

## THE KOGUL

Teresa lay on her bed, mumbling to herself and picking at her clear rosary beads. Her lips moved silently as she recited another Hail Mary under her breath. The tips of her right thumb and forefinger had been rubbed smooth by years of practice. Her eyes glanced absently out of the bedroom window, punctuating the monotony of her silent rhythms as the beads snaked their way in a loop over her sheet-covered lap. The ninety-four year old woman prayed daily to Our Lady for her soul to be delivered to heaven while secretly cursing the flesh that shackled her to mortal earth. With each passing day she grew more pensive. She questioned Savio endlessly, ‘Why doesn’t He take me? What have I done wrong? Do you think that He is punishing me?’

Savio was too much of a dutiful son to reply with what he was actually thinking. With Josephina abroad, Agnelo in the priesthood and Francis dead, he was the only one who could look after Teresa. Eduardo helped where he could, but he was only a cousin. The obligation lay upon Savio.

He was a strict man, a disciplinarian – just like his mother had been. But, unlike her, he had never rubbed onion juice into his children’s eyes when they were naughty, or made them kneel on the stones in the garden as punishment for stealing mangoes from the church orchard. He liked the rules and played by them. Being an accountant suited him well. Retirement suited him better. Never in a thousand years did he imagine that at the age of sixty-three he would be looking after his mother. He was resigned to it now. Three years ago, she had received extreme unction twice in two months. In both cases, the doctor had said to Savio, ‘Prepare yourself. Anytime now.’ But, no such luck. Now, when Savio thought of his mother, he worried that

she'd outlive him.

He was driving to her house in his mint-green Toyota Yaris. He'd chosen the colour himself. He felt it calling out to him after the salesman mentioned that it was the only mint-green Yaris in Goa. Savio wanted to be one of the few people in Goa to own one of something. He wasn't even that upset when he met the salesman at the showroom's garage a year later and he mentioned that another mint-green Yaris had been ordered. He was still the first one to own one in Goa. He shifted gears as he saw the house in the distance, drove the car off the tar road onto the rough, red track that his car had laid into the ground between the road and the front gate of the house. Forty years later, the house was still the only one in the area – isolated and badly in need of repair. It was where Teresa lay in wait, with one housekeeper and Savio having to drive there thrice a week to deliver the shopping and her pills, checking that his mother was comfortable.

Was she ever comfortable?

Lately all she could talk about was the past, dragging up memories of incidents long gone where friends had become enemies and family relatives had been disowned because of their indiscretions and betrayals. Uncle Jacinto often got a mention. It was always someone else's fault. Blame only belonged outside the house, never in it. Savio never wanted this house. He still felt his mother's emotional blackmail to buy this house for her against his wishes in the acid taste in his mouth as he pulled up the driveway, but something in his heart lightened as he entered the doorway. A sense of belonging. This house was his first. It had been a dream come true for his mother and he had made that possible.

He walked up the broad white-washed staircase, his steps heavy and measured on the

stone slabs, stopped in front of the double wooden doors and rang the bell. As he waited for his mother's helper Fausta to walk down the length of the corridor and spy into the peephole, he looked about the verandah and noticed the damp swathes of moisture that reflected the last bits of the setting sunlight before drying up. Fausta had washed the verandah. He smiled, pleased that he was getting his money's worth this time. He heard the bolt of the inside door slide back and the two front doors peeled inwards. He wished Fausta good evening. She turned around and went in silently, without even making eye-contact with him. It was her respect for the old ways that made him hire her. His mother needed someone who understood these things. He touched the walls of the sitting room in a moment of distraction, feeling the rasping texture of the white-wash against his finger-tips. It left its imprint on his fingers. He rubbed the tips of his forefinger and thumb together as he watched Fausta wheeling his mother towards him, thinking it might be time for another layer. She looked up from her wheelchair and tried to focus her anxious, extra-large eyes magnified through her bifocals onto Savio.

‘What time is it?’

‘It’s six in the evening.’

‘There is a bird. You must get rid of it.’

‘What bird?’ asked Savio as he pulled up a chair to sit by his mother’s side. He could never face her. It felt too uncomfortable.

‘It disturbs my sleep every afternoon. Raps on my window when I’m taking a nap. You know I need my nap, I don’t sleep at night. Now I can’t rest at all. You must get rid of it!’

Savio was annoyed at his mother.

‘Has she had her tablets today?’ he asked Fausta. Fausta was more interested in watching the latest Goan soap opera on television than the exchange between the old lady and her son.

‘Yes sir.’

‘What bird?’ Savio asked his mother again.

This time Fausta answered.

‘A Kogul has been appearing for the last two weeks. It always comes when it is hottest, after lunch and disturbs Bai.’

Savio kept quiet. He was trying to recall the last time he had seen a Kogul in the area – not since he was a small boy. He turned to his mother.

‘I’ll see what I can do.’

‘Do? What does that mean? You will kill it. I told you, I need my sleep.’

‘Fine Mãe , I’ll kill it.’

Savio got up to go to the back of the house. He did this when he couldn’t sit with her anymore. He pretended that he had ‘other business’ to take care of somewhere else in the house: check that the roof was holding up, make sure that the new plumbing installed in his mother’s bedroom was still working. If there was enough to pretend to look at, he could kill another twenty minutes, then leave. His duty was complete then, at least for another three days.

He thought of the Kogul on his way home and again later, when he was watching the FA Cup

final and eating dinner with his wife. He decided to call his brother the next morning.

‘Father Agnelo, please. It’s his brother speaking.’

After dispensing with the niceties, he got to business and discussed the care of his mother, settling some property matters, and the next time Agnelo would be able to visit. Then, when there was nothing more left to say Savio hesitated, cleared his throat and said, ‘Agnelo, just one more thing. Mãe said that there is a bird tapping on her window every afternoon, waking her up. She wants me to get rid of it because she can’t sleep. Can you bring your gun with you?’

‘Sure, I’ll have it with me when I come over next Sunday.’

‘Thanks.’

The Kogul had perched itself on Agnelo’s motorbike, parked under the old mango tree by the front gate, pecking at its left rear-view mirror. Agnelo’s finger was on the trigger, the bird in sight. He took aim and hesitated. He stared at the bird, and as the bird stared back at him, he felt that it was trying to communicate with him. Agnelo put the gun down and turned to Savio with a look of amazement on his face.

‘I think that this bird is possessed by a spirit. It’s tapping on windows and mirrors to tell us something.’ Agnelo chewed his lower lip for a second, then handed the gun to Savio. ‘Wait here’

Agnelo rushed to his mother’s bedside and asked her, ‘Mãe, what was Francis’s favourite bird?’

Teresa looked up at him from where she was lying on her bed.

‘The Kogul.’

Agnelo nodded his head slowly with realisation. He left her room and found Savio still on the balcony in a staring match with the Kogul.

‘Savio, I think it’s Francis.’

Francis had a head of wavy, black hair that stayed in place on his head, never moving, trapped under the regular discipline of the Brylcreem that he massaged in every morning. He had a fair, handsome face and a beautiful black moustache sitting on his upper lip. They always said he'd make a good Goan marriage with that skin colour and those polite manners. But Teresa couldn't keep him in Goa. When he landed in Texas, he enrolled himself in the nearest flight school to train as a pilot. He worked two jobs to earn his pilot's license. When Francis wrote to his mother about marriage to a lovely Polish-American lady called Melissa, Teresa said, ‘At least she’s Catholic.’ They didn’t have children, which turned out to be a blessing, after the car crash a year ago. They died instantly.

One heard stories of possession – it was common enough in rural Goa. All the same, it was still a shock for Savio when it was his own brother. Agnelo turned to Savio.

‘Do you remember the last time we saw Francis in Goa? We were sitting here on the verandah one afternoon, enjoying a drink when a Kogul landed on the mango tree and Francis said that he’d always loved Koguls because of their sleek, black coats and their white chests. Do

you remember that?’

‘No, but maybe I’d gone into the house to get some ice or something.’

‘Well, I remember.’

Agnelo knew what to do. He made the phone call. It was arranged.

A mass was given for Francis and his wife, in the house.

They waited.

The next afternoon, the Kogul appeared again.

Another mass was said.

The Kogul still appeared – tap, tap, tapping away at Teresa’s window.

It took nine days and nine masses before the Kogul disappeared completely. On the afternoon after the ninth mass had been said, Teresa was wheeled back to her bedroom for her usual nap. Her rosary beads clicked frantically in her right hand till she nodded off. She awoke later from a deep, uninterrupted nap and asked for Fausta.

‘What time is it?’

‘Bai, its six o’ clock.’

Teresa smiled, lay back on her pillow, closed her eyes and exhaled her last breath.

They buried her a couple of days later. As the priest blessed her grave, Savio spotted a Kogul sitting on a tree just above, watching him.