

# SNAKES AND LADDERS



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"Whose face did you wake up to this morning?"

Just as she was about to gain on Ritu's token, Sarina's own landed on a snake again. She had lost the two previous rounds of Snakes and Ladders, and was about to score a hat trick on that regard. Ritu wondered what was behind her friend's bad luck.

"Fahim er ma."

"You mean your next door aunty?"

Sarina rolled her eyes and sighed, "Who else?"

She had woken up a little later than usual for a Friday morning. When she got out of her bedroom, she saw Fahim's mother leaning on the doorway of the kitchen, doling out the latest gossip to her mother. Before she could even think of retracing her steps, the woman spotted her disheveled form. She wasted no time in making judgmental comments about Sarina's sleeping habits, passing them off as jokes.

"It's funny how we've lived next to her for six years, and I still don't know her real name."

"Do you refer to her as *Fahim er ma* in front of your mother, when she's not around?" Ritu asked, shaking the dice for her turn.

"I wish," Sarina scoffed. "She's my mother's idol, unfortunately."

"I bet even your mother doesn't know her real name." The dice landed on two,

much to Ritu's disappointment. Had it rolled on a three, her token would have climbed up a ladder.

"Yeah, her identity is always in relation with Fahim. Fahim *bhabhi*, Fahim aunty," Sarina picked up the dice and the shaker. "God, that's kind of pathetic."

"More pathetic than you about to lose again?" Ritu quipped.

"Shut up," Sarina's token landed on a ladder for the first time this round. "Ha, joke's on you!"

"Maybe I said that because I don't like Fahim," she added.

"Why, what has he done?"

"Nothing really. He's only the first boy in his class, but the way his mother brags about him, you'll start thinking she gave birth to Einstein reincarnate. Because of this, my mother has developed some sort of inferiority complex. So, in order to gain bragging rights, she wants me to be more like him."

"Well," Ritu started shaking the dice.

"Don't we all have a *Fahim er ma* in our lives?"

The dice rolled on a five, leading Ritu's token to the mouth of a long, winding snake. It slid down to just a few boxes ahead of Sarina's token.

"I can't believe it!" Ritu gasped. "Your bad luck's rubbing off on me. It's all *Fahim er ma's* fault!"

The two friends shared a laugh.

"Wait, who's your *Fahim er ma*?" Sarina asked.

"There's this aunty at my math coaching who's always trying to dig up dirt on me."

"How come I don't know about this?"

"That's because we don't go to the same coaching, silly," Ritu said. "Plus, she hasn't succeeded yet. But she came close once."

"How?"

"I'm friends with this girl called Maliha. She's kind of weak in math, so she asks me for help with the easier stuff. We sit next to each other most of the time. One day, I saw her with her brother on my way to class, and we decided to go together. Her brother was dropping Maliha off on his way to somewhere else," Ritu paused. "It's your turn, Sarina."

"Oh, it can wait," Sarina waved her hand dismissively. "Then what happened?"

"That aunty saw the three of us together, and jumped to the conclusion that Maliha's brother was my boyfriend. The next time my mother went to the coaching, this is what she told her."

"Oh, these good-for-nothing aunties!" Sarina huffed. "That's why I go to coachings alone."

"I don't know what she had to gain from this. Not long after this, she spread false rumours about another girl's parents, saying they were getting divorced. The girl's mother later had a nasty fight with her."

"Sounds like she has no life," Sarina

commented.

"At least I had it easier than my little brother."

"Oh no, what happened to Rinku?"

"You know how he's a bit hyperactive," Ritu started. "He gets into fights sometimes at school, which has gotten him in trouble before. But this one aunty, out of nowhere, threatened my mother, claiming that Rinku stole her son's pencil box, which was apparently new and expensive. She also vowed to get him suspended."

"Then?"

"He never stole it!" Ritu's voice rose in indignation. "That boy got into a minor fight with Rinku and complained to his mother afterwards. That woman came up with a plan to get Rinku severely punished, and made her son take his old pencil box to school. During the investigation, the boy broke down and confessed that the whole thing was a lie."

Sarina was speechless.

"I was so angry that I wanted to hunt her down and —" Ritu closed her eyes and heaved a deep, shaky sigh.

"All those *Fahim er mas*," Sarina found her words. "Always bringing us down like these snakes," she gestured to the board game placed between them.

"This stuff is depressing," Ritu opened her eyes. "Roll the dice, Sarina."

*Adhora Ahmed tries to make her two cats befriend each other, but in vain. Tell her to give up at [adhora.ahmed@gmail.com](mailto:adhora.ahmed@gmail.com)*