling on her jaw. She gave him a sad, knowing smile, as if she knew he had overheard his parents talking about her.



Kunal was by his bedroom window, idly peering at the still-open kitchen window of Rasika's house, hoping for a repeat of the other day, when he spotted the snake go in through it.

At first, Kunal thought his eyes were playing a trick on him. A light September afternoon shower had turned the garden behind Rasika's house a brilliant green. The snake was black and yellow and nearly ten feet long. It was moving up a pipe, coiled around it, and when its head came into his view, he knew it was a cobra. Then he saw it slowly slither in through the open window.

A whimper escaped Kunal's mouth. His legs were shaking. He stood rooted to the spot, staring at the window in horror, not knowing what to do. A stream of sweat trickled down his temple. He absently wiped it with the back of his hand and swallowed. He wanted to scream and alert Rasika. He wanted to run to her house and play the gallant knight and save the fair maiden.

He tried to see if he could spot the snake inside the house. No sign of it. Finally, he stumbled out of his room and made his way to the living room downstairs. He was alone in the house. Kunal picked up the intercom through which he could call anybody living in the society and dialled Rasika's number. The phone seemed to ring on endlessly.

The snake had bitten her, she was lying on the floor of her kitchen, or bedroom. In her sleeveless gown that she usually wears around the house. Her eyes open and unseeing, a thin dribble of spittle forming at her mouth as the life drains—

'Hello?' came Rasika's voice. She sounded a little breathless.

'Rasika . . . I mean Chauhan aunty—' He swallowed and suddenly wondered how to tell her that he had seen a snake enter her house while he had been staring at her window.

'Kunal?' She recognized his voice.

'Yes aunty, are you in your bedroom?'

There was a surprised laugh at the other end. 'Kunal, you know all intercoms are installed in the living room, and that is a somewhat offensive thing to ask a lady, if I may say.'

Kunal gritted his teeth. 'Aunty, please don't panic, but I saw a snake enter your house a couple of minutes back—'

All she said was, 'Uh-oh.'

'Aunty, I said—'

'I heard you. Don't worry, it is under control.'

'What? Aunty, should I come over and help you find it?'

Please say no, please say no. I am terrified of snakes.

'No Kunal, that will not be necessary,' she said. Her voice sounded distant, as if she was speaking to him only half-heartedly.

'Aunty, do you want to come and wait for my parents at my house? I can call mamma, she is at my grandma's—'

'Kunal, the snake went out of the kitchen window it came through. The same window that you were looking at for some mysterious reason at three in the afternoon.' Her voice held a hint of a reproach.

'It was a coincidence, aunty, I was just—'

'Cut it out and do me a favour and keep your mouth shut about it,' she said with an unexpected harshness.

'I am sorry, aunty.' He was not sure why he was apologizing to a woman he had called to alert about a snake in her house, but he followed his father's advice that apologizing to a woman when she was upset was the shortest route to peace, no matter what the circumstance.

Her voice softened a little. 'Kunal, I grew up in Palghar, in the Konkan, and have been chasing snakes out of the house since I was six. Believe me, they are not as scary as they look. Most of them are harmless.'

Then a soft laughter that might have given Kunal an embarrassing fantasy or two about this older, attractive woman. But that day, his blood ran cold when he heard what she said after.

'Some of them are quite loyal.'
The line went dead.



That evening, he was reading in his room when Harini peeped in. 'Dada, Chauhan aunty called on the intercom. She asked if you could go over to her house, there is some cupboard door that is jammed and she needs a "man" to open it.' His thirteen-year-old sister said 'man' like the word tasted sour in her mouth.

'Ask papa or mamma to go,' he tried.

'They went to chachi's for dinner, no? Anyway, aunty asked for you.'

As soon as he rang the bell, Rasika opened the door. She was dressed in a pale yellow sari and a matching sleeveless blouse. She had a little make-up on that made her look even prettier. Kunal got a whiff of her perfume as she stood aside to let him enter the house and he nearly swooned.

'Which cupboard, aunty?'

She looked at him coldly, no trace of a smile on her face. 'Sit down, Kunal, right there by that coffee table would be perfect,' she said. Kunal felt his knees buckle.

As he sat down on the couch, she sat next to him. 'You stare at my kitchen window every day, don't you?' she asked. Their knees were almost touching. She adjusted her pallu as she talked and it distracted Kunal.

'Aunty—'

'Don't make it worse for yourself, young man. Your mother and I are good friends and I hope not to cause any

embarrassment to her, so I am talking to you instead of her. But this is your only chance to come clean.'

Freaking adults! That was how they manipulated you. Threats. Always the spectre of something bad dangled over your head. Oh, and they had your best interests at heart! Kunal thought, and the sarcasm gave him some courage.

'I don't look at your window,' he said and averted his eyes. He knew he could not hold out for much longer.

'Don't lie, young man.' Somehow her stern voice made her even more desirable. Kunal was fighting panic and an erection at the same time.

'I am not lying and if you think I am, maybe you should bring mamma in now. This talk is making me uncomfortable,' he said. He was surprised by his own nerve.

Rasika took her time twisting and untwisting the corner of her pallu. She straightened it out and said, 'Okay, even though I am very disappointed in you, let me give you one more way out. I am going to speak hypothetically. You know what that means, don't you?' Kunal nodded.

'Supposing, out of some adolescent curiosity and my own carelessness you happened to notice that if my kitchen window is left open, then someone looking out from your bedroom window can observe me in . . . my private moments.'

The image of her breast flashed before Kunal's eyes and he swallowed. 'Now, further, suppose that, again because of your age, you couldn't resist watching my window every day, in the hope that you might catch me unguarded again, in my private moments . . .'

She paused and looked steadily at him. Kunal continued to look down at his sweaty palms.

‘Do you understand what a profoundly immoral thing it is to spy on women when they are in the privacy of their homes, Kunal? I am only a few years younger than your mother, and you have a sister who is about to blossom into a beautiful woman in a few years. You realize the enormous pressure we women feel to protect ourselves from prying male eyes, don’t you?’

If her intention was to shame him, it was working like a bastard. Kunal tried to swallow the lump in his throat. He could no longer trust himself to speak. He was afraid he might break down.

‘If your mother finds out that her boy spies on women, her friends, like this, how would she feel?’

A few months ago, Kunal had walked into Harini’s room without knocking. His mother was inside, helping Harini into her dancing clothes and she had given him a lashing that ensured he never went into any room in the house other than his own without knocking first.

‘She won’t like it, aunty,’ he said in a barely audible voice.

‘She won’t. And your sister. Soon she will be a young woman and her girlfriends will be coming to your place. How comfortable would she feel sharing a bedroom wall with a man, who is, to put it somewhat crudely, a peeping Tom?’

Kunal was ready to throw himself at her feet. He tried to say something when she shook her head and continued to speak.

‘But none of this needs to happen. I closed the kitchen window today, I shouldn’t have left it open like that in the

first place. So that only leaves the little matter of your phone call this afternoon.'

'Aunty, I was worried—' Now the tears were rolling down his cheeks. He didn't try to stop them.

She cut him off again. 'I know that, Kunal, and that is what saved you today. You knew I might find out about your peeping and you still took the risk because you thought my life was in danger.' She smiled faintly. 'But here is the thing, Kunal, if you bring up the snake with anyone, and I mean anyone, you see where such a conversation must inevitably lead, don't you? You will have to explain to your mother why you were staring at the window of her friend's house—'

'I won't talk about it to anyone, aunty, I swear on my mother's—'

She abruptly took his hand in hers. Her hands were incredibly soft. It was the first time a woman other than his mother had held his hands like that.

'It's all going to work out just fine, Kunal, trust me. Just remember, no one must find out about what you thought was a snake.'

'What I—'

'Does it occur to you that you might have imagined the whole thing?'

'I am sure I did not—'

She leaned closer and held his hand tighter. Kunal thought he would faint if he got one more whiff of the perfume she wore.

'Are you sure that is the way you want to go, Kunal? Will it not be easier to accept you imagined the whole thing and put it behind us?'

Kunal understood what she was trying to say and nodded weakly.

‘Say it, Kunal,’ she said, ‘tell me you might have hallucinated the whole snake thing.’

‘I might have . . . imagined the whole thing aunty, I . . . I am sorry.’

She let go of his hand. ‘Of course you did, no way can a cobra make its way to the urban dwellings of Pune. The very thought!’ And she laughed gently.

Kunal stumbled out of her house and ran straight to his room. Later that night, as he tossed and turned, he dreamt that a black and yellow cobra climbed into his bedroom through the window. He screamed loud enough to bring his parents running to his room.

His last thought before he fell back into an uneasy sleep was – had he told Rasika what kind of snake it was? And if not, and he had indeed imagined the whole thing, how come she knew what kind of snake he had seen?

He did not dare look at Rasika’s window even once after that.



A few days later, Kunal returned home early after a cancelled tuition class and saw his mother and Rasika at the kitchen table drinking tea. His mother had her hand on Rasika’s and they were talking in whispers.

Rasika decided to tell mamma about me! The thought made Kunal miss a heartbeat and he stood on the stairs to eavesdrop. He needed to know how much trouble he was in.

'I am so tired of all this, didi, just wish this nightmare would somehow end,' Rasika said. Kunal's mother said something in response but he was unable to discern her words.

'He knows babuji and mummy ji are coming next week and babuji will be livid if he finds out his son is laying hands on his bahu. I told you how Jugal slapped me before babuji once and babuji nearly went for his throat. So now—' a pause and what sounded like a sob before Rasika continued— 'he hits me on my stomach and back so that it remains covered. I threw up twice this morning.' And she broke down completely.

'Should I ask my husband to have a word with Jugal?' Kunal's mother asked, after Rasika's sobs quietened down a bit.

'No didi, that would infuriate him even more. Now he is convinced that I am having an affair and he is asking those good-for-nothing Gupta boys to install CCTV cameras at the entrance. How humiliating all of this is, *aap imagine karo*. I have never looked at another man and he is the one who travels a lot, and God knows what he does. And now, it is I who will be watched in my own house like a chor.'



Later that week, after cricket practice, Kunal's classmate, Ranjan, showed Kunal and his friends a clip on his mobile phone. Although Kunal had been given his own phone when he was in class eight, it was not a smartphone. Kunal and Harini were allowed only thirty minutes of surfing every

alternate day under the supervision of their parents. So naturally, for all the unsupervised stuff, he was dependent on his friends at school.

Four of them huddled in a corner of the dimly lit, cramped locker room. A man and woman walked into a bedroom holding hands. Their faces were blurred. About twenty seconds into the clip, the woman discarded her kameez and a fading bluish bruise was visible on her slightly flabby stomach. Feeling faintly sick and fascinated at the same time, Kunal watched closely as the woman lay on the bed, waiting for the man to mount her. Ranjan was the younger of the Gupta brothers, and Kunal couldn't help but wonder. He kept waiting for some sign of recognition, anything that would confirm, or hopefully negate, his doubt. About halfway through the clip, as the man began pounding into the woman, she turned on her side and Kunal spotted a small gondan of the bel patra leaf on her upper arm. Kunal ran to the toilet. The other boys hollered at his haste to seek relief. He just hoped they hadn't heard him retching as he brought up his late-afternoon snack.

Kunal couldn't get that video out of his head. He kept wondering what he should do. He had peeped into Rasika's house and it was a terrible thing to do. But what Ranjan had showed him was beyond just teenage curiosity. How would he tell Rasika about it? How could he face her and tell her he had seen her having sex with another man? She would surely think he was involved in this as well. Should he even get into this mess?

The next day, Ranjan and his elder brother, Pratik, cornered Kunal on campus after school, in the deserted

parking lot for bicycles. Ranjan had a black eye and looked nervous. Pratik grabbed Kunal by the collar and asked what he knew about the clip his idiot brother had shown him. Kunal tried to bluff but he was a terrible liar. Pratik slapped him and pinned him to the wall. Ranjan looked shamefaced but didn't attempt to help Kunal.

'You know who the bitch in the clip is, don't you?' Pratik said.

'You recorded Chauhan aunty, you asshole. Wait till—' Kunal's words were cut off as Pratik's fist exploded against his left cheek. Before Kunal could recover, Pratik punched him in the stomach. Kunal fell to his knees, holding his stomach, and spat out a broken tooth from his bloody mouth.

'Dada, you really—' Ranjan began to say something before Pratik turned to him and slapped him hard. Ranjan whimpered like a dog and stood aside. Then Pratik crouched down next to Kunal and held him by his hair. Kunal hated how afraid he was of this bully.

'Listen to me, harami, one word about this to anyone and I will come for you. And I have a knife. Do you want to see it?'

Kunal shook his head in fear.

'And your sister goes to school here, right? How would you feel if I make a clip of her in the shower?'

'You bastard!' Kunal tried to launch himself at Pratik and took a swing at him. Pratik easily blocked his strike and gut-punched him again. Kunal screamed in pain and fell against the tin fence. He remained curled up in foetal position, sobbing like a child, till a group of junior college

boys saw him and helped him back to his feet. Ranjan and Pratik were long gone by then. He had to say he had been mugged. The boys didn't believe him, but they knew better than to prod.

He spent about an hour in the school gym, trying to fix his face with a cold shower. Then he went over to the school clinic and begged the nurse to give him a painkiller and bandage his face. She shook her head sadly when Kunal told her he had fallen off his cycle.

He had to walk home with his cycle; the pain in his gut prevented him from riding it. As he inched towards his house, a snake slithered across the road, right in front of him. Kunal dropped his cycle in shock. The snake seemed to pause for a second, right in the middle of the road. It was unmistakably a cobra, black and yellow. Then it quickly slithered away into the grass on the side of the road. Kunal's knees were wobbly and he could barely move. As he bent down to pick up his cycle, he felt something brush against his socked ankle. He jumped back and dropped his cycle again. It was the loose end of his schoolbag's strap, dangling from the cycle carrier. He took out his water bottle and greedily emptied it out. Then he took a few deep breaths. His heart was still thumping hard, but he could at least feel his feet again. Curiosity overtaking him, he looked in the direction the snake had come from, and Rasika's house was directly in his line of sight. The silly woman had left the kitchen window open again.

As he reached the gate of his house, Rasika's door opened and Pratik walked out. Kunal knew he should leave immediately, but for the third time that evening he couldn't

move. Pratik spotted Kunal, gave him a nonchalant wave and lasciviously ran a finger on his lips. Then he flashed a big grin, as he walked away with a swagger in his step.

That was the last time Kunal would see him.



He was asleep in his room when the door opened and Harini timidly poked her head in.

When Kunal had returned home that evening, his mother had taken one look at his swollen face and torn shirt and demanded to know what had happened. Kunal lied to her about being attacked by some senior college students for accidentally brushing his cycle against one of them. His mother had wanted to call their school principal right then, and she wanted to ask his father to get home from office immediately. Kunal pleaded with her to let him have another painkiller and sleep it off.

He slept fitfully and had many vivid dreams. In one of them, he saw Rasika holding his hands like she had the other day, and then suddenly, she punched him in his gut twice, a warm smile still on her face. She kept asking him who the woman in the clip was. Then he saw Marlon Brando as Don Corleone shake his head and say, 'Bonasera, Bonasera,' like he does in *The Godfather*. Only, instead of a cat, he held a long, black cobra in his lap. Kunal wanted to warn the don, to tell him about the cobra in his lap and then he remembered he was not supposed to talk. He was not—

'Talk?' Harini said.

'What?' Kunal woke up with a start.