

# ANJUNA NIGHTS

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In this dark and fizzy original short story set in Goa, a woman discovers an uncomfortable truth about her husband. To drown her sorrow, she solicits the company of a writer-friend and together they embark on a culinary adventure across North Goa

"Two weeks from now, on Friday, at 2.43 in the afternoon, I'm going to kill myself," she said, ordering another negroni. We were at the bar at Mahé in Anjuna. I hadn't seen her in a decade—we had been in college together but she had dropped out after winning a major beauty contest. She became a model, I saw her in magazines I read mostly at dentist clinics in north Bombay, when I still lived in the city, when dentists still rang up magazine subscriptions.

"What're you drinking?" she asked. I'd asked Ivo, the bartender at Mahé for a gimlet, generously shot with the Greater Than gin I'd come to groove on in my years in Goa.

"Do you have any hash?" she said.

I was wolfing down a portion of tapioca bravas. "God, Sohini, you're still the same!"

She motioned the waiter and asked for the aubergine recheado. "I am not," she clarified, "I am vegetarian now. And I'm going to kill myself if all this doesn't fix itself."

Maybe because we were down several drinks—the restaurant's sole patrons, after midnight, Tuesday, late November—she felt she could tell me. Or maybe it was because I was an irrelevant writer she knew from college—I was familiar but no threat. A few weeks ago, her sister had moved in with her and this morning—right after she came back early from her jog on Morjim beach—she had found her in bed with Rahul, her husband of six years.

Her disclosure left me speechless.

She asked me again for hash and when I said I had half a joint in my bag, she said we should smoke it after ice cream from Mr Choc, the gelato place across from Orchard Supermarket. "I live on tubs of hazelnut and Belgian chocolate. The best," she ran her tongue over her upper lip, "cream in Goa." I don't know if she had meant it to sound obscene.

After dinner, we ambled it over to Mr Choc. We sat around circular metal tables. Two Russian boys sat across from us. The shadow of a white church fell over a row of stray cattle. Sohini asked me to do one thing: keep her company at dinner over the next few days. She made it sound that if I declined then she would go under depths of rage and sorrow; she made me feel as if I were her only friend in Goa. I did not understand this. She was famous, perhaps even rich. In college we marvelled at her independence—she lived by herself at a PG in Khar and took care of room and board doing print work for labels. She always had *maal* on her, she knew how to score, the dealers always took her call. She'd been to Mombassa on a shoot (I'd only ever been as far as Thailand, with my parents, a jelly fish had stung me in Phuket). She knew the models, the odd television star. As I recollected this, I thought to myself: Why doesn't she reach out to one of her real friends?

But maybe Sohini did not want her friends to know that her sister had stolen her husband. Goa was a small place; gossip ruinous as gout.

"Let me take you to Sublime," she said, and when we met there the following evening we were told the chef had had a bike accident. "But he can cook?" The waiter nodded, "Everything. Today. Slow." The drinks were lousy—a cucumber cooler with mucky bits of old coriander. But Sohini was sure I'd declare the food a winner. She was right. She ordered me a soup with clams and calamari, it sounded like a paella but it was masterful, fresh, wholesome, soothing. For herself she ordered salad with goats' cheese and caramelized onion—an enormous portion that took up most of our table. "The cheese is made in Siolim." She said she had spent the day packing away the belongings of her "*harami* husband". He was a yoga teacher who she said "devoted years to alternate nostril breathing only so he might one day muster the *prana* to bang his sister-in-law". I felt awkward. I asked for a fillet of sea bass—I had ordered it a few weeks ago, when my publisher had invited me here to say they were no longer going to be publishing my backlist.

In the middle of her main course—a fillet of beef with portobello mushrooms and asparagus, of which she ate only the greens—she stood, arms akimbo. "Let's go to Suzy's," she said, referring to an eccentric, wee place, approached via a dirt track in Assagao. I reminded her you had to book online for a meal at Suzy's; the chef was particular her small menu, and kitchen, ran zero-waste. "Then let's do Botanique, that French jingmathing," but when we got there she had changed her mind so we went to Gunpowder. "It's wall-to-wall Delhi farmhouse types," she complained about Gunpowder's customer base. "I hide at the bar drinking Lendu's cocktails." We settled in the corner of the bar; a whiff of Gunpowder's spicy potatoes and Malabar *parathas* floated over us. In a flat, circular dehumidifier dried the skins of pomelo, lemons, oranges, pomegranate—a finishing school for cocktail garnishes.

"My sister was depressed after her cat died. She couldn't breathe in Vasant Vihar. She had asthma attacks. So I asked her to move in with me in Siolim—I sent her a lifeline. And what does she do in return?" Terror flashed through her large almond eyes but I felt as if she was trying to be angry—she was trying to convince herself, more than me, that her husband had left her in some kind of kinky smoke. Sevak, the manager of Gunpowder, came to check on us. Her angry face changed; it was as if she was facing a camera, her expression was an open door leading to a warm, low-lit room. "Thank you, Sevak," she cooed. "You save my life every single time!" I noticed tables of men eyeing Sohini—they seemed to recognize her, her black off-shoulder dress called attention to a tanned bare back.

I sensed, as had her nerdy audience of urban leeches, my role as an emotional support pet. I was aware—the awareness cut into me—what it was to be a writer: it was a particular kind of noble invisibility that had recently become dreadfully cheap. I felt invisible when my publishers told me my books no longer sold enough copies to warrant a royalty invoice. The editor added, "But then people are just not reading—so it could also be that?"

"Are you okay?" Sohini asked me, when she saw I hadn't eaten any of the prawn mappas on my plate.

"I'm not hungry," I said. "I'll have this to go." Behind us, the group of men erupted in laughter. If this made me awkward, I wondered how she coped. "Shall we go?"

She motioned Sevak to have my food parcelled. "Don't let the micro-penis bother you," she said, reading my mind. Her bike was parked near Rangeela; we walked towards it. "Totally splashy party at Olive tomorrow!" She was astride her yellow Vespa, revving it up. "I haven't seen Latika and Hasan in years. You must dress up!" But when we got to Olive the next evening, it was not the intimate reunion she had hoped for with Latika and Hasan. A guest was celebrating her 40th birthday. A hundred drunk guests had laid siege to the marvellously located restaurant—high bluff, and beyond: clean, boundless sweep of blue sea. The birthday girl sprung up on a circular table. Popping open a bottle of bubbly, a man began to spray her with its fizz. Some guests applauded.

"Oh god," Sohini covered her mouth, "this is why I left modelling. Always some creep who thinks a champagne douche will sit in for a shower. And every girl who believes she can move all the merch. But let me tell you something." Her voice was a hoarse sizzle. "You reach an age no one wants to sleep with you and then the party is a punishment." According to Sohini, the "age of sexual irrelevance" for most women was 23 or "maybe 28, if you'd done Pilates since, like, you were six."

Sohini was around my age—two years short of 40. "How old is your sister?" I asked.

She could not respond because right then Hasan and Latika popped by and on spotting Sohini, he leaned down and hugged her. He clicked his fingers and had the chef send over Olive's classics—prawns pil pil, a mezze platter.

"Your chef is a star," she cried. "I love him! Pure genius!"

To my ears she sounded like an Instagram caption writ large although she had never been on social media ("I need another sort of gram").

Hasan and Sohini chatted excitedly, reminiscing about a crew of models who had ruled the Bombay catwalk, who let their hair down at the Olive on Union Park Road. But now Malti was married and lived in east London with a banker boyfriend. Jewel's gender reassignment surgery had turned out to be a "massive botch-up job". Two months ago, a make-up artist they knew had killed herself—she had set herself on fire on the 12th floor of her Yari Road flat. These recollections bore no relevance to me; I tore into dinner. The chef had sent a pizza to our table, glamorously thin crust, modest baste of red sauce. Neither Hasan nor Sohini were keen on the nosh. I understood what it was to be famous, or to have had been famous—dish after dish came to our table, my sangria was refilled without having to motion a waiter. But perhaps fame, or real power, was to never feel hungry, even when you were. I saw Sohini barely lift one spoon of the mushroom velouté to her lips. I was the only one eating. Briefly, I felt like an animal in their company. "I love Olive," she whispered in my ear, after Hasan had left her side. "It brings back so many Bandra memories," she sighed. "But another part of me was looking at the birthday girl whoring it up, at that moron spraying her with bubbly, and I thought—this is what is wrong with modern India! Consumption! Greed! Vile taste! The ship is burning but our lot is twerking to Beyoncé. No one told them to vote. They confuse freedoms for oppressions—it's not kosher to dance for all the men in the room. Know what I mean?"

"I guess you just have to let people be. . . . You can't judge all the time...."

"Your humanity," she said, folding her arms, "is giving me a headache."

When I was back home, Sohini texted that her sister was 24, begotten via her father's second marriage with a Kashmiri lawyer. "She has yoga abs—can't see, can feel."

The days passed in a flurry—we hung out with Javier, a Spanish photographer at the W. At Spice Traders, I relished the salmon nigiri (I'd only ever had it as good before at Izumi in Mumbai). Sohini called in the tofu krapao, while Javier ordered most things on the menu, including a truffle and tuna carpaccio. Originally from Madrid, Javier worked for B\_\_\_\_\_ in America; this magazine would cover dinner. "Ask as you want, eh," he put his hand on my shoulder. I'd never seen so handsome a man up close; it was like looking at a race horse, I wanted to comb his hair—long, silken, blond. Sohini finished her vegetarian sushi platter in five minutes. Javier called in rounds of Kiwi Fizz. Sohini said she had to "cut down on drink" (but she was the first among us to wipe the glass). One guest—a man with a disturbing sack of navel fat—came to our table to ask for a selfie with Sohini. She blushed. Then her face grew strong, alert, a spear in the sun. He said he'd seen her on the cover of *Vogue* and held on to the issue. He said, "Can you believe I have kept it for 10 years now?" Immediately, Sohini's face shut down. Even Javier couldn't get her to snap out of her funk. The next two days, she stayed in. At Mahé, the first night we had met, she had said she was going to kill herself. Was it for effect? But her silence—phone switched off for 48 hours—made me revisit her outrageous claim. Thankfully, I got a text the next afternoon. "I need to scram this hole." We arranged to meet at Matcha, a wee Japanese place where our salmon roll took so long to make that we left before it arrived. We headed to Laila's Café, a dive run by out-of-towners, where she ordered me *kheema paratha* and some *idli-sambhar* for herself. "Comfort food," she said. "Can comfort food comfort me? Can it comfort you?" Briefly, she sounded like a lunatic. "What may comfort any of us?"

The street was busy; a warm breeze, over palm fronds, made them quiver. "My husband asked for a divorce." She appeared resigned. "I thought he might want to separate but then I realized that's already happened."

"I'm sorry."

"Please," she raised her hand to my face: "This is not a funeral."

I bit my lower lip. I wanted to leave—I was tired of seeing her every evening, evening after evening, her soap opera asides. I imagined this is what it means to be married: routine humiliation in exchange for free food. But my loneliness was vast, and my sense of private failure deep enough to contain her contempt. "My own sister," she repeated. "Can you believe it?" I set my hand on her lap. She put her hand over it. In college, Sohini was big dawg, all the guys crushed on her, even the ones who later ended up on Grindr. She stood in the canteen of Mithibai College like a minaret, a queen who had lost her way and briefly appeared before plebeians, disturbed by their very existence. We imagined what it might be to touch her shoulder, to smell her long, thick, soot-black hair but then she dropped out, and the following year, she was Miss India. Like a shooting star, she went from distant to unattainable.

Now, years from the afternoon I had seen her in the Mithibai College canteen, her hand was over mine. But it was nothing as I had thought it would be.

"What is your book about?" This was the first question she had ever asked about my work.

I told her I had moved to Goa to research its two seminal painters, Souza and Gaitonde. A fictional account of their friendship grew to become my second novel.

Clasping my face, she said, "The only thing I ever wanted was to write fiction!" I blushed. I asked if I could invite her to this dinner at Laila's Café, the most affordable of places we had been together.

She declined. "No, when you win the Nobel prize then you can take me to Tataki," referring to a spanking new restaurant in Panaji. "Their men's room has the best view of the bridge—it could pass for the Golden Gate."

"What were you doing in the men's room?"

"Conducting an informal census."

On Saturday we went to Ping's Bia Hoi in Sangolda. A Vietnamese beer garden in Goa was mighty novel. Things sure had changed from when I first moved here. Seven years ago, Mrs Irene D'Souza from Aldona made us chicken pâté—the big ask. Now AJ Supermarket stocked kale and kombucha. Ping's was new and teeming with young people, the sort who invested heroic amounts of time dreaming up hashtags. Sohini reminded me of a cat at dusk, one leg aloft, sizing the air for prey.

"Oh, this conclave of averages," she exhaled. A garage band was playing the Eagles' *Hotel California*. Sohini pressed her long, manicured hands over her ears. She told me she had seen her sister and husband coming out of Orchard Supermarket. They seemed like "any other vegan couple with unresolved mental health issues". They had beige cloth bags that said Date A Book Lover. They had bicycles. She hadn't known whether to scream or to break "all my mother's Diwali china". The delicious food at Ping's distracted her—the fried lotus root, the pad thai, the tofu baos.

On the table next to us, a food blogger from Delhi sat with the chef who led her through his menu. He described his menu and some of its stars—the clay pot chicken or the prawn dim sums—but the blogger was more interested in imitating rich women from south Delhi, part of an act she did before millions of followers. Sohini, meanwhile, grew restless. I said, "We can leave if you want." She said she wanted to come back to Ping's on a day "all social media influencers have succumbed to a strange and fatal plague". She was loud enough for our neighbour to overhear. The blogger, revving for trouble, came to our table. "I believe you wanted to say something to me?" She pointed her phone at Sohini's face, who set down her fork. "Yes, but I've changed my mind now. I'd like to slap you instead." Sohini picked a long meat knife from a mug of cutlery. Later, she described the blogger as a "triumph of annoying over banal". Before our main course—a Thai yellow curry and a tangy mango salad—showed up, I noticed the blood drain from Sohini's face. Pointing to a couple that had just entered and was walking towards the bar, she mumbled to me, "Quick, get me out of here." I tried to get a good look at the couple but they were facing the bar and by then we were already at the door.

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I had one final dinner with Sohini before she disappeared altogether from my life. This dinner was at Tataki, its memory came back on the day of Ivo's funeral service. I wasn't sure how much time had passed since she vanished on me. Perhaps six months? Or even eight? Everything blurs in Goa. The bartender we knew, who had been making her negronis at Mahé, had succumbed to an accident. Ivo's memorial was at Mahé. I was seated beside Aravind, who owned the joint. When a

long black car pulled up—for Goa, it had an unnaturally expensive air, it was exotic, a zebra among horses—I saw Sohini emerge. She was wearing a white asymmetrical shirt that came to her knees; it was Savio Jon, the designer she loved over all others. I was angry at her for ghosting me but to be honest I had forgotten about her. I was working on a new book, reconstructing a grisly murder, my first book of non-fiction. Research for the book had introduced me to such absurd, memorable characters—a jailer who organized and filmed orgies in the slammer, a ventriloquist who lived with 27 pet ducks in Moira—that, in comparison, Sohini was already a beige space in my memory. A car, which looked like two cars were piled over each other, pulled in after Sohini’s sleek vehicle. An enormous white man stepped out of it. His two minders, in grey safari suits, led Sohini and the white man to Ivo’s widow. Other mourners tried to act nonchalant; the couple had an arresting air.

Aravind said the white man was Sergey, who owned a lot of things around Arambol, nightclubs, farm land, chemical companies, a hotel, a brewery. He looked like someone who modelled for protein supplements; he was handsome in the way of a pit bull. “He was in jail until last month,” Aravind divulged. I imagined Sergey was here as he had known Ivo—Russians in north Goa were a small, tight community. “I mean, he’s often in jail.” I wondered if he had been in jail when Sohini had met me at Mahé almost a year ago. “I think she’s used to his long spells away from their house,” Aravind said. “But he can be a man of many perks.” *I need another sort of gram.* Fairy lights were clustered over us in glass Chor Bazaar lanterns; the mood was sombre but hopelessly beautiful. “They’ve been together for a decade. He calls her his muse; she calls him her amuse. If you didn’t know Sergey was a drug lord who could call in favours at Tihar, it’d all seem cheesy.” At Tataki—where I had my last dinner with Sohini—she had ordered mushroom cigars and asparagus cream cheese filo. “Oh, and some of your fabulous salmon crudo for my dear friend,” she had said to the chef. The chef was an attractive, hunky man, originally from Lucknow; Sohini lodged her elbow on his shoulder. “And some Thai corn cakes for me, with your world-class avocado rolls.” She told me she had decided to go through with the divorce. She was relieved; she was not going to contest. Then she said, “Torched tuna, get that, it’s amazing.” I wondered how she knew the fish menu here so well; she was vegetarian. Sohini seemed bored by her sister’s affair; the shock had worn off, or maybe she knew she could no longer take it anywhere. *The only thing I ever wanted was to write fiction.*

After the memorial service, I stopped on the Anjuna road where Ivo had had the fatal accident—he was on his way home after work when his bike smashed into a stationary truck. When Aravind had told me this, it seemed so cruel, random, unbelievable. I stood near the spot where he was believed to have lain, bleeding, until an ambulance showed up. The circumstances of the accident had been entirely innocent. There was no reason. Briefly, I could picture Ivo at the bar where I had met Sohini—he had large twinkling eyes, a kind smile—and although I had not known him well, I felt fondness swell in my heart for him. The moon was half. The road abandoned. I got on my bike and drove home to work on my book.

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