

---

## The Diwali Fiasco

*'Who am I? Are you sure you want to know? If someone told you I was just your average ordinary guy without a care in the world, somebody lied. Truth is, it wasn't always like this. There was a time when life was a lot less complicated.'* –  
*Peter Parker, Spiderman*

As I was driving to Bandra, where we had been invited for a Diwali dinner by my wife's cousin, Sonal (my wife of seven years) sitting in shock behind and Shlok, the five-year-old apple of my eye, sitting confused and scared with me in the front, my own mind was awl with a million thoughts like raging impulses across agitated synapses. A cocktail of unwanted emotions was searing through me like sharp, tiny bullets, boring holes wherever they made contact. Horror – upon seeing my wife bested by such insignificance. Confusion – at the apparent absurdity of it all. Apprehension – would the fabric that held us together start crumbling? Consternation and self-reproach – for not having noticed it so far. Concern – for Shlok's well-being and sanity. Anger – at Sonal for not understanding what I was trying to tell her and instead arguing with me. Anger – also at myself for supposedly being the head of the family and not dealing with this situation deftly. Much as I tried to architect my thoughts into a coherent, understandable structure, they insisted on entirely being edgeless clouds of inchoate matter – ill-formed, stunted and warped.

I still couldn't believe it. Two ants! Two ants? I was scarcely paying attention to the radio churning out old melodies of Kishore Kumar

and Mohammed Rafi on the car stereo of my black Honda City, which otherwise I would have been singing along. Even Sonal and Shlok were terrifyingly silent. All I wanted to do was to have the evening end soon and it hadn't even begun. Two ants! I shook my head in disbelief.

Just to make sense of the bizarre spectacle that I had been a witness to, a few minutes earlier, I ran the scene through my mind again for the umpteenth time to make yet another futile attempt at understanding what exactly happened. It was the third day of Diwali of 2009. Every year, for the last seven years, we had been dining *chez* one of Sonal's relatives on this day. It was a ritual that came with the territory of being married to a girl with a huge extended family. Sonal has no fewer than ten uncles and aunts and twenty-five cousins. They have more than 'cordial relations' with each of them. This family is a strong case for '*rishta nibhaana*' (maintain relationships willingly), as against '*kaam chalaana*' (get by with the minimum). That year too, we had been invited over by one of Sonal's cousins.

They lived in Bandra and to reach there from our apartment, in Andheri, we had to leave at least 75-90 minutes earlier. We would have to weave our way through the Juhu traffic, drive by the Juhu seaside, cross the Santa Cruz Police Station and Linking Road and then reach Hill Road in Bandra. Knowing how things were likely to get delayed, I had impressed upon Sonal, the need to leave at 6.30 pm to arrive at the latest by 8 pm.

During the daytime, time seemed to be passing languorously, just the way I like it during the holidays. Still, towards evening, it already seemed like we would be late. Since Diwali is in winter, it was also getting dark outside. Lately, I had come upon the realization that this was becoming a kind of pattern. We were to leave in less than an hour, and Sonal still wasn't in any state of readiness to go. She isn't the type to take

too long deciding on what clothes to wear, what accessories to pair with them, how much makeup to apply, unlike the stereotypes women are cast in. That wasn't the reason for the delay.

But I truly wish that she was that stereotypical woman and that was the real reason for the delay, instead of what the reality was. Lately, our delays were caused by an annoying habit that she had developed. She had gotten into the irksome routine of wanting to maintain extreme cleanliness of the apartment. I make it sound like a bad thing because this fetish was bordering on the excessive. Whom am I kidding? On the other side of excessive, it was far away from the centre. Freakish is more like it.

Whatever time of the day it was, the apartment needed to be spic and span. Clean as the proverbial whistle! Whenever we had to go somewhere, she would leave the apartment only when she was one hundred percent satisfied with the cleanliness and tidiness of the place. She wanted everything to be prim and proper, everything in its rightful place. It was not uncommon to see her dressed at her finest, make-up et al., and still have a dusting cloth in her hand for some last-minute cleaning. Even seconds before leaving, she would wipe invisible dirt off a surface or two with the dusting cloth and subject it to a particular forensic-ish scrutiny. I would idly imagine her walking all around with a magnifying glass in her hand, inspecting the apartment for some missed spot. I would even make fun of her and tell her I would buy her one. She would give me one of her dazzling smiles and let it pass.

Sonal would start from the bedroom at the far end of the apartment, a rub-a-dub here and a rub-a-dub there. From there, she would move to the kitchen and repeat. Then, onto the living-room and repeat, like a tireless soldier, decimating enemies, thoroughly and systematically. Only then would we leave the house. This would almost always be done long

after we ought to have already left for wherever we were supposed to go, and it would irk me. I like reaching wherever I go on time, and I make an effort to be punctual. Here, despite the delay, Sonal would waste more time in her crusade while Shlok and I would be ready and waiting.

On this day, too, as usual, fifteen minutes after it was time for us to leave, Shlok and I at the ready, he in a smart Indian ethnic *chudidar-kurta*, neatly combed (and oiled – he didn't know enough to object to his hair being oiled and Sonal took full advantage of the situation by applying obscene amounts of oil on his scalp, as often as she could) hair, talcum powdered face, smelling of jasmine and wearing cute looking black sandals in his small feet and me in my usual checked shirt and blue jeans with Lee Cooper shoes, and a measured application of Brut deodorant. Feeling dapper but twiddling thumbs. Waiting. For Sonal to finish her cleaning. Sitting on the sofa, watching random programmes on TV. Flicking channels without registering what was playing, and inwardly fuming while Sonal was making sure the apartment was cleaner than ever. Occasionally casting frustrated glances at Sonal, who looked resplendent in an off-white *salwar kameez* with a golden-ish *dupatta*). She had on bangles that adorned her right hand, a sleek watch that adorned the left, lipstick that she liked and kohl that I liked. Beautiful!

The only thing that marred the scene was the cloth in her hand. The bedroom was inspected first, and with some fuss, it passed muster, after a scrub here and a dab there. The kitchen also made it. Like an army major inspecting a file of soldiers and pulling them up for their misses. I could imagine each room heaving a sigh of relief as Sonal was done with them. Finally, when she reached the drawing-room, my hopes of a speedy departure rose, and so did my spirits.

The *Lakshmi* idol and the *pooja thali* were kept on the centre table, which was ironically, against the wall. Sonal was cleaning that up. She removed the ash of the *agarbattis* and *dhoops* that had run their courses and lit new ones in their place. She replenished the oil in the oil lamps for them to keep being lit for a while longer. Then she cleaned the dining table and set the box of sweets in a container kept in a vessel filled with water so that no ants could reach the sweets.

Just as she was finishing up, and I was finally cooling down after having simmered all this while at Sonal for having delayed our departure, the event that would be the seminal point in our lives made its horrific presence felt. While Sonal was wiping the dining table around the box of sweets, she came face to face with her nemesis. It is funny to call them a nemesis because it isn't lizards or cockroaches that we are talking about, which most women (or even men) are scared of. It was two ants. Two ants! Bam! It was as if we were hit by a tornado. Things went in a complete whirl from that point. Sonal was utterly overwhelmed with fear, horror writ large on her face. White! Shaking! After going through multiple contortions of face and mind, trying hard to control her fear, when she couldn't, she finally burst into tears. Downright howling. Uncontrollably. Her kohl mixed with her tears and made dark blotches on her face, ruining her princess-ly looks. A torrent of tears streaming down her face, nose running, trying to keep up with the tears and nearly succeeding.

At that instant, Sonal forgot everything else. She forgot that we were to go out. She forgot that she had taken pains to get ready. She forgot that we were waiting. She forgot that we existed at all. All she wanted to do was to lay her hands on a fresh dusting cloth again, wipe-wipe-wipe to get those ants off the table, out of the drawing-room, and out of the apartment. She wanted to make sure that there were no more ants left, no

matter how much time and effort that took. She pulled out one of her clean dusting cloths, of which we had dozens at home at any point, went into the bathroom and washed it with generous amounts of soap and water (even new ones needed to be broken in with a thorough scrub with soap and water before she would consider them worthy of making contact with any surface in the apartment).

Then she spent a full twenty minutes cleaning the table up; wiping the entire surface multiple times, checking and rechecking to see if there were any more ants left that needed to be taken care of or if there was any sweet spilled on the table that would need cleaning up.

Her crying, even as she cleaned, had not abated. That continued with full gusto. She cursed her stars and God and me and everything and everyone else she could think of for the ants in the apartment. She ranted about disastrous scenarios that her hyper-zealous mind painted for her, about there being more ants in the apartment than she could take care of, about having lost the battle of cleanliness and about her wish to die.

A chill crawled down my spine slowly and continuously in small but unmistakable bursts at the sight of this bizarre spectacle. Years back, while on the phone, I had absent-mindedly clicked on an icon on my computer, which said 'Smile'. That was when small game apps were forwarded through emails by friends and I had downloaded it to my desktop. When I double-clicked on the icon, it activated a message saying, *'All the files will be deleted from your computer.'*

I frantically searched for a cancel button and hit the escape key multiple times to stop the operation. To no avail. The screen showed all my files getting deleted.

*'Oh, my god'*, I thought, *'I have clicked on a virus.'* I was dumbstruck. For a couple of seconds, I blanked out. I couldn't even hear

what the person on the phone was saying. I thought I could have a stroke. Turns out, it was an anti-virus software advertisement and my files were not really deleted. What a cruel, cruel joke! But those few moments were like my life turning upside down. That is how I was feeling at that moment. Sadly, this wasn't a warning app or an ad. It was happening in front of me. Live! In real time!

I fluttered about helplessly and uselessly, hoping that she would calm down. I tried to make soothing noises to ease her discomfort, which were summarily spurned by her. I went to hold her, but she pushed me away because I was standing in the way. This was the first of many times that I have felt like a used condom. Utterly useless.

Shlok had, in the meantime, also begun to cry because he was scared to see his mother cry and couldn't understand why his mother was crying, just a little kid, as he was. Hell, forget him, even I couldn't understand why my wife was crying. What was it about the ants that caused such abject terror for Sonal? I was utterly at bay for a possible explanation to this grotesque scene, which I had suddenly been forced to become a part of. But I mindfully had to remind myself that I was also ostensibly the man of the house. Supposedly, in charge. I didn't have an elder in the house to go to and seek comfort or ask for a solution. I had to handle the situation myself. I had to somehow first calm my jittery nerves down.

Then I had to soothe Sonal's anxiety. I had to get her to a level where she could deal with her fear, at least temporarily. I had to remind her that we had an appointment and that we were expected there right now. I had to get her to wash and make her face up again. I had to convince her that it was alright to stop worrying about the ants and that there weren't any more of them in the apartment right then. We could tackle the menace

on a more permanent basis when we returned. I had to get her to leave for dinner with us, even if to distract her from the scene and the horror that it represented. I had to comfort Shlok and lie to him that everything was fine, lest it torment his tiny, five year-old brain too much. I had to get us to try and enjoy the dinner. So, the dutiful husband and father that I believe I was, I did my best. After several pleas and entreaties, we exited the apartment *en route* to our dinner date. Throughout the journey, there was pin-drop silence in the car. All of us were going over the macabre spectacle in our minds over and over again. Wondering when this horrific game had begun and if it could have been played differently.

While going over the events of the recent past, it dawned on me that Sonal, my wife of seven years, the nucleus of my microcosmic family, who had hitherto been an average girl with her share of strengths and weaknesses, had developed a less than average quirk. It was a mortal fear of ants. A series of instances crossed my mind when I noticed this strange aversion – for aversion is what I thought it was, and I had seen enough instances of that in the past. Either I was too dumb or she, too sneaky because the extent of her fear was unknown to me, even if its existence was.

That we reached our destination late was inevitable and totally irrelevant. That we had to lie through our teeth to explain our delay (we sure as hell weren't going to be honest about it) was beside the point. Somehow we scraped through the evening with part bravado, part denial. But an abundance of questions plagued my mind throughout. How badly the incident had affected Sonal was alarming. When had the aversion metamorphosed into a phobia as severe as this? Why had I been so blind, nay, so dumb to not be able to see it? What were we to do? What was happening to my wife? What would happen to our lives? How would Shlok



be able to take it? I am adept at putting up a brave face in times of adversity, and I did so here as well, but despite my shallow, phony bravado, I was trembling inwardly.

After that first *tete-a-tete* with this truckload of panic caused by two insignificant ants, I knew. Without a shadow of doubt, I knew that Sonal was not merely averse to ants as I had been thinking (or hoping for?) I knew that she was not just fastidious about her cleaning routine. I knew that it was no ordinary fixation. It hit me hard to admit to myself that she was mentally unwell. Seriously, mentally unwell. This was well beyond our amateurish (read negligible) capabilities to handle. Or even understand. I knew that she needed nothing less than professional help to come out of this. I knew that she needed it fast. Yes, I knew.