

The Scent of Cedar

A secret and a lie are not so far apart from each other. Both enjoy living in the dark, needing privacy and silence to grow before sprouting like the fairy tale red and white fly agaric Nalini saw on her walks through birch woodlands. There was a reverence to secrecy, something that demanded respect somehow, even if the end result was always painful. Employing all efforts to remain undetectable, these accomplices easily disappear into hidden groves, away from the glare of the public eye. Nalini enjoyed playing with this notion, secrets and lies forming part of her day to day like a morning exercise routine. She rolled the idea around in her head and smiled as she cracked her boiled egg open, happy at the lazy roll of the egg yolk. She had perfected the act as Peter had once pointed out above the sound of the newspaper crinkling under the weight of his heavy forearms.

The news of his affair had dropped into her lap unceremoniously. She had felt cheated in the moment, almost wishing the information would have had Hollywood film proportions, inviting moody, or even bright white lighting and an orchestra score to the scene. But she was told very bluntly by her friend, Sarah, that Peter was cheating on her. Redheaded Sarah, her sole remaining university friend, badger-like and blunt, was merciless with her delivery because the love had already seeped out of her own two-year marriage.

Nalini had known that Sarah was in for a rocky road when pug-faced Henry presented his bride with a cheek for that customary first kiss. At their very first meeting, his prissy attitude towards women had elicited shock from Nalini and bemusement from Peter. Nalini had to bite back the responses she would have gladly flung at him as Sarah looked on expectantly.

Surely, Nalini had to think he was the best man for her? Any other opinion would only have signalled jealousy.

‘I saw him...’ Sarah huffed indignantly. ‘I saw him on Regent Street under a lamppost kissing this...*woman*.’

The words were hurried and clipped. Their efficiency bit more into Nalini than the wounding truth. She had hoped Sarah would have taken more time, preparing her audience for the ‘big reveal’, but instead she had torn through the story with the hurried pace of a frustrated teenager, out of breath, greedy for the outcome, ignoring the dramatic effect of a careful build-up. Nalini felt robbed of the shock that could have been allowed more room to breathe as it puffed out its angry cheeks.

And then, when Sarah had finally settled down after delivering the news, she waited for a reaction. Nalini saw the chestnut eyes, shiny chocolate spheres anticipating the breakdown, expecting the collapse, waiting for the façade to chip away brutally as if an earthquake had suddenly turned a beautiful chateau on its head, ripping through the delicately painted house front of her marriage. So, she lied, feeling the spider of untruth spring to life, her words breathing warmth and light into its lungs. It would be a healthy spider, Nalini thought sadly to herself. It would spin glass-like spiderwebs waiting for her to fall one day by mistake and find herself trapped between the sticky spiral strands.

‘I’ve known for a while already.’

Lie number one.

She could not stop the words from escaping her, navy-blue-headed house martins fleeing the cold for warmer climates. Sarah’s open impatience, clearly demanding some form of response made her pulse rise. Anything was better than the sticky silence they found themselves in. But

this was only the first of many lies she would have to tell, Nalini thought bitterly. The trail would need to continue, leading Sarah further and further into the conical fir tree woods in the hope of finding the delicious gingerbread house filled with even more secrets.

‘You have?’ Sarah asked a little too incredulously.

Nalini hated the way the ‘a’ in her two-worded sentence veered almost absurdly upwards.

‘Yes.’

‘Then why the silence? Don’t you trust me anymore?’

Nalini hated her own surprise. She should have been used to how quickly Sarah could place herself at the centre of a situation. It was almost an art form, turning any circumstance into an opportunity to steal the spotlight of attention.

‘I do trust you.’

Lie number two.

‘But it doesn’t add up,’ Sarah continued, intent on being the victim when in fact she had theoretically just ended a marriage, almost enjoying the falling autumn light in such a moment.

‘I just wanted to be sure...before...before I spoke about it with you.’

Lie number three.

‘I didn’t want to jump to any conclusions.’

The truth was that Nalini’s suspicions had grown over time like flowering ivy, fast, never resting, always stretching out a limb to expand and claim more space. The first beep on her radar was when they started retreating into separate bedrooms in the evening. Peter had

insisted that the office demanded he be online after hours and he did not want his bright blue computer screen disturbing her sleep pattern. She watched him move into the guest room, sacrificing their marital bed too easily for the sake of pleasing the company director. She knew there was more to it, but her pride had sealed her mouth shut. Instead, she looked at the empty space in her bed, refusing to sleep in the middle because that would mean she had accepted her fate and she was not quite ready to admit that to herself. The fact that he was still there seemed to pacify her. She told herself that only a wall separated them. And a wall could be ripped down with some determination.

‘But you could have told me,’ Sarah almost whined. ‘We could have gotten to the bottom of this together.’

And there it was. The reality. Sarah needed a project, even if it meant watching and deconstructing the end of her closest friend’s marriage. Nalini thought the notion was not that far removed from watching a skulk of foxes tearing their prey apart. She could never understand the interest certain city folk paid, watching from the safety of their Range Rovers as the flame-furred animals hunted through the twilight hours. But like them, Sarah wanted to observe the spectacle from a respectable distance, tucked in the safety net of her marriage.

‘It’s not something that is easy to talk about...’

‘What?’

‘It’s a lot to process.’

‘But how did you know? What did he do?’

Nalini sighed deeply. It felt like someone was sitting on her chest, a memory from her childhood bubbled to the surface, the class bully straddling her, winding her with the force of her large body. She could feel the shame as she was repeatedly smacked while her classmates

looked on excitedly. Everyone liked a show. Only now, years later, the need to examine her had more definition to it. It felt complex and heavier. It was a weight she could not simply push aside. She could not smile stupidly at Sarah, like she had as a child, downplaying the pain. She had to think faster. Sarah's exasperated look was warning enough.

'Well?'

'I overheard him on the phone. He was calling her to say goodnight.'

Lie number four.

She was surprised at how quickly the dishonesty appeared, even though it lacked depth. The clarity she usually infused her conversation with was missing. The truth was, she had seen the hotel bill for a five-star country retreat. The lack of surprise hurt her even more. After all, Peter always demanded a high thread count for his bedding.

'Bastard. You're too good for him. You always were too good for him.'

The statement stung because it spoke of years of pretence. Sarah had smiled at Nalini's wedding, raising her freckled arm, after the best man's speech, while everyone cheered.

Nalini knew she should have seen through the tough lines around Sarah's mouth. She should have pressed on for the truth, but she was doing her best at the time to hold on to a little bit of happiness as the tight corsetry under her antique ivory wedding dress bit into her abdomen. She had known at the very first fitting that the gown would be cruel to wear. However, when her mother-in-law gave her the almost-invisible nod, the deal had been sealed, outbidding any other dress that would have been kinder to her lungs. It was the only damage control she could accomplish after her parents had insisted on a traditional Indian wedding ceremony where Peter would have to not only wear a turban, but also follow her around a ceremonial fire in the local temple. She could still see the startled look in his mother's eyes when Peter

had informed them of the proceedings. She knew what restraint a woman like Cecilia must have had to say nothing when in fact every bone in her conservative body felt repulsed by her son bringing home an Indian fiancée.

‘What are you going to do?’ Sarah asked before she took a long sip of coffee. The cup in front of her had almost been forgotten. ‘You are going to confront him, right?’

Nalini folded her hands in her lap. She knew that if someone were watching her through the Georgian window frame, she would look like the lady of the house sitting for a portrait, her downcast eyes making her the perfect subject for a Dutch master. Her calm face felt like another lie, hiding the avalanche of questions that were trying to push each other aside, eager to be heard in the blank space. She knew they would remain unanswered, fading into the shrubbery as velvet moss grew over them. She would never ask Peter for any explanations.

‘You can’t possibly forgive him...he’s been a pig!’

Only Sarah could use three letters so brutally, turning a harmless noun into an insult, Nalini thought to herself. What did Sarah even know? Two years into her own marriage, she had already thrown in the towel, giving up before she had even tried to jump over the first hurdle, that first bramble bush, red-dotted and dangerous that could have nicked her skin. Sarah went into her marriage with numbing blindness. She imagined that all she had to do was fall pregnant and throw catered dinner parties. The baby did not arrive, and the catered parties were not an option for a husband who was always busy at work, driving hard deals for a start-up company he secretly loved more than his wife. Sarah lacked the bravado to throw a party without her husband at her side. She feared the wagging tongues more than the acidity of a lost dream.

Nalini's secret glistened in the distance, flickering in and out of the light, trying to catch her attention. No one would ever have guessed it and she knew their surprise would only hurt her. No one would ever have imagined her capable of such action, not even someone like Sarah who took pride in 'understanding' people better than anyone else.

The truth was that Nalini had already packed a suitcase with the things she loved most in the world.

Secret number one.

The chipped picture frame that she could not throw away was carefully folded in tissue paper. It held a photograph of her youngest brother, the one who had danced with her at her wedding before foolishly climbing into a taxicab that was driven by a drunk driver. Narun would never dance again.

Nalini had chosen to pack her favourite black cardigan, an heirloom from her mother. It was not expensive, but her mother had insisted she take it with her when she moved into her new home. Between a few sets of underwear, she had carefully placed the caramel and cream cameo her grandmother had given her when she turned sixteen, pinning it so severely with her arthritic fingers that it struck skin, but Nalini had held the gasp in her throat, too aware of the milky eyes watching her.

The truth was she had been thinking of a way out of her marriage for quite some time, only too happy to leave her door key on the marble-topped side table before closing the front door behind her forever. And this secret, almost glowing in the dark corner of her mind, made her smile briefly while watching Sarah fumble with the corner of her baby blue blouse. The colour never suited her.

Secret number two.

Another one, she thought to herself. Two already this morning and the post had not even been delivered yet.

There had been an exact cracking point in her marriage. Nalini was sure had she been paying more attention, she would have heard the lining tear under the pressure of the moment. It had happened below a blanket of heavy rain during a weekend trip to Zurich. That Saturday, a typical autumn day plagued by both wind and unpredictable showers, they had decided to visit the famous Chagall windows at Fraumünster. She had slipped, the wet leaves providing an opportune moment for her new boots to slide and flip her forward onto the hard cement. In that precise second, she had looked up expectantly at Peter, waiting for his extended hand, but he was busy running an index finger over the smooth screen of his phone. When he finally noticed that he was standing alone, he turned, but it took him a full two seconds to realise that his wife was in fact expecting his help. His begrudging look made her shove his hand away as she forced her body upwards while trying to ignore the shocked looks from passing pedestrians. Later, as she stood in front of the five wondrous stained-glass windows, her welled-up eyes made seeing them nearly impossible. Her stubborn streak kept her hands at her sides. She would not wipe her eyes in front of him. He did not deserve a moment to redeem himself by offering her a tissue.

But even this scene, which replayed itself repeatedly in her mind whenever she was alone, could not stop herself from being sentimental. She had to open Peter's side of the closet and inhale the cedar smell of his cologne, the one she had given him when they had started dating, the one he remained faithful to, ignoring the irony of such behaviour. She could still see the little store and the sales lady who asked too many questions before offering a selection of perfumes. Nalini loved the experience, the elegant wooden cabinets making her think of an old-fashioned chemist, were it not for the designer shopping bags on the brass counter tops.

trying to teach her daughter to feel a sense of pride for the national dress that had become second nature to her.

Eventually Nalini shut the closet door, sealing off the memories abruptly, proud of herself for not taking her favourite sweater as a memento, the scarlet elf cup rollneck she had given him at Christmas the year before. If she had pocketed it, it would remain unwashed to preserve the smell of him. Nalini knew herself well enough to know she would lay it out delicately on the pillow next to hers in her new bed before rolling over and crushing her unhappy face into the material, inhaling what was left of her husband.

‘If you need anything, our home is your home, darling. You know this.’

She wanted to slap Sarah but resisted the temptation. Sarah could not stop herself from pointing out that she was still part of an intact pair. A ‘we’. She could say ‘our’ with a frequency that not only nauseated, but also made her appear smug and entitled.

‘Thank you, Sarah, but I’ll be fine,’ Nalini said as she sipped her tea that was already too cold.

Truth number one.

She could only think of her suitcase and what it would feel like to shut the door behind her one last time.

‘How foggy it’s become,’ Sarah said as she looked almost dreamily through the patio window. The Venus statue outside between fading beech trees seemed to disappear into a blanket of thick cloud a few meters away. Only its legs were visible, somehow fitting because these were the limbs Nalini would need to free herself. She had wanted the statue the moment she had seen it at an auction. Peter had given in without much of a fight, signing on the dotted

She knew that it was an extravagance she could barely afford, but her heart swelled when she inhaled 'Forest Mist' for the first time. It was the love token she had been looking for, something that was so intimate that she hoped each time he used the cologne, it would feel like her mark on him.

As she pressed her nose into the row of lambswool sweaters, she inhaled the fragrance that felt warm, elongated through time. The cologne may have been a little too mature for Peter, but at the time she knew he would grow into the depth of it. She hoped he would take it not only as proof of her love, but also a sign of the confidence she had in him. He would be the type of man who would wear an expensive perfume and not the other way around. She felt the fibres tickle her skin as she stood there, waiting for her self-respect to kick in, shaking her roughly, looking at her with annoyed eyes.

You deserve better.

Wake the hell up!

She remained standing in front of the almost too pedantic lined up clothing, waiting for the sentimentality to pass, feeling the familiar burn of regret in her chest, reminding her of that hated last day of childhood seaside vacations where she would play in the grey sand until her mother started screaming her name, cursing her in Hindi because no other Briton would understand her. Nalini drew it out until the bitter end, soaking up the salted sea air that bit mercilessly into her soft cheeks. She hated her mother for insisting on wearing a sari to the beach. She wanted her to be modern, to wear trousers and a t-shirt, but her mother would not hear any of her pleading. She would stand there, with her feet in the wet sand as her blood red sari blew effortlessly in the wind, turning her into a spectacle that other holidaymakers gawked at. Nalini felt ashamed for wanting her mother to fit in when in fact she was only

line for the extravagant gesture. Had he already been sleeping with other women by then?

Was the beautiful statue a plaster for his guilt?

Nalini shook the thought from her head. She could only think how apt it would be to leave her husband in such weather. The fog would swallow her up, almost fooling her into believing she had never been there at all.

