

Right Fit Wrong Shoe
By: Varsha Dixit

Aaj ki taaza khabar

‘That’s a pakka BTM! Bunty and Babli buying together? Hello . . . Uncle, buying for Aunty or Shanti?’ Nandini went on labeling the people, coming in and out of the shop, across the street, from the conference room she sat in. Why has the shopkeeper written ‘Hosiery’ in English, and ‘Lingerie’ in Hindi? The latter sounds more like striling for langur, she wondered for the millionth time. Bored to the point of self-immolation, Nandini looked around, catching her reflection in the adjoining glass window.

She addressed the empty conference room. ‘Laddies and gentelman, for all those who don’t know . . . my stats are 26-66-96. Naari of 26, with pakau soch of 66 and living as if she’s 96.’ Her voice dropping a few notches, Nandini whispered the announcement, ‘Me whela and my life—’

Whatever Nandini was about to say, hovered incomplete, as a girl, a few years younger than she was, entered the room. Reading off her cell, Riya, gushed, ‘Nandini, did you hear? Aditya Sarin is coming to town!’

Let me rephrase – my life and me are now officially and *royally* screwed! Nandini panicked. The pencil slid from her hand, clattering onto the patterned mosaic floor. Immediately bending to retrieve it, Nandini let her long, black locks hide her distressed face – just enough time to reboot her expression.

‘The international success story, is actually going to breathe the same air . . . as us?’ Roy droned, strolling in behind Riya. His eyes, unlike his voice, not totally disinterested.

Who could blame him? Not every day did a bigwig of that proportion visit this sleepy town. Cawnpore, Kaunpur? Or KANPUR – that is what it was and is, before and after, the last of the least known elections.

‘Not to forget his dishy looks . . . ooh! I could have him for just about every meal of my entire mortal life.’ Coming in behind Roy, Tina simpered, fluttering her eyelashes. An effort totally wasted because of the perpetual no-nonsense shape of her mouth, further intensified by a makeup-free face and a painfully short haircut. There were whispers that she actually visited a *naayi* for the authentic touch.

The other person, amidst them (remember the girl who dropped the pencil), heard the ongoing conversation with something akin to shock. What interest now, could this place be to him? Nandini wondered.

‘People and the cars of this city need a better life, big time!’ In the past, the heir apparent to the Sarin business empire, had griped often enough to her.

Nandini’s conscience, or whatever that loud thing sitting inside her was, niggled, ‘You very well know, why he’s coming back! For revenge munchkins, and all of it from you . . . hahaha!’ Yup! Nandini’s conscience came with, tailor-made staccato villainous laughs, among other unbelievable features and upgrades.

‘Tina, take those damn ipod thingies out of your head. One would think you were born with it. Riya, please stop smsing. I am sure you’ve texted half of the country by now,’ Nandini rebuked.

‘Nah! Only half of the office!’ Riya replied, her tone, just like her face – impish.

Nandini shook her head. Her young face seemingly composed in front of the even younger designing team. ‘Enough guys! Can we get some work done here?’

‘Nandini this is big, it’s huge! Who knows? One of us may actually snare the country’s most eligible bachelor,’ Riya said, with dilated eyes. ‘I can see my favourite Mills & Boon coming to life in front of me. In which . . .’

‘In which, the girl kills the rich guy, gets all his money and then marries his best friend, only to find out the best friend is actually a woman, whose had a sex change,’ Tina teased.

Riya made a face at her. ‘Very funny! As I was saying, my favourite kind of M&B is the one where, celebrity-meets-an-undiscovered-stunner-and-falls-head-and-*vast* material possessions intact-in-love-with-her. With, me essaying the role of the undiscovered stunner,’ Riya said.

‘Forget it! Aditya Sarin plays in a different league altogether. Regular girls like us could be a part of the toilet roll for all he cares, right Nandi?’ Tina glanced at her for support.

‘Wrong, completely wrong! *Yeh saraasar jhooth hain melord!*’ Nandini wanted to stand on her chair, and vigorously shout the done-to-death dialogue, from our good-ol-

Bollywood. However, she concurred, dully, ‘Of course! Aditya wouldn’t notice us even if we stood stark naked.’

‘I would!’ Roy leered, mockingly. Instantaneously a few paper clips, launched by the women hit him smack on the face.

‘You would what?’ inquired a girl close to Nandini’s age, as she shouldered the door open, her hands laden with books and files.

Nandini hustled to her feet to help her peer manager, best friend and self-imposed guardian angel, since standard ten, Sneha Verma. In school, Sneha had once saved Nandini from the bullies and after that, she had vowed to protect Nandini for life; from everyone and everything – except herself.

Riya quickly filled her in. ‘Sneha, guess what? Aditya Sarin is coming to Cawnpore.’

‘I know,’ Sneha replied, casually, offloading some of her burden in her friend’s arms.

Nandini’s pretty mouth fell open. The files in her hand nearly met the pencil’s fate . . . nearly. ‘You know?’ Her tone and eyes were condemning.

‘Ya! Kit (short for Ankit, her husband) mentioned it today morning,’ Sneha said, sliding in an empty chair.

Gnawing her bottom lip, Nandini remained where she was. ‘Why do you look nervous Nandi, you owe Sarin money or what?’ Roy teased.

‘You are such a bag of laughs . . . Johny Lever!’ Nandini retorted, avoiding Sneha’s eyes. She propelled her body to the conference table, even though her insides repeatedly screamed at her, ‘Bus addaa! Flee to the nearest bus addaa!’

‘Let’s get cracking guys! I am nervous about the presentation for that pen company, due soon. That account is colossal and Ace Advertising Agency, as in us, really needs it.’ Nandini’s rebuke was more for herself than others. Her thoughts were flying all over the place.

After some half-hearted protests, formally lodged by the three musketeers (Roy, Tina and Riya), the group got busy with work at hand, Aditya Sarin forgotten by all but two.

‘Gosh, it’s seven, can we wrap up now?’ Riya requested, stretching her arms over her shoulder.

‘Damn! Sorry to keep you guys so long. We’ll finish this tomorrow.’ Nandini rubbed her forehead. ‘Why didn’t you say something? Ms Stickler for leaving at six!’ she rounded at Sneha. The latter did have an irresistible reason to head home every day and once in awhile at lunch to.

‘I just decided to make an exception today,’ Sneha replied, smiling enigmatically. Nandini gulped.

‘Puhlease, it’s no biggie! Chowdhury keeps his team till nine, almost every night,’ Tina assured.

‘Don’t you dare compare me to that jackass!’ Nandini pasted a scowl on her face.

‘God! Rochak Chowdhary repulses me. The other day I was alone with him in the elevator, and those were the longest and creepiest twenty seconds of my life,’ Riya shuddered, recalling.

‘Did Roach (company anointed Rochak’s unofficial but befitting nickname) try something?’ Sneha immediately demanded.

‘No! But he’s just so sleazy. Especially his eyes! It feels like he is stripping me,’ Riya replied.

‘You and just about every woman, unfortunate enough to cross his path,’ added Roy, slinging his satchel over the shoulder.

‘Mrs Shukla only tolerates Roach because of his contacts in and outside the industry. Actually Rochak is like periods!’ Tina said.

Roy visibly squirmed. Sneha goaded, ‘Explain!’

‘He’s smelly, dark and bothers women between fifteen-fifty,’ Tina replied, grinning.

‘Well said!’ Riya agreed.

‘Except there’s no Roach control pill that will make him go away for twenty eight days, every month,’ laughing, Sneha added.

‘You’re on birth control?’ Nandini asked.

‘Just knowing about it doesn’t mean I’m taking-’

‘Do you women even realise there’s a man amongst you all?’ Roy’s tone was clearly exasperated.

‘Who?’ Tina and Riya chorused simultaneously.

Sneha and Nandini cackled. Roy opened his mouth but Sneha beat him to it. ‘All right, see you guys tomorrow.’ She hastened the discussion to an end. However, witty and funny, any conversation about Rochak Chowdhury, the marketing head, still ruled as the least favourite or the most vehemently hated topic for Nandini.

A few minutes later, the three trooped out. Their bosses, the two chaddi-buddies, always stayed back at the end of the day to chat a bit.

Nandini gathering her stuff from the table, offered, ‘If you and Ankit have any plans tonight, I’m free to baby sit Advey.’ Sneha’s irresistible reason to go home was her eighteen-month-old toddler. Nandini too obsessed over him.

‘All that later! Why is he coming back?’ Sneha grilled, honing straight to the point. There was no need to mention names between them. She and Nandini, 110% of the times were on the same wavelengths.

Sighing, Nandini said, ‘No clue Sneh! Just hope he’s forgotten all that happened between us.’

Sneha’s rude bark of laughter said it all, yet she voiced, ‘I doubt Aditya will ever forget. I merely wish he knew the *truth*.’

Nandini whipped her head up, the expression dank. ‘Sneha, don’t even go there. You gave me your word never to bring it up.’

The other girl’s face burst in a cheeky smile. ‘Nandi, you only call me Sneha when you are either mad at me or in hot soup. What’s it this time?’ Her brows bounced up and down, mischievous and suggestive.

Nandini in an answer further narrowed her eyes and pulled her lips back.

‘Fine! Spare me that pit-bull look. My lips are sealed. Tell me, Nandini what’s your POA in life?’

‘If you must know, I just want to live my life the way it is happening. I do not want to expect, plan or steer it any direction.’

‘That’s lame Nandi. No one lives like that.’

‘Some do! Call my kind lazy, content or just spokes in the super demanding and ambitious wheel of life.’

‘Well you were never a **phataka** but I definitely remember a time when you were not so **maara hua**. C’mon **Kulta**, let go of the past.’

‘You are the oldest part of my past,’ Nandini countered.

‘The song for constipation, electricity of this city and your **budhi** is the same.’

‘Are you nuts? Why am I stating the obvious?’ Nandini picked up her things.

Sneha did a hip and shoulder shake, as she belted the number, ‘**Aaati nahin, aaaati nahin. Teri yaad aati hein par tu aati nahin!**’

‘Shuddup! Are you done making an ass of yourself? Will you please tell me if you want me to babysit Advey or not?’ Nandini asked, gruffly.

‘No thanks, not tonight! Some silly cricket series is beginning somewhere, in some part of the world, between some countries and of course Kit has to watch it!’ Sneha wholeheartedly grumbled.

‘That bad eh?’ Nandini teased, well aware that Ankit’s obsession for cricket drove Sneha batty (pun intended). Soon the two girls headed out of the building.

‘Crap! It’s raining,’ Sneha whined, covering her head with a purse.

‘Shuddup, it’s just a drizzle, you won’t melt,’ Nandini, an ardent fan of the rains, ridiculed. Just the sweet smell of monsoon was enough to give a hop to her steps, a smile to her lips and crave for chilled Baileys.

Shooting her an annoyed look, Sneha shot ‘You are so perfect for Bollywood. All you lack is a transparent chiffon sari and gigantic fake boobs.’

‘Not anymore. In name of reality, even Bollywood is downsizing!’

Sneha cracked up. ‘That was good! I’m going to dash to my car.’ Her expression sobered, ‘Promise me, you won’t think of him. No more than say . . . an hour at the most!’

‘Him . . . who?’ The smile did not quite reach Nandini’s eyes.

‘Whatever! Just call me. We’ll talk!’ Sneha shouted, sprinting to her vehicle.

Naraaz

Nandini, too, got in her car, waving to Sneha, pulling out of the parking lot.

‘Do you want to grab a cup of coffee?’ interrupted a smooth voice.

Nandini did not answer, concentrating instead on fastening the seat belt. Finally, raising cold eyes and in a voice reeking of disgust, she replied, ‘No thank you Rochak.’

‘Nandi, I have some interesting news. *You could be the first to hear it,*’ Rochak cajoled. Playing pocket billiards, he had been lingering in the shadows for quite some time now.

‘It’s Nandini to you. Even more appropriate would be Ms Sharma. *And please nothing you say could ever be of any interest to Me!*’ Nandini noisily pushed the key in the ignition.

As few other employees sauntered in the car park, Nandini thanked her stars. She knew what this sleaze ball was capable of.

Rochak came closer to the window whispering, ‘Men can’t resist a tease and they say in bed-’

Nandini curtly and loudly interrupted, ‘Watch it! I’m sure the statue of limitations is not over, charges can still be pressed.’

Rochak recoiled as if slapped. Nandini knew his aversion to her was temporary. Just as a fish can’t live out of water, a shopaholic without credit cards, Rochak could not stay away from women. The wiring of his head was messed up; it was only disconnected. Glaring at Nandini, he abruptly walked away; softly mouthing rude names. She overheard the words, ‘frigid bitch’.

Calmly reversing the red Swift, Nandini joined the ongoing milieu of chaotic traffic on the main business street, Birhana Road. Flashing neon signs of various international brands, plastered on old crumbling buildings, loudly proclaimed global commercialisation.

For just about everything else the populace stands divided, from where we pray to the water we use, yet as consumers, all are *one* – empty brains with loaded wallets! Nandini, a novice cynic, mused.

She turned the steering hard, just in time to spare a cyclist who out of nowhere, appeared bang in front of the car. Driving in these streets was a nightmare, but Nandini always experienced a sense of peace when she got behind the wheel. Tonight, it was sorely missing!

What will I do when he actually gets here, she worried. ‘Take the next right . . . to the railway station!’ her conscience, suggested. ‘Shut up!’ Nandini retorted. Sometime later, having parked the car in the garage, Nandini stepped into the foyer of her house. She struggled to keep her expression pleasant.

‘Nandi, you are late again? Why didn’t you answer your cell, I called several times!’ Her mother, Mrs Shruti Sharma, the last of the Mohicans (a title lovingly bestowed by her husband of thirty-five years) demanded.

‘Sorry Maa, I didn’t hear it. Must have been busy,’ Nandini said, dropping her bag and laptop on the table.

‘Why are you always so busy at work? If you want, I’ll talk to that lady boss of yours,’ Shruti suggested. It sounded more like a threat.

‘Ma, one is supposed to be busy at work . . . that’s what you get paid for,’ Nandini replied.

‘Sarkari job kar lo! Manmohan Singh has increased salaries in the public sector.’

‘Ma, don’t you have something useful to do?’

‘Go sit with your dad. Tullu, get the tea and sandwiches ready for didi!’ wailed the mistress of the house, marching off towards the kitchen.

Her mother ran the house smoothly, in spite of the few rough edges she possessed, particularly for those, who in her I-know-it-all opinion did not treat her children right. That scope covered every known living organism.

‘I’m sure it’s always the mother who is the root cause of people turning psychos or brilliant successes. Both highly abnormal!’ muttered Nandini. She took refuge in the family room, with the only person besides Sneha, who got her from the word ‘Go’.

The first love of Nandini’s life, the only man she had, in all the wisdom of a five year old, publically proclaimed to marry . . . her father. Nirbhay Sharma. A retired CFO

of a financial company, running his own business consultancy, was Nandini's one-stop-shop of pure love and solace.

'There you are chotu, you look tired,' Nirbhay observed her, over his beige rimmed glasses. He quickly went back to one of his three addictions – the Discovery channel. The second was Khana Khazana and the third, sanjeevkapoor.com. No, he did not have a man-crush on the above-mentioned chef, just a plain, simple, Indian obsession with food. Why are Indian men so much into food? Even when, most of them cannot cook Maggi, which comes with written instructions.

'What are you thinking Chotu?'

'Papa, I have already lived around twenty-two percent of my life. I am no chotu,' Nandini quipped, collapsing in her favourite chair, right next to him.

Mr Sharma quickly did the math. 'eighty-five years or so! Not, if your mom lives hundred percent of her sixty-five years.'

'Oh! You are mean!' Nandini giggled.

Affectionately patting her knee, Mr Sharma then went on to repeat the age old, beaten to death cliché, 'You will always remain a child-'

'For your parents, no matter how old you get,' finished her mother entering with Tullu and tea in tow.

'How come you never think in similar terms when you want my room tidied or have me married off to any stranger, literally off the streets,' Nandini retorted, directly to her mother.

'You and your silly remarks! I have some good news,' Mrs Sharma said handing her the cup.

Keeping her head bent, Nandini sipped the scalding liquid. Her body tautened anticipating the lightning strike.

‘Vibha Didi called; she and Aditya are coming here and guess when?’ Shruti didn’t wait for any response. ‘Day after tomorrow, by the afternoon flight!’

Nandini clutched the cup, lest it might meet the same fate as the pencil and nearly the files. So it was confirmed – her worst fear was about to come true, she even knew its ETA.

‘Arre say something, aren’t you happy? You will finally get to meet your Badi Maa, what after three years,’ Shruti said.

Three years, seven months and the number of days I am a little confused about, Nandini quietly deliberated.

Badi Maa! Aditya’s mom, Mrs Vibha Sarin was and is best friends with Nandini’s mother. They only refer to each other as sisters born of separate mothers.

Their husbands, Nirbhay Sharma and Paresh Sarin, as providence would have it, were childhood friends. In a strange coincidence, two best friends married two best friends. Tragedy struck close *twice* . . . just kidding!

‘No Maa, of course I’m happy.’ Nandini assured. ‘And anyway, I already know. I heard it in the office earlier today.’

‘Why didn’t you immediately call up and tell me?’ Shruti admonished.

Shrugging her shoulders, Nandini finished her tea in a gulp. ‘I’m a little tired, can I go upstairs and chill?’ She got to her feet. The excited plans her parents were laying out for the Sarins’ homecoming, pricked her ears.

‘Go ahead Nandi, do as you please, this is your house,’ Nirbhay replied watching his daughter with thoughtful eyes.

Nandini climbed the stairs to the three-bedroom apartment, on the first floor. Earlier occupied by her elder brother and his family, it had come to her once they had moved to Mumbai.

Elder to her by five years, Namit Sharma, an IMA Ahmedabad pass out, was currently a financial head honcho of a leading infrastructure giant. He was married to an absolute sweetheart, Meghna aka Mugs. A pediatrician by profession and an adroit multi-tasker, who managed the job of a mother, doctor, wife, daughter and daughter-in-law in the best possible way known to mankind. They were blessed with two lovely twins, a six-year-old boy and girl, Piya and Piyush, cheesy names but adorable tots.

Wearily, Nandini flopped on the sofa, resting her head in her hands. She unconsciously massaged her scalp, vividly recalling Aditya’s painful grip on her hair, the blazing hatred in his eyes accompanying the vicious words, ‘You greedy b#@!*! I will come back, I promise . . . to destroy you and everything you ever held precious.’

3

Jab we met

‘But Paapu can’t dance saala!’ Her cell phone’s blaring ring jolted Nandini, back to the present. Rummaging inside her bag, she grabbed the phone, ‘Hello?’

‘You are thinking about him, aren’t you?’ sounded Sneha’s reproachful voice on the other end.

‘No Sneh.’ The lie, shuffled from tight lips.

Ensuing silence loudly proclaimed, ‘Liar, liar, thongs on fire!’

‘Okay fine! Just like you, I, too, am a little concerned,’ Nandini confessed, heavily.

‘Honey, our concerns are totally different. It is not my hide that Aditya Sarin might be gunning for.’ Sneha’s words were blunt, not her tone.

A crooked smile teased Nandini’s lips. ‘I agree it’s only mine he plans to skin.’

‘Don’t worry so much. Maybe it’s all over and done between the two of you. We constantly read about his dating of some socialite, actress or model in an unending succession. Aditya always liked to play the field. I am sure he has forgotten all about you.’

‘I hope you are right.’ Another lie, the thought that Aditya might have forgotten her, struck in the artery closest to the pumping beats. ‘Listen Mom is coming, I’ll talk to you later . . . don’t worry about me Sneh. Go and make your man happy.’ Nandini hung up on the rude cackle. ‘Maybe I should change the ringtone to Hanuman Chalisa. That might just keep him away!’ Bad one, her conscience pointed.

‘What a mess? Why did it have to be like this?’ She whispered, tormented. After a long bath, and avoiding her parents, Nandini curled up in her bed. Sleep, unlike the memories, eluded her.

Flash back! (True Bollywood style)

Twenty one year old Nandini, a fresh commerce graduate of Christchurch College, excitedly strode inside the Sarin mansion adjacent to her house.

‘Gosh it’s mind blowing!’ ambling through the driveway, she reflected for the millionth time.

Surrounded on either side by lush, green beautifully landscaped gardens, lolled the majestic house. The two-story spread was impeccably white in colour, its exterior shaped befittingly like a Rajasthani palace. Adding to the grandeur, a lofty several-tiered fountain sat at the entrance.

The senior Sarins, Vibha and Paresh, had flocked to Kanpur only a couple of years ago.

‘Ajit and Seema, overseeing the business, are constantly accumulating frequent flyer miles. Aditya, for the last eight years, has been living in one hostel after another. It is just Vibha and me most of the time. Sometimes it gets very lonely,’ Paresh had confided to Nandini’s father.

‘Yaar Paresh, then why are you sitting so far in Cochin? Come and live here. All of us will make sure that you and Vibhaji don’t get a single moment of peace,’ Nirbhay coaxed.

That is it. The decision for the Sarins to move was literally made overnight. Several properties next to the Sharma residence were bought, consolidated and in the next ten or twelve months, an army of workers, similar to the ones employed by Shah Jahan, had constructed the grand abode. The palatial house boasted of tennis and basketball courts, Japanese gardens, two swimming pools – outdoor and indoor, a state of the art gym, a media room, ten bedrooms and god knows how many bathrooms.

The Sarins were quickly becoming an essential part of Nandini’s life. In fact, Vibha insisted that she address her as ‘*Badi Maa*’; after all, she was a year older to

Shruti. Nirbhay and Paresh shared a common dread at the thought of Nandini's inevitable bidai.

The only person from the Sarin family, Nandini had never met was Aditya Sarin, the younger scion studying in America. Having completed his MBA, Adi had finally come to live with his parents and join the family business.

Yesterday, due to a close friend's wedding, (no, not Sneha, she did have other friends) Nandini could not attend the lavish bash the Sarins had thrown to celebrate Adi's homecoming. Almost all the city hotels and available farmhouses, legal or illegal, had been reserved to house the who's who of the country and outside, in attendance for last nights' shindig.

Since morning, Nandini's parents and the TV channels, had been broadcasting truckloads on Aditya and the lavish bash – some good and some even better. Heightened curiosity and Badi Maa's phone call persuaded Nandini to overcome her stranger anxiety and show up to meet the 'man'.

Nandini waited in the humongous living room as one of the servants rushed to fetch Vibha. From the arched, stain glass windows of the living room, she could spy several workers milling about in the lawns, cleaning up after last night's revelry. 'Party for some pain for others!' she declared softly.

'Who are you?' questioned a suave voice, echoing in the otherwise silent room.

Nandini got startled, and whirled around to see where this voice was coming from. She immediately recognised who stood in front of her. No sillies! No past-birth memories like in Karz or Karrrrrrzzzzz (did I miss a Z?!). Nandini recognised Aditya Sarin from his photographs.

Aditya was taller in person, definitely six feet or more. The thick, dark, crop of hair – well cut, and miraculously gel free, unlike the metro sexual men who in the disguise of being hip, have gone from *gole ka tael* to *tael ka gola*.

His black pupils framed with long curling eyelashes, studied her with no hint of recognition. After all, Nandini was no Paris Hilton or a child successfully rescued from a borewell. Aditya's face cradled a wide forehead, a Greek nose, and a sensual mouth with a hint of dimples in his chiseled cheeks. His broad shoulders and mouth watering body, was clad in a white, probably ridiculously priced, designer T-shirt, dark blue jeans and tan shoes. Aditya Sarin loomed large as an epitome of oozing masculinity.

Holy cow, he is bloody gorgeous, sprung the sudden thought in Nandini's mind. 'You are Aditya, right?' she stuttered, blushing furiously.

'And you are about to faint?' Aditya mocked, in a deep and cultured baritone. His eyes crinkled at the ends and his dimples deepened.

Humour served in arrogance, a typical trademark of children brought up by the philosophy: Spare the child and break the rod or better still, sell it to the *raddiwala*. Nandini's expression awkward, she asked, 'What do you mean?'

'Your face is redder than a beet root.'

The snub definitely ruffled, more than imaginary feathers. 'Were you pursuing a MBA or a cookery course?'

For a moment, Aditya's eyes narrowed and then he burst out in a full-throated laugh. At the sound, Nandini felt like curling her toes.

'Okay, Ms Smarty Pants, introduce yourself.'

‘Nandini . . . Nandini Sharma,’ she answered lifting her chin, unconsciously defiant.

‘So you are Nandini? My parents’ adopted daughter.’ A thorough gaze sized her up from head to toe. Aditya liked what he saw . . .who wouldn’t?

Almond shaped eyes perfectly sized, with a pert nose trailed by pouty pink lips, sat pretty in a heart shaped fair face. Bereft of any make up, Nandini appeared to be a tall teenager, except, her body was that of woman. Her curves, clearly visible in a tight yin-yang, powder pink and silver colored T-shirt and figure hugging jeans.

Aditya’s amusement grew, as he noticed Nandini’s flush become more pronounced, at his minute inspection. My stares are actually making her uncomfortable, he thought, surprised. In the circles, Aditya moved there was not one woman, married or single, who would not botox or lipo herself to her very bones just to emerge good enough to catch his eye. But Nandini, discomfited to the core, literally hopped from one foot to another.

Nandini, experienced strange tingles, as Aditya’s eyes freely roamed over her. Even though thoroughly covered, she felt completely exposed. To break the eye contact, Nandini abruptly swung her face away, bringing the ‘wow’ feature to his notice.

Aditya, riveted, gazed at the poker straight, shiny black tresses, cascading down the shoulders, ending at the waist. Ms Dimple Kapadia and Demi Moore, your days are numbered! His hands twitched to touch the black velvet.

‘So you’ve met Nandi?’ Seema, Aditya’s sister-in-law’s voice broke the moment.

‘Nandi? Isn’t that the name of the bull a god rides on,’ Aditya baited the spitfire.

‘Yup! The one with the horns sharp enough to shred just about everyone, especially the lecherous kinds,’ Nandini shot back. Damn! My comeback was super lame, I suck at this witty repartee s@#%, fretting she bit her lip.

Aditya was not backing down; he opened his mouth to fire another salvo. Nandini braced herself for the next zinger.

‘Hey Nandi, maa is looking for you. She is in her room,’ Seema interrupted, giving them each a closer look.

‘Thanks Bhabhi,’ Nandini murmured, quickly climbing the marble stairway, happy to escape the not so extinct T.rex.

‘So what do you think of Nandini?’ Seema asked softly of Aditya, whose eyes remained pegged on the other girl.

‘Surprisingly, quite attractive and not my type at all.’

‘Attractive and not your type? That doesn’t make any sense, dear brother-in-law.’ Aditya did have a certain reputation with women.

‘Dear sister-in-law, I like my women a lot more polished and sophisticated. My woman has to be the strong, independent kind, who sees my shoulder as something to rub against, rather than something to cry or lean on.’ Aditya now looked directly at Seema, as he flopped onto the adjoining sofa. A full-scale, head-to-head offensive was unleashed; Seema’s head versus his.

‘That’s it! An Amazon is your ideal woman?’ Seema retorted.

‘That’s not all! No saas-bahu serials for her, only CNN, ESPN and bang-bang . . . with only me, of course. She would stand out, not merely for her looks which is anyway something the parents should be blamed or credited for-’

‘Oh, so she could be butt ugly and you would be okay with that?’ Seema ridiculed.

Aditya shook his head. ‘She has to be nice to look at, but not necessarily a Gisele Bunched. The way she carries herself and the way she speaks and thinks is much more important. She has to be what you see is what you get kind of gal! My qualifications and interests should thrill her more than my money.’

‘That doesn’t sound bad at all? But what if, she has *had* prior relationships? A colourful past . . . like someone in our family?’ Seema’s face danced with mischief.

Aditya broadly grinning, said, mildly, ‘Her past is only the past; with absolutely no bearing on the present. Relationships are important aspects of building one’s character and gaining experience, for both men and women. I won’t share her with anyone, but I am not interested in fighting ghosts.’

‘Well, well not an MCP after all? Wonders never cease!’ Seema said.

Smiling, Aditya continued, ‘There is more. I am not looking for the jeans clad, English talking, gharulu kinds. Lassi served in a wine glass, is still lassi. There should be no lies, no mind games and no excessive vanity. And unequivocally, she cannot be a gauche teenager who wears sneakers in the middle of the day!’ The last part was a dig at Nandini’s sport shoes.

‘Oh c’mon, Nandini is damn sweet and extremely nice,’ Seema defended, ‘And why are you so anal about women wearing sneakers?’

‘You can’t stand AB in transparent shirts and you yourself avoid certain colours. Similarly a woman in sneakers totally puts me off, except when she is exercising.’

Aditya’s eccentricity made complete sense to him.

‘You are crazy! Nandi is wonderful.’

‘Eh tu brutus!’

Seema gave him a confounded look.

‘You too are a part of Nandini fan club? Weren’t mom and dad enough?’

‘AB is a part of it too,’ smirking, Seema shot back.

‘Well then I bid adieu to all you demented people.’ Standing up, Aditya, dramatically, clasped his head.

‘Where are you off to?’ Seema inquired.

‘To meet my new conquest of course! I shall not be back for lunch,’ Aditya announced over his shoulder. He headed for the pristine, brand new, royal blue Mercedes SL -500, a gift from his parents, for completing his masters from Wharton with excellence. One of his father’s cardinal rules – gifts are big, only, if the endeavour and results exceed expectations. Only a few knew that Aditya, a meritorious student, could have accomplished a large chunk of his education through scholarships, but chose to pay, so someone not equally fortunate, could score a seat.

Aditya hid his humility with contrived arrogance. Humility was a concept better understood by the middle-class or Indian reality show winners. His friends only ‘got’ gizmos and complexes – the ones you live with or live in. One thing Aditya had picked up from his father at a very young age was success frees you to be yourself. And success is not inherited, it is achieved. Aditya was just bidding his time and turn. Time and turn, to co-manage the Sarin Empire.

Reversing out of the large iron wrought gates, Aditya's head was full of a pair of almond shaped eyes, flushed cheeks and raven hair, instead of his glamorous date: A socialite from out of town, he had just bumped into yesterday.

The subject of Aditya's thoughts was thinking of him, too, but not as favourably. 'Opinionated jackass! Haraamkhor!' grumbled Nandini, crossly. Nothing can be as cathartic, as a Hindi cuss word said with feeling. A single cuss alone can describe and relieve anger enough to go in the straitjacket.

Even though Seema and Aditya had been conversing softly, Nandini 'the beagle' as called by her brother, had overheard every single word spoken between them.

'Aditya Sarin who cares what you think? Unpolished, gauche, my foot! He probably thinks he's god's gift to women . . . I'll show him!' declared Nandini, her usually pleasant expression, marred by a severe scowl.

'You look angry. Nandi, what happened?' questioned Vibha, emerging from her room.

Quickly, Nandini altered her frown to a smile. 'Everything is fine and it shall only get better, Badi Maa.' Gazing at her sneakers, Nandini's eyes sparkled with much malice, like the baddies of old movies. The ones who for the lack of props like machine guns, tongue-twisting contraptions or scantily clad molls and transvestites, relied heavily on the eyes, to portray character.

'Did you meet Adi?' Vibha inquired.

'Yup, he was on his way out somewhere.'

'And what do you think?' Vibha probed.

Nandini's honest response would go something like this, 'Bada bhagwan, chota shaitan.' Therefore, out of affection for the Sarins, her lips remained interlocked as the brain put forth few more suggestions. 'Different!' was all she could spit out.

Vibha chuckled. 'I know Adi is a little spoilt, but his heart and head is in the right place. I am sure he will grow on you.'

Like a bloodsucking parasite, Nandini silently derided. 'Bhabhi said you were looking for me?' She changed the topic.

'Oh yes! I just received some saris and suit materials from Calcutta, beautiful *kantha* work. Choose as many pieces as you like.'

'Badi Maa please, you have given me way too many things already,' Nandini protested.

'I'm your Badi Maa. You can never say no to me understand?' ordered the older woman, affectionately. 'We all missed you at the party yesterday,' Vibha said, launching into an immediate discourse about the last night's party.

4

Andaz Apna Apna (Flashback continues . . .)

Next day, the Sarin clan, including Aditya, sat at the dining table and were about to begin breakfast. Nandini traipsed in, a smile on her face.

Aditya instantly was lost to the smile. In his eyes, it vaulted her from beautiful to stunning.

Unaware of his complimentary thoughts, Nandini briefly and disdainfully glanced at him. ‘I do not care for you or your designer butt; see that in my eyes!’ she telepathically tried sending Aditya that message.

Aditya grinning, wickedly thought, ‘I know how to get you!’ Catching Nandini’s eye, his eyes at a leisurely pace, travelled all over her. Within seconds, a tell-tale blush crept up Nandini’s cheeks.

‘What would happen if I were to actually touch her?’ The unbidden thought shot to his mind. Aditya immediately quelled it. Nandini was not his type. ‘Moreover, god forbid, if I ever harm a hair on that lovely head, my own family will plunge the knife in my heart. Dad and AB will probably toss a coin, to see who gets the first stab,’ he whispered to his libido.

‘Jerk!’ Nandini hissed. Today she had adorned a loose T-shirt and baggy jeans, yet Aditya’s intimate examination made her want to pull burlap sack over her head. Nandini resisted the urge to tug at her clothes.

‘What good timing Nandi, come join us for breakfast,’ Paresh warmly invited.

‘Thank you Uncle but I just ate. I only came to give you these. My notes are scribbled alongside the articles.’ Nandini handed him some loose papers.

‘What are those?’ Aditya quizzed.

‘These are the articles for our annual magazine which I had asked Nandi to proofread,’ his father replied.

‘She is an experienced proofreader or maybe a qualified editor?’ Aditya inquired. Nandini did not miss the veiled sarcasm.

‘Nandini is extremely creative and multi talented. You should study last year’s corporate brochure and catalogue of our company. Page by page, line by line, it was all her work,’ Paresh praised.

‘Yes that was done very well indeed,’ Ajit agreed taking a gulp of the juice next to him.

‘Nandini is awesome!’ Seema mouthed, pointedly looking at Aditya.

Aditya had seen the brochure under discussion. That was quite neat, he thought. However, he did not say it.

‘Please . . . that was no big D. Uncle and AB guided me all through.’ Nandini was more at ease being the backbencher, unnoticed, invisible.

‘Rubbish! Nandi, if you want to rise in life, learn to take praise as well as the brickbats for your work,’ Paresh advised. AB and Aditya slyly rolled their eyes. Their father’s penchant for dropping such pearls of wisdom was a great source of sneaky amusement for his family.

Nandini nodded, solemnly, absorbing Paresh’s words. Aditya on seeing her serious expression hid a wry grin.

‘Nandi, what kind of eggs would you like?’ inquired Vibha, emerging from the kitchen, followed by two servants carrying trays laden with breakfast. It was a tradition at the Sarin household, to prepare a variety of dishes at each meal, irrelevant of the people at the table.

They are probably making up for the drought forever present, in some part of the world, Nandini silently mocked, as she declined the invitation, ‘No thank you Badi Maa I just ate.’

‘Then sit and have a cup of coffee with us,’ Vibha directed, pointing at the empty chair next to Aditya, who accordingly pulled it out for her.

‘Sure!’ Nandini slid into the offered chair, purposely, stepping hard on Aditya’s foot. ‘Oh! I’m so sorry.’

‘No harm done,’ Aditya responded, trying to ignore the throbbing toe.

‘Are you sure? The sole of my sneakers is very hard.’

Seema took a large swig of her coffee; Aditya immediately glanced at Nandini’s feet.

‘Good god!’ Aditya scowled; today Nandini’s sneakers were gigantic. A thick layer of dried mud, caked on either side. What he did not know was that the ghastly, oversized, and psychedelic sneakers were bought yesterday from the most ghatiya dukaan of Arya nagar. The mud zealously applied and dried overnight with a hairdryer.

‘Aren’t they nice?’ asked Nandini, modeling her foot solely for Aditya’s viewing displeasure.

Aditya could not keep the sneer out of his voice, ‘Don’t you have any other footwear except sneakers? What are you . . . one of the William sisters?’

Bingo! Nandini clamped her lips tightly, holding on to the fake injured expression, hovering on her face.

Vibha immediately censured, ‘Aditya that is not for you to say!’

‘Yes your mother is right. Don’t tell Nandi what or what not to wear. Remember, your own yellow dungarees? Or those tight pink pants, which you lived in?’ Senior Mr Sarin, too, rose in Nandini’s defense.

A dull red covered Aditya's face, as he shot back, 'The dungarees were cream. And the maroon, *not* pink pants was something that mom got for me from one of the trips she went on.'

Just when Aditya assumed the worse was over, his mother confessed, 'Adi I didn't say anything then as you really liked them but those pink pants from Harrods were actually a gift for Preeti bua's elder daughter. She was quite plump at that time.'

For a second there was complete silence and then Ajit guffawed, his laugh loud and booming. Paresh followed suit and so did Seema and Nandini. The muscle working in Aditya's jaw, only increased the mirth, overflowing, on the dining table.

This is way better . . . I practically lost control of my bladder, Nandini reflected, wiping her eyes with the back of her hands. However, she could do nothing about the wide smile; it refused to budge from her face

'Thanks Mom!' Aditya glowered at Vibha.

'What did I do?' Vibha replied in all innocence, trying to bite down her broadening grin.

'Very funny!' Aditya made a move to get up, his appetite gone.

Nandini leaning closer, whispered, 'Much unpolished and what was that word . . . *gauche* of you to wear women's clothing.'

Instantly, Aditya realised that Nandini had overheard his chatter with Seema yesterday. Now Nandini, had taken this to another level, and Aditya sure as hell was not the kind to turn the other cheek. 'You little brat, apologise right away and I might forgive you.' Aditya offered her a last chance of escape.

At Aditya's look, Nandini felt a strange sense of excitement rush through her veins. Her face, like the rest of her body tingled. Tossing, the glorious mane over her shoulder, she challengingly scoffed, 'Apologise? You must be out of your mind. This time you've messed with the wrong girl!'

'The intention was not to mess, Nandini Sharma. But now I promise . . . *you shall be thoroughly messed with!*' Aditya softly declared with a glint in his eyes. They both stared at each other, unable to look away

Oddly breathless, Nandini stuttered a hushed, 'Bring it on!' Using every ounce of will power, she managed to glance away, breaking the hypnotic effect of the enemy's eyes.

The others at the table had stopped laughing. All their attention fixed on Nandini and Aditya, as they could not hear the soft exchange going on between the two.

'I'm done!' Aditya got to his feet.

'I'll be off. Mom is waiting for me,' Nandini said. The two headed in opposite directions, both experiencing a sudden need to get away from the other.

'Damn! What was I thinking? I almost kissed a millennium behenji and that too in front of everyone,' Aditya breathed, shutting himself in the bathroom. 'On second thoughts, cancel the kiss. I wanted to shake her! I will do exactly that the next time she comes around,' Aditya promised his reflection, as he adjusted his shirt and something else. Women only fidget with their hair that much, and dogs with their tails.

'It's only the absolute joy of victory that is making my heart gallop like a horse on steroids,' Nandini muttered, speedily exiting the Sarin household.

Over the following year, the battle of wits between Nandini and Aditya ensued. Someday Adi won and sometimes it was Nandini's chance to crow. Gradually the rest of the family just ignored their constant skirmishes, the only way Nandini and Aditya communicated with each other.

5

Ek Hi Maqsad (2 the present)

'Dil haara re.dil daara haara . . . ' The song from *Tashan* blared jarringly, startling Nandini from her fitful sleep. 'Gawd! Piya . . . you really need to get over this Saifeena fetish!' Nandini grumbled, struggling to escape the tangled bedcovers.

Managing to shut the alarm off, as Saif went down on his knee, for whatever reasons, Nandini hobbled to get the morning ablutions out of the way.

As she took a seat at the dining table, her mother noticed, 'Nandi those are some dark circles under your eyes. Didn't you sleep well last night?'

'Kind of!'

'You might be coming down with something. Take the day off and rest at home,' Nirbhay suggested.

'I'm fine dad, just one of those nights.'

'Don't make any plans for tomorrow. Keep your day free,' Shruti ordered.

'Tomorrow is Saturday. Apart from going to the gym, I'm home the whole day mom.' Nandini heartily dug in her upma.

Her mother characteristically was about to grumble at Nandini's lack of complete social life other than work, but Nirbhay discouraged her with an imperceptible nod.

'So what are we doing tomorrow?' Nandini asked, observing the silent communication between her parents. Even though different in personality, Shruti and Nirbhay were never distant. North Pole and South Pole did meet outside the boudoir.

'We have to be at the airport tomorrow morning, to receive Vibhadi and Aditya,' her mother reminded.

Not wanting to gag, Nandini carefully swallowed the food in her mouth. Her first thought was throw herself in the bathroom, and remain barricaded there for the next few weeks. Yet she causally answered, 'Sure! I'm going to work. See you in the evening.' Swiftly, Nandini got up.

'Nandi, finish your breakfast,' Shruti said.

'Nah! It's not made right today.' Nandini, already half out of the house, was doing some serious mental work. 'I have to get out and think of plan A, B . . . possible Z, to escape tomorrow's airport rendezvous'.

Nirbhay went back to reading his newspaper. At appropriate intervals, he continued to nod at his continuously chattering wife, even though he had stopped listening to her quite some time back. The trick always worked. He was considering getting a patent for it.

Parking the car on the usual spot, flinging the half-eaten murku packet on the side and gripping her purse and files, Nandini got out. A loose paper fluttered to the ground. Tossing her hair out of the face, she squatted to pick it up. A frisson of awareness crept

into her mind, as though, someone was watching; Nandini immediately glanced around and up but there was no one.

‘Stupid jittery nerves! Get a hold of yourself, woman!’ she muttered, self-consciously grinning. Seizing the errant paper, Nandini briskly headed inside the office building.

Unseen, the angry eyes bore into her, from the tinted window of his new office. *Once I am done with you Nandini, you will have nothing to smile about for a very, very long-time*, fumed Aditya Sarin.