

# NIKITA



**AJAY JAIN**

# NIKITA: AN EXTRACT

This is a preview version of the book NIKITA by Ajay Jain. The complete book is available for sale in print and in an e-version. You can access the same at

<http://ajayjain.com>.

## Connect with Us

Web: [ajayjain.com](http://ajayjain.com)

Email: [books@ajayjain.com](mailto:books@ajayjain.com)

Mobile (WhatsApp): +91.8800200280

Twitter: @ajayjain

Instagram: @ajay.author

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# ABOUT NIKITA

NIKITA is a story of love.

And of betrayal. And of abuse.

Of hopes dashed. Of aspirations lost.

And yet it is a story of a woman who refuses to give in. To men who could not live up to her faith and expectations. To men who tried to hold her back. To men who believed their right to mould her like wet clay.

The struggles never end. But Nikita refuses to buckle. Does she realize her ambitions? Does she find the love she seeks?

Nikita's is a story every woman must read. And every man too. Read what promises to be a story you will not be able to put down till you finish reading it.

# NIKITA: FROM THE BACK COVER

## **RUN NIKITA, RUN**

Nikita just wanted to catch a train to the big city. To be a model. And a fashion designer.

And to find someone who loved and respected her.

She ended up running. Running for her life. Running for her happiness.

Running from men who pawned her aspirations. Or could not live up to her trust.

Till she called out the demons within, and showed them to be the cowards they were. That's when she overcame her own fear of existence. And started running for herself.

Fate might have been in a grumpy mood when Nikita crossed its path. Leaving her homeless, broke and broken. But Nikita refused to give up. Or give in.

And kept running. Did she get to where she wanted to be?

# NIKITA: SELECT READER REVIEWS

## **ONCE YOU PICK THE BOOK AND START READING.....YOU'D WANNA FINISH IT IN ONE GO!!**

The end was unexpected as a normal reader would be expecting Nikita to 'run' and make an independent world for herself but then the ending of the book leaves one smiling for her.

Being a male author, Ajay Jain has done a great job at writing from a woman's perspective. He has boldly expressed Nikita's story.

The book again and again brought an echo in my mind of a line I wrote myself: "Behind the softest fur collars and costliest diamond strings you find the deepest scars. – *Reviewer on Amazon.*

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## **A BIT OF NIKITA IS IN EVERYONE**

I must say I haven't read such a racy, intriguing, full of surprises kind of book in a long time. What moved me the most was the feisty character of Nikita, her never-say-die attitude, her search for love with a child woman heart. For me I could see clarity in her confusion, truth in her lies, and vulnerability but gutsy outlook. One hardly ever comes across such a racy, saucy, tragic yet a very endearing and powerful story of grit and resilience.

I am in the work of human behaviour, conditioning and beliefs – and this book really showed how conditioning can really shape a child's mind. – *Shivani on Amazon*

Absolutely loved the racy book. The character sways so beautifully from playing parts that you can relate to at some level and aspire to be at another level. the way she takes her life in a stride and 'makes the most' of whatever she gets her way is a motivation.

I especially loved the last bit where it truly comes together - giving her complicated journey her true honest perspective which seems to prove her innocence and yet her grit to take control of her life.

What the book showed me is that pursuit of a support system and the pursuit of love don't necessarily coincide... until you show endurance and grit! And as a life coach, I relate to that at many levels - both personally and professionally. – *Review sent to author privately*

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## **HELLO WORLD, NIKITA HAS ARRIVED!!**

**Nikita is the story of one woman's dreams, hopes, struggles, love, obstacles, self-discovery, survival and triumph. You will find many heart-wrenching and thought-provoking moments. The way Ajay has elaborated all situations is impressive. His character Nikita is quite relatable. The book will keep you so engrossed that you won't put it down once you start reading it. I found it so good that I finished it in a day. Certainly a must read for everyone. – Mamta Singh on Amazon**

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AN EASY READ OF A COMPLEX SOCIAL CONSTRUCT  
Nikita is one book that not only every Indian Woman but everyone at a universal level can relate to: how this girl deals with different men at different stages of her life and how it shapes her life; how men get away with doing things and a woman is objectified and struggles in maintaining her dignity. This book shows a stark contrast between strength and vulnerability in the same person. A must read. – Arun Verma on Amazon

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### **A REAL PAGE TURNER**

**A very interesting story that keeps you hooked till the very end. The author has given you a chance to take the journey through the protagonist Nikita's life. As you flip through every chapter you get a closer understanding of Nikita's feelings and experiences and by the end you feel like you have known her since many years! – Nikhil Kamath on Amazon**

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Through every page of the book, you can relate to so many characters around you. The aroma of India is so well served into the narration - not to forget all the spice that comes along with it. The writer has done a commendable job.

The task is all the more difficult - for a man to narrate the story from a women's perspective. The hooks at the end of every section keep you hooked till the end and the end is definitely not on the expected lines - SPOILER ALERT :) Read it !! – Rahul Kasliwal on Amazon

# ABOUT AJAY JAIN



Ajay Jain is a writer and a photographer. He has authored 11 print and over 50 electronic books so far.

He is also a traveller. Literally. And metaphorically.

He has been travelling the world for well over a decade, but his first love has been driving across the Indian subcontinent. At last count, he had clocked over 100,000 kms (60,000 miles) in his car; mega journeys have included traversing the entire motorable span of the Himalayas cutting across India, Nepal and Bhutan.

His outlook towards life has been that of an explorer, on a perpetual quest for discovery by trying his hand at different things. He secured degrees in mechanical engineering (Delhi College of Engineering, 1992) and management (FORE School of Management, 1994), followed by conventional careers in technology and sports management, before taking to journalism, writing and photography as his full-time vocation.



After earning a masters in journalism (Cardiff University, UK, 2002), Ajay wrote for leading media, published his own youth newspaper, pursued blogging professionally and then sat down to write books. On travel, marketing and personal development. He has added novels to his portfolio. He set up the popular Kunzum Travel Café, a social hub also serving as a gallery for his photographic art.

The human connect has always appealed to Ajay, and he has derived greatest satisfaction from his work on portraitures – visual and written. And thus Nikita, his first work of fiction.

# BOOK EXTRACT STARTS HERE



# PROLOGUE

## One Mistake

I made one mistake in my life. At nineteen. An age when you cannot distinguish between right and wrong, correct and incorrect, the good and the bad.

It's an age when there are no precedents, no events to base judgement on. You just do things. You are in the kindergarten of adulthood. When you still have to learn the alphabet, the vocabulary, the grammar to write a story for your life.

When you enter school, you start with pencils. And an eraser to wipe and correct mistakes. Unfortunately, you are only given pens with indelible ink in life. The slate cannot be wiped clean. What's on it determines the course of all your future.

When I made the cardinal mistake at nineteen, I had no teachers to guide me. If there were any, I did not pay heed. Had I done so, or even listened to my own heart and soul, I would not have made the mistake at nineteen – and then another at twenty nine. Just when the marks of the first were fading into oblivion, I splattered ink all over my destiny.

And thus I need to narrate my story to myself. So I can reflect upon my life. And make another go of it.

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## Run Nikita, Run

Run Nikita, run.

I have been running. Ever since Radha *didi*, my elder sister, told me to. She had been to a hell one would not send their enemies to. And she did not want me to be forced to enter one too. She loved me, she cared for me. She was my mother since we lost ours when I was not even one.

Someone had cast a spell on our family. We were condemned without a trial for sins we were not even aware of. The punishment was serving term in hell. My sister urged me to run before the flames in that jail consumed me, before someone locked the gates and lost the keys.



I would, and sprint on the road to heaven, only to stumble into another hell. The curse would endure. I would be hurt, I would be in pain, I would cry. But I stayed defiant. And continue to.

I will enter the gates of the heaven I seek, I will build the utopia I dream. Hell be damned.

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## Nikita is Coming

Martyrdom is never a good idea. Not on a battlefield. Not at home. Every soldier lost means one man or woman less to fight another day. And every personal life ruined means continued distress for those you are trying to protect.

I allowed myself to get married at nineteen to gift a measure of peace to my father. His sufferings were not easy to bear for a child who loved him. My decision was only a placebo, not lasting longer than a flash in the pan. He could not have been blind to the misery I got trapped in – the resulting grief consumed him till his last days.



Of course, the new decade had started on a more cheerful note. The dreaded high school leaving exams, called the boards, were finally over. Symbolically, history was the last paper – and I was already doodling the personal history I was going to write in my future. I chose to walk back, rather hop and dance,

from school to home – it was late March, and the afternoons were already very warm. The sun was harsh, but it was only brightening up the flower-laden streetscapes. The flaming oranges of palash, the lilacs of rosy trumpet, the reds of silk cotton and the deep pinks of kachnar – these are a few of my favourite things at this time of the year. Just as are raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens in *The Sound of Music*, perhaps my favourite movie of all time.

The protagonists sought a life rightfully theirs; I believed myself to be the eighth of the Trapp children, deserving of any life I could envision for myself. I did not need to escape to Switzerland like them, but I would catch a train to Delhi. To study further. To model. To party. And to get a man for myself; I was done with boys.

Hello world, Nikita is coming!

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# THE STORY STARTS HERE

## NIKITA

I am, because my mom wanted another child. Out of remorse. She might still have been around had she not wanted to see me in the family portrait. I am, and thus my mom is not. The cross of guilt became mine to bear. Even though I had no say in a past I was not even conceived in.

We lived in an extended joint family, and my parents were hosts to their parasitic ways. They sucked them financially, and then they messed with their psyche. They took away my parents' jewels, their house, their health, their peace, and their second son. My parents took it all in their stride, but the burden of parting with her child weighed too heavy on my mother. I was needed as the counterbalance.

It was a blunder, a fatal one. My mother carried me despite her frail state, and could not nurse or even hold the three kilos of the newly born me. My first meal was formula milk. From what I have been told, my mother's feet rarely touched the ground for a year before she passed on. I was not destined to have a mother who I could have had one conversation, just one that could have been the touchstone of my life. To keep me from making mistakes, or knowing how to tackle them when I did.

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Our family was one notch below the royals of Jaipur in social status. We had served them for generations, and my father continued the tradition. Even though his masters no longer held any political sway except those who got elected democratically to the state and national assemblies.

We were the confidants of the rulers. With extremely strict rules and protocols. At any given time, only one member of our family was allowed to work at the palace. The baton was handed over to my father from a granduncle who lived and served long. No one from my grandparent's generation got the chance to hold the position.

My father worked closely with the *rajmata*, the queen of the state without a crown. He had access beyond doors closed to most of the royal family members, and was privy to information he could be killed – or handsomely rewarded – for. But he was not entrusted with this role because someone pulled his name out of a hat. He was groomed and tested by his granduncle for years. He had to prove not just his aptitude for the job, but his trustworthiness to exercise utmost discretion in whatever he did. Everything had to be kept a secret, even from his own family. Despite his proximity to the palace, we saw no more of it than a tourist to the city.

My father never, ever spoke of his work. We broadly knew what he did from what our uncles and aunts told us, but much of their accounts were guesswork too. He was the royal family's Man Friday, having his fingers in all their pies. He oversaw their finances, ensured the security of their massive collection of jewels and valuables, kept track of their vast real estate holdings, lobbied with the government to protect the family's interests and assets lest they be nationalised, and managed election campaigns when any of the family ran for office. He was the event manager of their opulent weddings, birthdays and anniversaries. Every festival had to be a grandiose celebration. He was the gatekeeper who let guests in for these occasions. The stables were his responsibility, the well-being of horses and elephants vital for polo matches. He sat on the table – and often dictated terms – for business collaborations including those with hospitality brands who took over palaces and forts to run them as hotels and museums. Every will, every family settlement, every legal agreement was vetted by him in consultation with lawyers and would bear his signature as a witness.



He was the perfect employee, not even sharing trivia about the royals lest he let slip any confidential information. The employers were not necessarily ideal though, as paymasters at least. They paid my father well, but he should have been rewarded better. He was steeped in idealism and the tradition of the position he held, and could never get himself to demand more than what he was given. He could have but did not make anything for himself on the side. He had enough insider information to create wealth for himself – and for us – by investing in land, gold and stocks before their values escalated. It would have done his employers no harm, but he still regarded it a crime on his conscience.

In earlier times, his ancestors would benefit from the occasional largesse of the king or the queen of the day; the massive bungalow or *haveli* we lived in was granted to us in the nineteenth century. As were vast tracts of agricultural land spread across the state of Rajasthan. Such bonuses became scarce after India gained independence, the new republic stripping the former royals of much of their assets and sources of income.

There has been another distasteful tradition in our family. Most lived off the one serving the royals. But as income fell, some made themselves useful by being gainfully employed elsewhere. Others started selling off land and jewellery to pay for their ever diminishing lifestyle and even renting out a part of our *haveli*. But that was never enough. My father had the most modest income amongst all his predecessors, and that too was largely mooched off him by his brothers.

I came in late into the story, but by the time I did, my father's spirit was already being squeezed of its juice. I only heard from others of how he was the charmer amongst the city's youth, a man so good-looking to have attracted my mother, herself a head-turner at Jaipur's parties. But someone cast an evil eye on their union; their marital bliss was short-lived as domestic

politics, financial stresses and resulting poor health dominated the time they were together.

And yet, they stood firm with their feet on the ground, as pillars of strength for each other. They weathered the gale around them for as long as they could, till my mother could not take it any longer. Leaving my father – and us – forlorn.

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I don't know what his siblings – and their respective families – had against my father, but it seemed they were out to suck his blood dry and destroy him in every way possible. Including the lives of his children.

My father had five brothers and two sisters. The position he held with the royal family should have gone to the eldest brother, *Brajesh tauji*. But he was too busy managing his wives and mistresses to be entrusted with any responsibility. Next was a sister, *Sarla bua*, who was not entitled to work. The third, *Chand tauji*, had some sense and studied medicine in Russia and settled there only. The baton was my father's to drop, but he held on to it for dear life. He had grown up dreaming of this job but expected one of those in line before him would get it. But when destiny offered this gift, he gleefully accepted it.

My father's parents lost their lives tragically about two years after the youngest of their children was born - they were on their way to Badrinath for a pilgrimage when their bus fell down the steep Himalayan slopes. All thirty four on board perished. The eldest of the siblings was expected to take charge of the family at the young age of twenty, but he was too caught up in his romantic liaisons to bother. The aunt had been married just a few months prior to the tragedy to a lawyer about twelve years older to her. He was struggling in his practice, and he found the perfect pretext to move into our house as the new father figure. My aunt was very docile, and took the task of managing the household upon herself. The husband, Mahesh uncle, went about unchallenged as he sold

off properties to not just pay for household expenses but to also siphon off an undue share for himself. The jewels were saved because my great-grandmother was still around, and kept those close to her chest.

We also got by in those trying times because of the special status our family enjoyed in Jaipur as the confidants of the palace. We could raise unsecured loans with no questions asked, seek favours of any kind with the authorities, be assured of admissions to the best of schools and colleges, and get preference for jobs in the private and the government sector. But all these benefit those who can make good use of it. Doors may have been open for us, but it still required one to study and work hard. The royals themselves were generous enough with gifts and grants to our family, and became even more charitable after the death of my grandparents. But any good fortune squandered off provides little solace to its intended beneficiaries.

The four born after my father were all studies in contrast. Birju *chacha*, the uncle born after my father was a waster, a bully, a drunkard, a leech and a predator – yes, it's possible for one to be all these and more. Harish *chacha*, the sixth child, got good guidance from a friend's father, pursued law and moved to Delhi – he built a successful practice helping politicians legitimise their ill-gotten moneys and became fabulously wealthy himself. Rupa *bua* was born after him – no one bothered looking for a groom for her, and she became a bitter, abusive spinster. All of us kids would call her a witch behind her back and stayed clear of her; she would wallop us on a whim anytime, with or without reason. The youngest, Jagdeep *chacha*, caught the fancy of a rich Marwari family, the rich business community from the state, and married one of their daughters. The bargain required him to move to Mumbai, live with his in-laws, be employed in their garments factory, and not move anywhere from under the thumb of his dominating wife.

In this family was born Nikita.

Our house was like a hammam of sorts. Everyone's lives were bared for all to see; there were only feeble attempts to be discreet about one's pleasures and displeasures. Illicit liaisons and abuse were rife, as were resultant outbursts and tears. Everyone knew what was happening, and yet no one talked about it. We hurt each other, and let wounds fester.

I was the youngest in the family, and was invisible to everyone. I was literally a fly on the wall, and on the floor, and behind doors, and even under the bed; even if others knew I was around, I would be disregarded as the kid who would not even comprehend what was going on. They were right. I did not, at that tender age. But the images stayed. For me to interpret later in life. We may have been a family of stature for the city, but we would have been condemned socially and legally had our admirers got to peek within.

The eldest, Brajesh *tauji*, turned out to be an inverted role model. He got married to Lata *tai* when he was 15 and she was all of seven. Of course, she did not move in with her husband until puberty but she always remained a child to him even after she did. Brajesh *tauji* did not desist from bringing his 'girlfriends' home. This was the normal *tai* got conditioned to since she was still at an impressionable age. No one read out her rights as a wife to her. She was made to wash and iron his clothes, serve him food, make his bed and even wait outside the bedroom when he was busy with a woman. The audacity of it all was laid bare when she was made to serve drinks to the visitor, and even clean up after she left. She did not know what sex was, and her husband couldn't bear the thought of 'educating' her. Birju *chacha* took it upon himself to make her wise about worldly matters. For his own motives though.

One day, Brajesh *tauji* brought home a fair-skinned woman; she was clearly a foreigner. A coolie followed, lugging oversized suitcases and boxes. *Tauji* was beaming; he had the

look of someone who had just won a world cup in polo, his favourite pastime and hunting ground for women. Without a word to any of us, he took the lady straight to his bedroom on the first floor. Curiosity took us all to the central courtyard, to look up and see what that was all about. Servants were continually going up and down, with the luggage first, then water, and then chai. After about an hour, we saw Lata *tai* coming down, with a servant carrying her personal effects behind her. She did not look towards any of us, save a couple of fleeting glances. Even in those briefest of moments, we could see the humiliation writ large on her face. But her eyes were not wet. They were seething. Rupa *bua*, the 'witch' muttered: Everything will be finished now. You wait and see. Never forget this moment when the downfall of our family started.

The child in *tai* was going to throw a tantrum. But she was no juvenile, not anymore. It was time to lay out the chess board. We would discover a crafty grandmaster in her, whose game would be played out over the coming generation. She would show us an art of war to make Sun Tzu proud.

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There were no fixed norms for meals in our house. Everyone had their own schedules, their own menus, and their own eating places. Sometimes there was sharing and caring, but people stayed to themselves mostly. There were exceptional days though, like one when Brajesh *tauji* sent word out for all to have dinner together. He made it sound important, and mandatory.

After all, his marriage to Gloria Sternberger deserved a toast, even if it was just over a family meal. She was Jewish, from Israel, in town to write a history of the sports the royals played. The charmer of a man played the perfect game in winning her over; besotted by him totally, she agreed to marry him despite being fully aware of his personal situation. She could not be bothered about his modest financial condition; her

father was an arms trader, a key player in keeping the Middle East well supplied with weapons and ammunition to be able to keep fighting. He traded with all sides, and they protected him as their own. Gloria was the sole heiress to his wealth. If *Tauji*'s heart fluttered more for those riches than for the woman, then disappointment lay in store. His new wife would not let him have a whiff of her money even if they had vowed to be one for as long as they lived.

Dinner was served on a massive dining table built about a hundred years ago; it was an heirloom, a priceless one. Money cannot buy such wood and workmanship today. Everyone was there – only *Lata tai* was missing. Not surprising though. There was small talk over starters of chicken tikka and lamb soup, but the corners of all adult eyes were firmly on the white lady. The kids stared at her directly for the entirety of the evening. And then *tauji* spoke up. Let me introduce you to Gloria; we got married today morning in Birla Mandir. She is from Israel but will now be staying with us. She speaks English and Hindi very well, so you can all talk to her. I hope you will give her the respect due to the eldest *bhabhi*, or sister-in-law, in the family. We would have liked a bigger ceremony as the occasion deserves, but we decided to keep it simple. Her majesty, the *rajmata*, is very close to *bhabhi* and has blessed our union. Gloria is a historian and a scholar, and has studied in Cambridge in England. She needs her peace and quiet, and I hope no one will disturb her when she is working.

The uncles and aunts exchanged pleasantries with Gloria, but fell short of making meaningful conversation. The children milled around her out of curiosity, pulling at her silken flowing dress, and giggling while testing her Hindi. She was not exuberant in her expressions, but would smile easily.

An unusual chapter had been added to our family biography. It would not make for very pleasant reading.

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Lata *tai* was at war. With everyone in the house. But she could not ride to battle alone. Birju *chacha*, the useless one with all the time on his hands, was recruited to be her ally. He readily accepted a role where he could indulge in the pleasures of fornication, had someone to attend to his daily needs, and was handed over keys to a money chest to fund his wasteful life.

In a house of open secrets, their proximity was not missed by anyone. They became inseparable, sharing meals, going out shopping, socialising, and just hanging out together at home. In the verandah, on the terrace, in the kitchen, in the bar, in each other's bedrooms. They bolted the doors from the inside at times, giving a hoot to wagging tongues. She was out to spite the family, he was being the parasite he was born to be.

The *tai* discovered the joys of illicit sex with *chacha*; all was fair in a war where her own husband was lost to other women. She came from a rich family in Bikaner, and *chacha* would help himself to much of the pocket money her parents sent every month. When this was not enough to fund his wanton ways, he gifted himself his paramour's jewellery to be pawned or sold. The *tai* was too focused on the bigger battles at hand to be bothered with material losses. She dismissed the embezzlement as fee for the services her brother-in-law rendered.

And then *tai* struck the first blow. She came pleading to my parents to save her marriage. What could they do? They had no say, and certainly not on conjugal matters. It was between the couple, more so when the bull-headed *tauji* was not one to pay heed to anyone.

I want a child, the *tai* said.

But how? You don't even share the room, said my mother. She feigned ignorance of her relationship with *chacha*.

But the white whore has already given him two children. A boy and a girl. How can I bear to see that?

You are our elders, how can we interfere?

I just want one child. I know I will not get one from him. Can I adopt one of your sons?

My mother went pale at the prospect. She had a daughter and two sons, but each were as dear to her as the other. Even the thought of parting with one, even if living in the same house, would be too much to bear. Why would *bhabhi* put them in such a predicament? Why couldn't she just seek a divorce and go back to her parents? My mother knew that option was worse than death for *tai*; she would rather continue living in humiliation in her marital house.

My father, who had been quiet throughout, finally spoke up. Addressing my mother, he asked if she would be agreeable to letting Aman, the elder son, be brought up by *tai*. It really will not change anything. We would be living in the same house. He will have two mothers instead of one. He will be well looked after. No one would be going anywhere.

My *tai* knew my father would support her. He could not say no to anyone in the family even if it called for emotional and financial sacrifices by his own wife and children. Aman was adopted by my *tai* and her husband in a religious ceremony followed by legal formalities.

The guilt of giving up one of her children began bothering my mother. It was her turn to talk to my father, and thus the idea of me took shape. I was born two years after my brother was given for adoption by his *tai*.

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Disturbed, disjointed and dysfunctional – that was the state of the House of Mathurs, as was commonly referred to with our



family name. It's subset, my immediate family, the one I was born into, was disintegrating even before my birth and the pieces just kept falling off through my growing years.

I lost my mother before my first birthday. An unidentified complication during my delivery left her extremely weak; despite running all possible tests by the best of doctors, she could not get better. My elder brother, Aman, was adopted by my eldest *tai*; it was supposed to be more of a placebo for her hurting soul. He would be living just a few rooms down the corridor. But my *tai* was playing a grander game with the Mathurs; she took him away much further without consulting his biological father. Aman would eventually come back home, but only after a failed suicide attempt upon being betrayed those he trusted within the family.

My father and sister had their own share of hurt and heartbreaks, their stories running parallel despite the generational gap. My younger brother almost died of burns when his bid to scare Birju *chacha* went awry. The residual scars – on his body and on his soul – would leave him lesser able to lead a life with any semblance of normalcy.

Radha *didi* had been a witness – and victim – to all that was wrong around us. I should have run the first time she told me to.

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You may be its guardian, but you may not pluck the forbidden fruit for yourself from the garden. Even if the royal family holds you in high esteem for your performance and loyalty. There are some rules set in stone – rules to remind you of your position in their society. It would be a sin for my father to be in love with a princess, lest an eventual marriage leads to him being counted as one of the royals himself.

For a long time after losing his wife, my father was a dispirited man. He went about his responsibilities at work and at home

almost robotically, with dedication but little emotion. And then he got acquainted with Sara.

Sara was a princess but only of a notional kingdom. The royalty had titles only because their 'subjects' continued to address them with such; they had none officially. They did not rule over a single square foot of land anymore. They had their status, their jewels, their real estate including a few palaces, their parties, their media coverage and their polo but no political power. They were one family to the world, but were out for each other's blood within. All of them were embroiled in complex legal battles over assets and inheritance. As the cases dragged on for decades, the number of claimants increased as more children bloomed on the family tree. Deference to the *rajmata* was holding up the facade from cracking. But only for as long as the aging matriarch was around.

Sara may have been a part of the family, but far removed. If heirs still counted for anything, she would probably have been two hundredth in line for the throne. She was not even entitled to any dividends or shares of the royal assets. Her father made a living as a building contractor. The only privilege accorded to her were invitations to events at the palaces; but it was more to flaunt her stunning beauty than as a relation. Much of the family was undistinguished in their appearance, and they were conscious of it.

But Sara was all humility. And only had love for dad despite being wooed by the finest of suitors from not just within the state, or the country, but even by the rich and the royal of Europe. But she did not want to be a part of their shallow world as she put it, where all she would be expected to do was dress her part and play a wonderful hostess, a doting wife, and an indulgent mother to a brood of children. All Sara wanted was to travel to discover the real world for herself, and capture it in her camera.

What did she see in my father? A fine gentleman, and a good soul. They never opened up about their relationship to others, coming across as just acquaintances. Whoever saw them together could not miss noticing the love they had for each other, no matter how hard they tried to hide it. Of course, Sara would be affectionate toward my father in private. She would even drop by at his home, spend time with his children, bring them gifts, tell them stories, and shoot photos of them. I still hold onto some in my albums with fond memories.

The extended family did not think too kindly of my father's new found happiness but would not let their displeasure be known; they wrongly assumed Sara would bring riches of the palace with her after marriage. One day, Sara told us she would be travelling for four months on a cruise around the world. Even as a child, I could see her eyes were sad despite embarking on a journey she had spoken of excitedly in the past. I could not understand the heaviness in her voice when she spoke; it's the last memory I have of the most beautiful face I have ever seen.

She never returned. My father chose not to carry on the relationship despite Sara being readily agreeable. He feared for his children; how would Sara treat them when she had any of her own? I do not want any, she would clarify. I want to travel, and not be bound by any of my own, and yet ensure your children never feel neglected, she would tell him. Being an empathetic man, my father did not want to burden the young and sprightly Sara with the baggage he carried. My father was also not sure how the rest of his family would treat her.

Of course, there was another reason why the match might not have been possible. The *rajmata* had summoned my dad and expressed her displeasure explicitly when she heard the rumours. She would not even recognise Sara as her relation for all practical purposes, but rules were rules. If my father did not end the relationship, it would be regarded as treason – he could have been jailed for life or even executed in the past.

But in the current scenario, my father would lose his job, the only job he was trained for and loved. He would not know how to support his family. The 'queen' could well have been bluffing with her threats of firing him; he knew he was indispensable and could not be let loose with all the insider knowledge he had. But loyalty toward the royal family was too ingrained in his blood to rebel.

He acceded to the queen. And from that day on, my father was sick most of his life.

\*\*\*\*\*

He may have taken it upon himself to be the head of our family when my grandparents died, but Mahesh uncle was like a politician who uses his position to enrich himself and to inflict abuse with impunity.

He had been married once earlier but his wife never returned from a visit to her sister in Canada. His male pride severely bruised at the abandonment, and saddled with the additional responsibility of a six year old son, he desperately sought another wife. A common acquaintance set up a rendezvous with Sarla bua who took to him at first sight; he shouldn't have felt flattered though. She would have gone for the first half decent man who proposed to her.

She was told about the son Vikram only after she reached her new home. A worse shock followed soon after – she lost her parents within a month of her marriage. It set off a chain of events leading to her moving back into her parental home with Mahesh uncle and Vikram. There was too much happening for her to grudge the stepchild; she just took him in as her own, to care for along with her orphaned siblings.

With no one to question him, Mahesh uncle went about consolidating his financial position, skimming whatever he could of the family assets. For the first time, portions of the *haveli* were leased out; he pocketed all the rent coming in. It

did not take long for the gossip mills of Jaipur to go into overdrive, the town wondering what ailed the Mathurs. Why else would they let out their traditional home to the petty traders of Johri Bazaar, the market of jewellers? Our *haveli* was a landmark in the area, one of the most prestigious of addresses in the city.

If that was not enough, he became a sexual predator within the house itself. The easiest target was Rupa *bua*, his wife's younger sister. She had just been a child when she lost her parents. Mahesh uncle became the man she looked up to in the absence of any other credible candidates. He showered extra care upon her to win her confidence; soon after she attained puberty, he took advantage of the trust she had in him to rape her. There was no struggle, no resistance from a girl who took such a physical act to be a normal human activity; she had been living in a cocoon and knew no different. It pained the fourteen year old the first few times, but she gradually got used to it. As trauma turned to pleasure, she even started looking forward to the encounters.

Mahesh uncle swore her to secrecy, but a child cannot keep things to herself for long. She narrated what was happening to her elder sister after about a year; she sounded as if this was something to be pleased about. Of course, it was a horror story to the older sibling who went hysterical. She sought her husband out, and screamed and cried herself hoarse with the entire household including servants standing witness. My aunt made the mistake of making it public; this was a matter where discretion and sensitivity was of utmost importance. But the damage was done.

Tongues wagged. Within the *haveli*. And beyond. Very soon, all those who mattered to us knew. The talk was not so much about what uncle had done; people were more interested in what to do with Rupa *bua*. The victim became the sufferer.

Her schooling was first to get affected. The principal suggested she go for home tutoring or be sent off to a

boarding since other students and teachers could not stop talking about her. Both these options would have increased the cost of her education, and Mahesh uncle did not want to invest in it. No one else in the family had the money to. She became an introvert, staying confined to her room, mostly in the dark. Tragically, Mahesh uncle continued to visit her; this time he threatened go public if she squealed. She complied, out of fear of further ostracization. No suitors came forward when she reached marriageable age. She was the keep, the mistress, of Mahesh babu; he was addressed with a respectable suffix to his name as he moved up the social ladder in town. His unsavoury – and illegal – actions were glossed over.

Rupa *bu*a turned bitter; she was a reject of society for no fault of hers. The child in her grew up to be a 'witch', venting her anger, frustration and despair at all those who crossed her path. She aged in a hurry. She became scrawny, her hair turned frizzy and grey. Her temper was feared by all, especially the children. She would calm down only when Mahesh uncle visited her. Which he did most of his life. He would still take her despite her appearance. He was the trainer who could tame a caged wild animal.

If he wasn't enough of a scourge in the family, Vikram aspired to emulate his father.

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What do you do when you walk into a room and see your sister with her step-cousin, Vikram? With her sitting on the edge of a bed, her dress dropped to her waist, the bra lying on the floor? And he standing over her, his shirt unbuttoned, and his member protruding hard and big?

I was looking for the stray kitten who ventured into our house sometimes and followed its trail into the room. All curtains were drawn, but there was enough light to see what they were doing. I watched them, transfixed and fascinated, while they

carried on, oblivious to my presence. He was moving his hands all over her, and cupped her breasts when she bent down to take him in her mouth. They moved and made muffled sounds till he withdrew with a jerk – and squirted something whitish-grey over her chest.

I was too young to understand what was going on. I did not know what sex was. I did not know what a blowjob was. I did not know a man does not 'pee' after a blowjob, he comes and goes limp.

Vikram was all smiles when he was done but my sister was expressionless. As she had been all through. They noticed me standing in the shadows by the door only when they turned in my direction. Vikram smirked, and I still remember him giving me a flying kiss while he fastened his belt. My sister had a look of panic on her face.

What are you doing here, she asked while clumsily fastening her bra and pulling her dress back up.

I was looking for Lora.

Who is Lora?

My kitty.

When did you get a kitty?

She comes to visit me sometimes.

Go out.

Ok.

No wait. Don't go.

She looked at Vikram and asked him to leave. He left, grinning. Radha *didi* came up to me, went down on her

knees, looked into my eyes and asked when I had come into the room.

A little while back, I said.

What did you see? Or forget it, it's ok. Don't talk about this to anyone.

Ok.

Please don't tell anyone.

Ok.

Promise?

Yes.

It's our secret.

Ok.

Want a chocolate?

No.

What do you want?

Ice cream.

Ok, let's go get one.

I also want Lora.

Sure, where is she?

I don't know.

Ok, let's look for her.



So we went looking for the kitten and the ice cream cart. We found only the latter, and picked up my favourite mango duet bar.

What were you playing with Vikram *bhaiya*, I asked referring to the big brother.

Nothing.

But you were.

It is not for children.

I am not a child.

No, you are.

I will ask papa.

No, it's our secret.

So why won't you tell me?

I will. When you are my age.

Promise.

Yes.

I went back to licking my lolly. I had seen other people in the house together without any clothes, so there was nothing novel or surprising seeing my sister in that state. I assumed it was something everyone did. Even I wanted to. But in that moment, my priority was not to let any of my precious ice-cream drip on my frock.

\*\*\*\*\*

There were no secrets in our house. Even if there were, I was privy to most of them. I just happened to walk in on events. I moved about silently, barely noticeable; I would describe it as creepy. Even when the protagonists in the middle of an action scene spotted me, they carried on. I was not a witness to be a cause for any alarm or embarrassment.

Maybe. But my photographic memory captured everything. To play back later in life. When the child would be an adult, and would then interpret the meaning of those images. Many events would no longer matter by then, and it might be too late to do anything about some. I would be tormented by mixed emotions; there would be anger, there would be regret, there would be a sense of helplessness. I would want to scream when hindsight showed how things could have been different, how much of the hurt and abuse could have been prevented. It would not be possible to turn the clock back, nor could the dead be woken to demand an apology for their misdeeds.

But back then, I did not understand why Vikram *bhaiya* was 'peeing' over Radha *didī*. Or why Birju *chacha* was moving fervently on top on Lata *tai* without any clothes on. When Gloria *tai* had a relation from Israel staying with us, why were they taking a bath together when Brajesh *tauji* was travelling to Bombay? Why would Rupa *bua* be crying when Mahesh uncle had his hand between her legs and moving a finger in and out?

I would also see Vikram *bhaiya* lock up his room at times when he had his male friends visiting. Why would they take their clothes off and feel each other and 'pee' again and again? Who were the women who would come into the house from the door in the back at night with Mahesh uncle, follow him to a room on the terrace and let out loud moans from behind closed doors? Why were those women painted with heavy make-up and deep red lipstick, smelling of revolting perfume, and be wearing flashy clothes over their buxom bodies? Why did they come in a group sometimes led by an old woman,

wrinkled with age but equally flashy, and argue over payments due to them? Why would Mahesh uncle need to pay those women?

It was all happening in our house. I was the roving camera, secretly recording the goings-on. I wish I had stayed innocent to the ways of the House of Mathurs.

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If I could erase one memory, one image, it would be of the night when my sister's life changed forever. If I wasn't habitual of sneaking around the house, I would not have witnessed her being ravaged. There would thus be no flashbacks to torment me, to haunt me till the end of my days.

My father was in Udaipur for an extended period of time to settle a knotty property matter. Birju *chacha* was hosting four men over drinks in the living room; guests included a police officer in a *khaki* uniform and a politician dressed in white trousers and shirt. They were guzzling down liquor as if it were water and getting boisterous by the minute. Who was the bartender? Radha *didi*. They were not only ordering her to make drinks, but to also keep the supply of ice and snacks going. I was being her tail, one step behind her throughout. My sister would ask the servants to carry the food but Lata *tai*, who was supervising the cooking, would order her back. Whenever she crossed the men to pick or serve anything, I could not help noticing them patting her bottoms or running their hands wherever they could on her body. She was being molested in plain sight of the elders.

With their decibels at its peak under the influence of excessive alcohol, *chacha* ordered me out of the room and closed the door with my sister still inside. I promptly climbed onto the window sill to see what was happening inside. The men put on raunchy Bollywood numbers on a tape recorder to dance to – around my sister. They were trying to get her to match her steps with theirs, but she would not move on her own; they

had to hold her by the hands and force her to. She was being pulled, and pushed. My *chacha*, who was already unsteady on his feet, passed out on the carpet. The other four men got bolder with my sister, taking turns to press their bodies against hers, gripping her tight with their arms, and trying to kiss her as she shook her face vigorously to avoid theirs.

It got ugly after that. The police officer took out his belt and tied her arms behind her back. While he held her, the politician gagged her with his white scarf. The two gripped her arms and legs and lay her writhing body on the carpet next to the unconscious *chacha*. The cop unbuttoned and lowered his trousers and went down on his knees. He lifted her skirt, yanked out her panties, and thrust himself inside of her between the legs. He moved hard and fast, even as the politician held her down by the shoulders. After a few minutes, the officer stopped heaving, and moved off, walking on the carpet on his fours like a dog to pass out next to the couch, his trousers still crumpled at his ankles.

My sister, crying like a baby, drained of all energy, watched in horror as the politician did exactly what the officer had. When he was done, he stood up, fastened his trousers, and walked out to the toilet leaving the door ajar. Before I could go in, Lata *tai* walked in, surveyed the scene, looked at the two men with lust in their eyes waiting to have a go at my sister and said, not today. It's enough. Next time. Go home.

By then, the police officer was coming to his senses and the politician was back. She told them to leave too. All four men tried to behave as if it were just another party breaking up, and casually filed out of the main door.

My sister was lying unconscious next to my *chacha*, her skirt still lifted, her crotch in full display. *Tai* looked at them both, turned around, saw me at the door and walked up to me. Taking my arm, she took me away from the scene of the crime and deposited me back in my room. She bolted the door from the

outside. I looked out of the window to see her walking back into her room, closing the door behind her, and switching off the light.

I don't know how long my sister lay next to her father's brother in the state I last saw her. I don't know who woke up first. I don't know if they were both conscious at the same time and looked each other in the eye. I don't know what my sister made of her *chacha* lying next to her.

I just know my *chacha* would have not have suffered from any remorse at what happened to his niece. He orchestrated it after all.

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Something changed in the house. A hush set in. It seemed no one was talking to anyone even as they went about their chores. All eyes would be on *didi* – when she would be seen. She barely stepped out of her room for days and weeks.

We shared a room, and I knew something bad had happened to her. That's why she was sobbing all the time, even in her sleep. No one came to our room to talk to her, to console her. My father called after a month of the incident to say he would be home in two days – he asked for Radha *didi* but Sarla *bua* said she was not home.

My sister finally snapped out of her stupor when she heard papa was coming back. She stopped crying, but could not get herself to even fake a smile. She tidied her room, and our father's too. She did all the laundry, went out for a haircut, and bought a new saree to greet our father in.

Seeing her go about the house, there seemed to be a collective sigh of relief. Time had been standing still, the household frozen while she was cooped up. The thaw set in, and the clock could be heard ticking again. The corridors were chattering again. The woks were back on the fire to

cook rich delicacies and desserts. The mourning period was over for the world. It would never be for my sister though.

My father did not get to grieve. He would never know what happened to his elder – and favourite – daughter. Despite his meek persona, I am sure blood would have flowed in our *haveli* had he been told.

My sister could have been saved had my father married Sara.

\*\*\*\*\*

My sister could have made herself sick with anguish. She could have harmed someone - or herself - out of loathing for her perpetrators. She could have dug a hole for herself to go into hiding in. But she chose to go out. To become the toast of town.

Trained as a fashion designer, she cut herself the most provocative of dresses by Jaipur's standards. She camouflaged her grief under heavy make-up. And then went partying. She needed people around her so she would be forced to keep her tears from flowing out. She could be anyone she wanted to be with strangers. She sought attention. And she got it. The rich, the famous, the royal could not take their eyes off her.

Everyone wanted to be seen with her, everyone wanted to see her. If an event was covered by the press, photos of her were sure to be published. Men wooed her, and she teased them back. She would dance with them, let them seduce her, and then leave them heartbroken when they swore their love for her. She hated men, hated all of them. She could not bear to be with anyone for long. She wanted to avenge what had been done to her. She did not know how to. The company of men – bastards most of them as she called them – might teach her to.

And then she met Ranjit. He was technically a royal – the grandson of the *rajmata*'s sister. He had no entitlements but

the 'rulers' were fond of him. He was a trader, based in Jodhpur, exporting the art and handicrafts of the state. They met on New Year's eve – at the biggest party in town in Rambagh Palace, a heritage property owned by the royal family and converted into one of the most luxurious hotels in the world.

They may have been introduced to each other by a common acquaintance, but their meeting was no happenstance. He was famous – or infamous depending how one looked at such things – for being a playboy and yet a highly sought after bachelor in all of Rajasthan. She set up the 'chance' meeting and charmed him right away. He did not let go of her all evening, flirting with her, wooing her, bringing her drinks, and offering to drop her home. She accepted the ride in his Rolls Royce where he tried to make out with her. She let him up to a point; just when he was set to go all the way, she zipped her dress back. Leaving him high and dry.

He was besotted with her. He wanted her. He loved her. He wanted her all for himself. He had finally met a woman who could rein in his wanton ways. He proposed to her.

She held back. Told him the family would never agree. Neither hers, nor the royal. She narrated what happened with Sara and her father. Ranjit was determined. He would do anything to marry her.

She agreed to marry him if he could figure how to. And then, just like that, she was missing from the house. There was a note to say she was going away, and promised to be safe. No one should worry, she would be happy wherever she was and was sorry for leaving in that manner.

I did not know what my elder sister had done. I was too much of a child to comprehend what was happening. But I still knew Radha *didi* had done the right thing by running away to wherever she had.

Birju *chacha* was beside himself with rage. He was mumbling away like a madman, flailing his arms, moving about the courtyard like a headless chicken holding the morning newspaper. The whole state was abuzz with the news of the year.

A leading politician, tipped to be the next chief minister of the state, was dead. As was his son. *Chacha* was banking on the deceased leader for Government contracts to finally make some money of his own. I saw the photo in the newspaper. It was the same man who had done bad things to my sister.

There was more in the story. The son had been in London past few years to develop the market for their export business. He had returned recently with his wife and son. There was a welcome party for them at their home in Jodhpur, attended by close family and friends. Around two in the night, the politician's wife woke to see her husband frothing at the mouth. She raised an alarm. Her son was displaying similar symptoms. Both were dead by the time the doctors arrived. Post-mortem revealed poisoning by a chemical not known to the forensic department of the city. Samples had been sent to New Delhi for further investigation. The bodies were released for cremation.

A week after the news broke, we had two visitors. My sister, and an infant boy in her arms. She was back. My father started crying with joy and relief. I ran to hug her. My brother Raghav just stood and watched, as did others in the house. My father tried asking questions, but my sister evaded answers, feigning fatigue. She asked to retire to the room we had shared. I felt privileged to have exclusive access to her.

Where have you been, I asked.

I got married, she said.



Why didn't you tell us?

No one would have agreed from either side of the family.

So what did you do?

We ran away.

Where were you staying?

London.

When did you come back?

Last month.

Who did you marry? Where is he?

He's no more.

What? How? When? What happened.

Someone poisoned him. And his father too.

Oh my God! Why would someone do that?

Probably to avenge something bad they must have done.

I was still very young when we had that conversation. But I understood what she meant about what can happen when one does bad things to someone. My sister would be my hero for the rest of my life.

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Radha *did*i felt I was mature enough to be taken into confidence. She told me what she had been through. Not at one go, but in bits and pieces. Not everything, but most of it. I figured the rest for myself, there was no need for her to say it.

Why was she involved with Vikram *bhaiya*? The two of them would see what the adults were doing through windows and ventilators, and wanted to try it for themselves. She was too young and naïve – but had reached an age to be curious about and be attracted to the male body. Vikram seemed an accessible candidate to try stuff with. He was her age, and they were not related by blood; he was Mahesh uncle's son from his first marriage.

Not much happened initially; they would hold and feel each other with their clothes still on. They would kiss a wee bit, awkwardly. It was not long before she realized it was wrong of them to be indulging in such acts, and wanted to put a stop to it. He resorted to blackmailing her, threatening to expose her to our grieving father. Radha gave in, under duress, not risking calling his bluff. She allowed him to have his way up to a point, but stayed a virgin.

Until she was raped.

She sought out Ranjit, knowing he was the son of the politician who had raped her. She wanted to get back to at least one of her rapists, but had only a fuzzy game plan for it. It was important to stay close to the family while she figured what to do. She seduced the son to rebel against the family and to go away to London.

Why did they come back? Did his family agree to accept her? The politician never realized who his daughter-in-law was; he was too drunk to remember, and he had too many victims to bother remembering each. Looks like the son may truly have been in love with Radha *didi*, but he had his father's genes. He was known to be a playboy, but he gave girls no choice. They either played along, or he would force himself upon them.

Villainous habits die hard, if they do at all. Ranjit made the fatal mistake of raping his son's young nanny, a Scottish

woman, while in London. *Didi did* not realize anything had happened till the cops came knocking the following day. The nanny had filed a complaint.

Somehow Ranjit knew he was going to be in trouble. He left home early morning, and caught the first flight to India before the police could apprehend him. He called when he was safely home, and tried to pacify a distraught Radha. He pleaded innocence, saying there had been a misunderstanding, the nanny was lying, it would be her word against his, and the cops would trust the white woman more. He had no choice but to leave the country in a hurry.

He sent tickets for Radha and their son, assuring them his family had accepted his wife, and were eagerly waiting to receive them. Radha's mind could not stop replaying images of her own rape in a loop. You will get justice, she made a silent promise to the nanny. And to herself too.

Her father-in-law and husband died under tragic circumstances soon after the family was reunited. She did not even try to fake sorrow. She went into a Zen-like state, not communicating with anyone. One early morning, without informing anyone, she left for Jaipur. Never to return. No one from her late husband's family ever contacted her. The cops would never find the murderer.

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Run Nikita, run.

Radha *did* uttered these words for the first time when I was in high school. And would repeat them time and again so I never forget the warning, and take it seriously. You should go away, she would say. As soon as possible. This place will destroy you. Like it has destroyed me.

Go where, I would ask.

Anywhere. Every place will be better than this one.

What about you?

Don't worry about me. I will be fine.

What about papa? He is not keeping good health.

I will take care of him. I will do what I can. But you cannot stay here. At least you can go make a better life for yourself.

Our father was chronically ill. There was no identifiable disease afflicting him, but his body seemed to be in a state of permanent decline. Every healthy moment would be spent at work to make up for lost time. He would strain himself by putting in long hours, exacerbating his health further. We were always worried for him, and administered whatever care we could. I could not think of abandoning him but Radha *didi* insisted I look at my life ahead. She would hold the fort now that she was back, for good.

I had to run before someone broke my spirit.

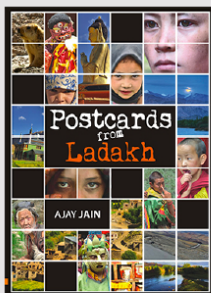
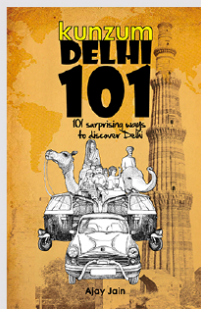
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