

NAZAR

By Anushka Mehrotra

A Rusty Fears 4 Winning Entry – Read by Karim Kronfli

Content Warnings:

- Bullying & social isolation
 - Compulsive behaviour
 - Panic & anxiety (inc rapid breathing)
 - Paranoia
 - Sexual references
 - Discussions of: paranormal encounters, superstition, food & eating
 - Mentions of: sleep deprivation, injury, weight loss
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Sachin had always been superstitious. I wasn't particularly observant back then, but I'd noticed it from the very first day that we started rooming together. I had come in from lunch and, as was my routine, did a careless kick and flung my slippers across the room. He'd been sitting on his bed, folding his clothes, and watched as my slippers landed upside-down on the pale wooden floor. Then, he turned that loaded gaze of his to me.

"You should turn those around."

I hadn't known what he'd meant, and simply stared back at him. We'd barely spoken past introducing ourselves to one another and, to be honest, I hadn't expected to have much of a relationship with him. His Mickey Mouse comforter had formed an instant and unflattering impression of him in my mind.

“Your slippers,” he clarified. “You shouldn’t leave them upside down. It’s bad luck.”

The statement seemed utterly ridiculous to me, but he’d worn such a piercing, unsettling expression as he spoke that I wordlessly turned them over without thinking. This satisfied him and he returned to folding his socks. I stared down at my slippers and wondered how them being upside down could possibly bring me bad luck.

I learnt soon after that Sachin’s rules and beliefs about luck were intricate and steadfast.

“Don’t step over someone’s outstretched legs or they will stop growing. If you step over them, you must do it again in the other direction to remove the curse.”

“Don’t wash your hair or your clothes on a Thursday. Any other day of the week is fine.”

“If your right eye twitches, that means good luck is coming your way, but if your left eye does, then it means something terrible is going to happen.”

For the most part, I ignored him. My initial belief that we wouldn’t get along was right. We had nothing in common. Sachin was... to put it kindly, a bit of a fuddy-duddy. He spent all his time studying, took everything far too literally and was aghast at the idea of bending the rules even slightly.

And then there were his truly bizarre beliefs.

It bothered me somewhat that I'd been assigned to be his roommate, but I had been a boarder for years before Sachin joined the school, and already had a group of friends who I spent most of my time with, so it was only during the compulsory one-hour study time that I had to spend any time alone with him.

It was the conversations we had during this one hour, actually, that started this whole thing. I'm ashamed to say I spent many evenings with my friends telling them about Sachin's strange compulsions and going through his dreadful selfies on Facebook. I acknowledge now that it was all my stories mocking his eccentricities that even put him on my friends' radars to begin with.

You have to understand – as much as I loved my friends, there were things that set us apart. We were fifteen-year-old boys, in our prime years of buffoonery. These were the years to be obsessed with girls and satisfying our libido, and yet I had no interest whatsoever in any of it. Not in girls, not in boys, not in anyone. Bawdy conversations bored me. I treated watching porn as a chore instead of a guilty pleasure. I just... wasn't interested.

I still have no interest, but I'm no longer bothered by it. In fact, I'm proud of the way I am. But back then being different felt like the most awful, glaring thing in the world. I knew that anything that would take their attention off my oddities and onto Sachin's, would only work out in my favour.

So, I encouraged it. I would invite Sachin to sit with us at dinner just so my friends and I could exchange meaningful glances and choke back our laughter when he would say something weird. And then, when he left, we would shout with laughter, and spill salt, and dramatically bemoan the fact that the demons

were coming to doom us. We were just stupid fifteen-year-olds. That's what you have to understand. We were just dumb, stupid teenagers.

It was Armaan who came up with the idea.

We'd all seen it of course, the string of green chillies and a perfectly round yellow lemon that Sachin had hung over the door to our room. It wasn't unusual to see such a thing outside shops and hanging from the front of rickshaws, but this was the first time any of us had seen it hanging over the doorway of a dorm room. It amused us all to no end, but Armaan was obsessed with it.

"How exactly is some ten rupee chilli on a string going to help him?" Armaan had asked once.

I shrugged. "When I asked him, he told me that the goddess of misfortune likes sour and spicy food. So by hanging the lemons and chillies, she will stop to eat her 'favourite food' and be so satisfied that she won't enter our room."

Their laughter was like a clap of thunder, and it filled me with a warm sense of belonging.

"I wonder what would happen if we steal it," Armaan mused.

"He'll probably freak out," I said.

Armaan didn't reply, but he was grinning, his teeth white in the growing darkness of Rahul's room. It seemed then, to my fifteen year old eyes, that he looked almost inhuman.

My spine prickled.

Whatever protestations I had were drowned out by the growing acquiescence of the other boys, and I realised with a thick dread that I was outnumbered. But it didn't matter, I reasoned. Lemon and chillies were not hard to replace.

The next morning, our doorway was bare.

Sachin didn't notice right away. The routine of boarding school life was so established that I'm sure he just assumed nothing was amiss. I was on-edge though. I hadn't taken his lemon and chillies, and yet... as his roommate I felt responsible for his loss. I couldn't shake the memory of the cruel spark in Armaan's eyes. The way his smile seemed almost too wide.

When Sachin came back from school that evening, he looked wrung-out and hollow. I tried to ask him if he'd had a bad day, but he darted past me towards the door of our room. I reached the doorway just in time to witness the moment he realised it was gone.

He turned to me, his eyes wild. "Where is it?"

I'd never heard such vehemence in his voice before. "Where is what?"

He gestured towards the empty, rusting nail above our door. I focused my eyes instead on the flaking paint around it.

“I’ve no idea,” I said. It was, at least, the truth. I didn’t know where Armaan had hidden it.

Sachin began searching, frantically, on his hands and knees, peering around the doorway, and then in every nook and cranny of our room. When he couldn’t find it, he began pacing, a tiger locked in a cage much too small, and began raking his fingers through his hair so aggressively I thought he was going to tear some of it out.

For a moment, I considered coming clean, telling him about Armaan, but I didn’t want to be a snitch. If I was the one who revealed the collective secret, I would be excluded from the fun forever. I would be no better than a Sachin.

So I swallowed, and said nothing.

That night, I awoke to the sound of something scraping against my headboard. I sat up with a jolt and turned around, but darkness obscured my vision, choking out any vestige of light in the room. Our dorm-parent always took our phones before we slept, so I felt around for the torch I kept on my side table. As my fingers closed around the cheap plastic, I heard it again.

The beam of the torch was weak, watered down light that barely illuminated even what it was directly pointed at. I held it up, feeling my breath lodge painfully in my chest. I had never been scared of the dark, but there was

something about this darkness. It felt thicker. Heavier. Like shadows had come home to my tiny dorm room to roost for the night. My body felt so cold.

There were deep scratches in my headboard that left curling slivers of wood in their wake. Fingernail scratches. I almost fell out of bed in my haste. I grabbed Sachin's comforter, shaking it, but it was empty. Fear was choking me, hot and acidic like bile in my throat. I stumbled across to the wall, and stabbed at the switches until light flooded the room.

Nothing. There was nothing there. My breathing slowed as I walked over to the headboard of my bed and ran my fingers over the smooth wood.

The door opened with a creak and I spun around so fast I dropped my torch. "Are you ok?" Sachin asked. The dark circles beneath his eyes seemed deeper than usual.

I made a non-committal humming noise. "Where were you?"

"Bathroom."

I left my desk light on for the rest of the night.

I didn't tell the other boys what had happened. They would tease me mercilessly if they knew how I had frightened myself. I almost half-convicted myself it was a nightmare. But that empty, rusted nail in my doorway was in my peripheral vision, and I couldn't stop the seeds of doubt from growing in

my mind, taking root. I had done something terrible. I had invited something – or someone – into my home.

And now, she wouldn't leave.

Sachin stole lemon and chillies from the dining hall and put them up over our doorway. He sprinkled mustard seeds on the floor and put bowls of salt in each corner of our room. It didn't seem to make much of a difference. He was growing more peculiar with every passing day. He ambled about, hunched over like he was carrying an invisible backpack full of bricks. He was never a chatty person, but now he was positively laconic.

I spent even less time in our room than I had before. The air felt heavier there. Musty. Almost like dust had accumulated between the books on our shelves and in the crevices between the furniture.

Once, when I was hunting under my desk for my fallen torch, my fingers closed around something hard. I thought, at first, it was one of the mustard seeds. But when I pulled it out, I saw that it was a tooth, yellow, large and hard, like the tooth of a cow.

I threw it into the lake outside our campus.

Small things began happening. My locker was broken into. The fudge my mother sent for me was stolen. I failed a maths test. I no longer slept. The smallest of sounds woke me. One night, I found a long, grey hair on my pillow. On another night, I found a smudge of bright lipstick on one of my shirts. Once,

I woke up to a raspy sound, like a... like an animal trying to bray with sand in their mouth.

When I called out to Sachin in the thick, inky blackness, he didn't reply.

By our junior year, Sachin had stopped talking altogether. When I asked him a question, he looked at me uncomprehendingly. Sometimes, his fingers twitched, as if being controlled by a lazy puppet master, idly tugging on the strings.

The worst was the day I came into the room to find him naked, staring up at the ceiling, unmoving. His legs seemed to be coated with thick, grey hairs that almost looked like fur. I slammed the door shut so fast, my fingers got caught and pain made me fall to my knees.

Eventually, I began ensuring that my slippers were never overturned, that I never spilled salt on the table. When someone accidentally bumped heads with me, I made sure they did it again. I never let anyone sit on my pillows or walk over my legs.

My friends made fun of me at first, but I was stubborn in my new beliefs and eventually, they took to excluding me from get-togethers. Sachin and I remained roommates the following year, and then the year after that. In 12th grade we were allowed to pick our roommates, but by then, I had no other friends left.

Even on my vacations home, I heard the noises. My parents were concerned, but what could they do about an unwelcome guest who wouldn't leave?

By our senior year, the thick, grey hair I'd seen on Sachin's legs had spread, coating his chest and his chin. No-one ever commented on it, or the fact that he had become so skinny you could see the outline of his ribs beneath his skin. His cheeks had grown sunken, and his dark eyes seemed to swivel aimlessly around in their sockets.

On the night I said goodbye to him, with my suitcases packed and our room devastatingly empty, I finally asked him the question I knew he would not answer. "Was there anything we could have done?"

He didn't reply.

I stopped by my locker on my way to the bus stop to get my remaining notebooks. As I sifted through the pencil shavings and scraps of paper that were left, I spotted it. The lemon had shrivelled up and the chillies were dry as sin, nothing more than flaky, rotten husks. It was the lemon and chillies that Armaan had stolen so many years ago. I picked it up, my heart pounding and held it to my chest.

Then, slowly, methodically, I began pulling out pieces of the dried lemon, putting its sour, scratchy skin on my tongue. I chewed it for hours standing there, by the bank of lockers, grinding the rubbery gritty skin down to dust between my teeth. The chillies, luckily, crumbled easily, but I felt their sharp sting on the tender flesh of my throat as I swallowed.

Armaan had gone without saying goodbye, and over the years whenever I tried to call him or message him, he never replied. It was almost like he'd never existed. But it didn't matter. Because the day I left the school, it all stopped.

The darkness. The scratches on the ceiling. The noises in the night and the cracked teeth on my floor. I made a whole new group of friends, ones who were less cruel, and I brought my grades back up to As.

But some nights I still smell it, the fresh tang of lemon, and the chalky darkness that once weighted the very air around me like a sickness. Those nights I open my eyes and check for the mustard seeds, and make sure my slippers are straight. And then I'm comforted.

I am safe.

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