

AN EXCERPT FROM 'BACK SEAT' BY ADITYA KRIPALANI

Vijay lay sleeping in the front passenger seat of the car. He'd made the chair recline almost to a complete lateral position and he had his feet up on the dashboard as he snored away. He was woken from his slumber by a quick knocking on his window. He awoke with a start. He rubbed his eyes and then looked out to see Nikita and Shashank standing outside. Shashank, thought Vijay, still looked groggy and so there would hopefully be no more conflict on the way back. Vijay opened the car doors from inside and let them both in. He was surprised to see Nikita also ready to go home instead of staying back as she had the last time they were here. Shashank went back to sleep as the car took the turn out of the hotel gate. Vijay had been looking forward to the drive back home as the city with its large doses of grey asphalt and endless roads now beckoned Vijay every night when he felt the urge to take the car out by himself but abstained from, for fear of being caught. The drive back reminded him of countless Hindi films he'd seen since he was four, of heroes driving their cars along the 'as deserted as Bombay can get' streets. He remembered the film 'Tezaab' and the song 'So gaya yeh jahaan, so gaya aasmaan ...' picturing Chunkey Pandey driving the large white car Vijay hummed the song in his head. He then took a chance and stole a glance at Nikita and Shashank both of whom were fast asleep now, Shashank leaning on Nikita and Nikita leaning on the opposite door.

On reaching 'Krishna Kunj' Vijay took the car up the slight slope to the building a tad too fast and he noticed Nikita waking up in the back seat disturbed by the sudden jerk. Shashank however lay fast asleep. Vijay stopped the car as close to the building entrance and then helped Shashank out and then into the house. He walked a groggy, drunk Shashank at times falling onto him, over to his room which was icy cold thanks to the instructions which Shashank had left Ramdeen with. He needed the room to be absolutely chilled when he entered. Seeing his bed Shashank flopped onto it and turned to his side and shut his eyes. Almost immediately he was fast asleep. Vijay watched him as he lay there. He wondered how even someone like Shashank could look so calm, peaceful and almost innocent in his sleep. Watching Shashank snore for a few minutes Vijay then came back outside to the waiting car. Nikita was now wide awake like a cat on alert. Vijay got into the car, reversed out of the building and drove off towards Nikita's place.

Vijay crossed all the night time landmarks like Asha Parikh hospital medical store which was open all night, all the petrol pumps on S.V. road right up to Pavan Hans which were all night petrol pumps, the scores of prostitutes standing outside the public toilets and around, across the road from 'Rasraj' restaurant, past Amar Juice centre, the favourite night time pav bhaji and juice haunt for every Gujrati and then over the years, non Gujrati in the neighbouring suburbs. Vijay then got onto the D.N. Nagar road and looked out at marshlands which still reigned and held testimony to what was originally Bombay. He drove on at a good pace enjoying his growing control over the car. He then looked behind at Nikita and saw her sitting quietly staring out of the window into the night. 'How calm she looks now ... wow! ... what a change' thought Vijay. Just then she caught him staring at her. Irritated by this repeated happening, she looked at him with icy eyes.

"Eh. . . hero. . . do you want me kya?. . . haan? Want to thoko me?" she asked with a slight anger flaring through her voice as she spoke.

Vijay just looked back at the road and didn't dare to look at the mirror for the rest of the journey, even if it was just to keep track of the vehicles behind.

They reached Nikita's building lane at three a.m. and Nikita got out of the car. Vijay didn't dare look at her even now. She walked over to his window. Vijay turned to look at her surprised and almost fearful of what was to come.

"Kay re. . . do you want to do some chodumchaadi. . . haan. . . just so that you know. . . you won't be able to afford even short time with me in a million years!" said Nikita.

"so don't ghoro all the time in the rear view... if I tell your sahab he'll shove a bamboo up your gaand...patla ka?!" she continued before turning on her heel to leave.

Vijay was shocked out of his wits with the language he just heard hurled at him. His mouth, he realized after Nikita left, was still slightly open. Shutting it, he put the car into gear then looking at the haughty Nikita walking with gusto towards her lane.

"what does she bloody think of herself?" thought Vijay. "is she miss India? or miss world?"

suddenly he felt the anger rise in him like a hot ball of gas which was rising up into his throat and fast. He rolled down the window.

"oh. . . miss India. . . I hate the very existence of women like you. . . who sell themselves to lives like these. . . no bloody respect. . . " he shouted.

Nikita was startled and turned back immediately to face him, a mixed expression of anger and horror on her face.

"I'm from a small town in Bihar so it took me time to understand you. . . but now I think I understand your Jaat!! Patle Kay??!" he said with his garbled version of Marathi and quickly rolled up his window as he saw Nikita approach him at top speed for a fight. He put the car into gear and began to move off with a frustrated Nikita trying to catch up with him. She only managed to swing her purse onto the back of the car as it moved off.

“maderchod” she exclaimed under her swelling breath.

Vijay was looking at her in his rear view now, a smile on his face.

“Aur dikha nakhre. . . .serves you right. . .” he said to himself. Just then he noticed in the rear view mirror that two men on a motorcycle had come up to Nikita and shouted out to her whilst passing by. He slowed the car down almost to a halt and continued to watch. Nikita hurled abuses at them to challenging them to come back. And they did, to her dismay. One guy got off and began to touch her. Vijay pressed on the accelerator so hard that a shrill screeching sound emanated from the rubber and startled even the two offenders. He spun the car around and approached the scene of the crime. By now even the other man had gotten off the bike and they were both onto Nikita. One man slapped her hard. Seeing this Vijay got out of the car and ran towards the two men.

“madddeerrrchooooooooddd!!” he shouted almost as a war cry giving him that much required energy to plant his strongest blow on the back of one of the men’s heads sending him almost to the ground. But the other man was upon on him in almost no time at all delivering killer punches and kicks, the third one of which caught Vijay so hard that he stumbled and fell to the ground. Now the first man who Vijay had hit was also back in the one sided fight and kicked Vijay like a maniac. Nikita came into the fight and tried to pry one of the men off Vijay.

“maderchod bloody top class Randi. . .” he said and slapped her.

“who’s going to bachao your chikni gaand now haan?” he shouted.

“bastard. . .” shouted Vijay getting the man’s attention away from what he was about to do to Nikita and attracting his attention back to himself. The man now moved towards his bike removing a thick steel rod to inflict more pain upon his helpless adversary. Realizing that this was getting more deadly by the second Nikita ran up to the parked car and pressed the horn hard and long. ‘Pooooommmmmppppp!! Pppppooompppp!’ rang the horn. She went on and on honking till a couple of people in the two new buildings had come out into their balconies and windows. Lights had begun to come on here and there. The two guys stopped short of using the rod and took off before the odds were evened leaving a bloody faced Vijay on the ground. Nikita walked up to him and quickly and carefully helped him up from the ground as he moaned and groaned. She hurriedly helped him into her small dark lane trying to control the damage to her reputation as much as she could though she knew that the damage had in fact already been done. This had never happened before. She could smell the blood and sweat emanating from the dark bony figure she now helped over to her building. Vijay’s arms were so bony they cut into Nikita’s neck from the back as he used her shoulders for support. She anyhow helped him up to her house, opened the door and slipped in before any more neighbours came out to bare witness to the night’s events.

As Vijay entered the small hall in Nikita’s one bedroom hall apartment he stumbled and fell onto the floor. Nikita noticed that he’d been kicked hard on the knees also and there might have been a chance of some bone or cartilage breakage. She felt lucky

that Vijay was featherweight. She helped him up.

“arre baapa re. . . You’ve gotten hurt really badly. . . My god. . !” said Nikita.

“aah. . .” said Vijay.

Nikita helped him to the cane sofa and got him to sit on it. Then she walked over to the light switches near the door and switched both the tube lights in the hall on to check for the extent of the damage. She asked Vijay to roll up his trouser sleeves so that she could check for bruises there, then she got him to stretch and then bend both his legs one by one, followed by his arms, in this way checking for fractures or sprains. When she was satisfied that nothing serious was broken, she began a survey of the bruises. She checked all over and realized that there were scalds and bruised everywhere, right from his back to his head, face, legs and feet. The assailants had kicked him mercilessly. She asked him to take it easy while she fetched him some water. Then she went inside to fix him some ‘Glucon D’. With Nikita inside the kitchen, Vijay looked around. The small hall was done up in cane and so had a picture frame in cane accompanied by an entire sofa set consisting of two chairs and a sofa itself. The centre table was also made of cane. Vijay didn’t know this yet but cane furniture had for decades been the choice of many of the immigrants in Bombay who lived on rent and didn’t want to invest in more expensive furniture. He could hear a distinct hum which came from very close to where he was sitting. The sound frequently became an audible clicking almost as if some small thing was hitting against the cane repeatedly. When Nikita came back into the room from her kitchen, she noticed that Vijay was craning his neck to try to figure out what the sound was.

“arre. . . That’s some kind of termite or white ant or something which is eating away at the cane. I bought all this kabada cheap from a sale in someone else’s house. Another tenant somewhere who was going back to his native place leaving this city of dreams forever.”

“going to shift to my new flat soon . . . Done khoop planning to do tichi sajawat with proper furniture... Not this bhaltach...!” she said as she gave Vijay the Glucon D.

“you live here alone. .” questioned Vijay.

“yes...Why some problem?!!” questioned Nikita getting back momentarily to her guarded position.

“naheen bhai. . . Nothing like that at all. . . Just amazed. . . You see I’m from a place where women don’t live alone. . So I though maybe. . .” said Vijay.

“oh ... Ok ok ... Chook jhaali ... Was just caught off guard by your question!” replied Nikita.

Nikita looked at Vijay as he greedily slurped the remaining Glucon D from the glass and kept it on the table. He was so thin thought Nikita that in a fight there would be absolutely no skin and fat to protect his bones at all leaving them exposed to the threat of complete and irreparable breakage. Why then did this scrawny little fellow take on those two men for me, someone he was abusing only a few minutes before the incident.

“come, let’s go inside, I have a proper first aid kit aat in my cupboard. We’ll sort you out.” she said.

“naheen naheen ... Dhanyavaad bhai ... I’m absolutely ok now ... No need!” said Vijay.

“arre bavdat. . . .atta will you please stop this veda formalitygiri. . . If you don’t attend to those wounds and recover fast you’ll have to bear another beating from that Shashank. So now stop doing jhig jhig like a nayi naveli Navri and come. .” she said, leaving almost no room for opposition.

She helped Vijay, who by now had relented to her will, into her bedroom. Vijay noticed the long dressing table mirror decorated with bindis of all shapes and sizes around and the simple bed, this time made out of wood and not cane. He also noticed the simple single Godrej steel cupboard taking up the only remaining space for furniture in the small room. Nikita got him to sit on her bed noticing that he was

feeling very uncomfortable sitting on a lady's bed.

“kaay re. . . never sat on a girl's bed before kay?” she joked.

“actually no. . .” replied Vijay in all honesty.

Nikita smiled. She then moved towards her cupboard and opened it revealing certain parts of it to Vijay. He noticed how neatly she'd arranged her clothes in sections for daily wear, the home wear variety, and obviously the 'wear to work' sexy clothing set separately. He also noticed the scores of bangles hung on sawn away hangers. And a small locker with a turning dial number code safety device on it. Nikita got back to him with her first aid kit. She opened it up on the bed revealing the gauge bandages, dozens of band aids in all shapes and sizes and the three different types of creams and two small miniature sprays inside. The complete range of first aid casualties from burns to fractures were covered in the itinerary of creams and sprays. She removed some antiseptic cream and another antiseptic powder. She then asked Vijay to spread out the cream on all his wounds one by one, then following it up with some powder sprinkled on top of the cream patches forming a super antiseptic mixture. Vijay complied with her actions being in some way grateful for the feeling of being at home at least after sustaining such injuries and going through the ordeal tonight. When after fifteen minutes of careful painting of each and every wound, some even under his shirt, Vijay had tackled the last wound, Nikita wrapped up the kit and shutting it walked over to her cupboard. This time she opened one door a little more revealing to Vijay a photo of Aslam and her at the gateway of India which Vijay hadn't seen yet in person but recognized from numerous filmy posters, on television and from photos of relatives who'd gotten themselves immortalized in front of that gigantic monument which symbolized Bombay as much as the statue of Liberty symbolized America specially in Vijay's world of knowledge acquired through films. Nikita then placed the first aid kit in its rightful place and shut her cupboard.

“sorry. . . But. . . who's in that photo with you. . . ?” asked Vijay in a quiet, almost inaudible voice which Nikita heard nice and clear.

She turned her head around and looked at Vijay with a hard stare for a moment

making him feel almost sorry for having asked, then almost immediately she regained her normal composure and turned around fully to face him.

“It’s a long story. . .and a personal one!” she said with calculated words.

She moved to sit on a small wooden stool near the bed, slightly away from Vijay.

“all I can say is. . . Nobody gets into this profession by choice. . . . It’s mostly circumstantial. . . . Though in the long run of course. . . The money and other things make us all stick on. . .” she added.

Vijay nodded. “hmmm. . . I can understand” he said.

“by the way. . . . What made you get into a fight for me like that. . . .I’m sure you knew that you didn’t stand a chance even before you got into it. . . .” asked Nikita.

“welllll. . . . It’s a long story again. . . . Very long. . .and painful, so personal. . . But I can say this. . .it wasn’t about you!! I can’t see violence being inflicted on any woman. . . That’s all I’ll say now!” he said, and then got up from the bed.

“I’ve got to be going. It’s really late. Thanks a lot for the care and help.” he said as he began to move out into the hall with Nikita getting up and following him.

“It’s nothing. . .thanks. . .no matter what you did all that for. . . You barobar ended up helping me. . . Thanks again.” said Nikita as she opened the door to Vijay who turned around, smiled at her for a brief moment and then moved towards the stairs and then disappeared down the first visible flight. Nikita shut the door and walked back in, shutting the lights of the hall and retiring to her bedroom. She sat in front of the mirror and used a deep cleansing milk lotion to remove the light make up from her face and eyes. ‘what a strange fellow. . . .there’s obviously so much more to people than we think at first sight. . .’ she thought, giving the topic no more importance than that for the night. She slept well that night, with no dreams to entice her and no nightmares to plague her. The future held a lot in store for her of which at this moment she was blissfully unaware.