

Maximus The Family Darling

It's difficult to decide who is more handsome, the father or the son. Let's just say both are such rockstars, says **Farzana Contractor**. Meet Neil Nitin Mukesh and his energetic two-year-old boy, Maximus along with their entire *parivaar*

Every dog believes in having one master, not so with Maximus. He has a whole family he divides his love with. Well, almost. For though it was Neil who brought him home as an eight-week-old pup, it was Neil's mum to whom he became a dotting grandson, eventually. Doting and highly possessive, as all boys are wont to be.

I must confess, in all these years of listening to wonderful doggie tales being recounted, this was as astounding as it was endearing.

Let's start at the very beginning when Neil was a nine-year-old child. A child who loved dogs. But who, alas, could not have one. Mum, Nishi was petrified and would not hear of it. And that is where the matter ended.

Until one night, when she and her husband, Nitin, the son of legendary singer Mukesh, rang their doorbell, on returning, pretty much tired from a long haul flight from America. And guess what? Their ringing of bell was answered by a cheery bark from within.

Nishi couldn't believe her eyes or her ears for there was young Neil in the

doorway, smiling away, a pup in hand! He had gone and picked up one from somewhere in Malabar Hill where they lived and was now cuddling it, in front of her.

All hell broke loose Nishi refused to enter the house and no amount of Neil's tears or Nitin's coaxing could get her to change her mind. The pup had to go and it did. Sigh...

But the refrain to get a dog did not die out. Both Neil and his sister Neha tried every trick, but mum was adamant, did not budge from her resolve. So the two youngsters came to a settlement. They told their mum, "Well, if you can't get us a pup, at least get us a baby!" Believe it or not, that was acceptable to Nishi and a baby was planned and Naman, the third sibling popped into the world, after a 10-year gap. As I sat listening to this tale, Naman, very much in

the room, grinned on sportingly, not perturbed in the least that he was a 'replacement pup'.

But if you are now wondering how a couple of decades later Maximus made an entry into this household, the answer is simple. Neil grew up, the family bought another apartment, closer to their office in Andheri and he was now at liberty to live as he wanted. As luck would have it, a friend had a preggie Lab and a litter was on its way. Neil decided mum can't object, the dog will not be in her line of vision, so fine, he'd finally get one home, in Andheri.

Proves perseverance pays. Though the hand of fate was very much evident.

"You know it's simply amazing how I got Maxi," says Neil spread out comfortably on the marble floor of their Malabar Hill apartment, playing

with Maximus, "I was shooting at ND Studio in Karjat for *Prem Ratan Dhan Payo*. It was the last shot of the movie and we were breaking off after this scene, when I got a call from Sunny, my friend who has a farmhouse right in that vicinity. His Labrador, with a clean pedigree going back seven terms was getting into labour and he asked me if I wanted to come over!"

Of course he wanted to! And even as he bounded over to Sunny's farmhouse two pups, both black, had already made an entry into the world. But Neil's heart was set on a fawn male. That's what he wanted, a Golden Boy! Well, that night there was a litter of six. Black, black, fawn, fawn, black, black. Fortunately for Neil one fawn was a male and he got his Maximus, though he had to patiently wait for eight hours for that's how long it took for Maximus to emerge.

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Today Nishi and her grandson Maxi are inseparable

With sterilised hands, he gingerly picked him up and knew, "... a father was born." "Really, when my mum tells me I must now get married, I tell her, 'Why? I am already a dad!'"

But the story doesn't end. I am at their Malabar Hill house and the entire family, but for Neha who is married and lives in Kanpur, is here, including Nishi. And Max is nuzzling up to her and she looks anything but petrified. "How did this change happen?" I ask wondrously.

Neil and Naman can't stop laughing and smiling at the memory. By now Nitin has joined in too and surrounded by the three and a half men in Nishi's life she begins to tell me how indeed. Eventually everyone joins in, in the narration and I learn how both Neil and Naman were going out of India for two weeks and they had no choice but to plead with their mum to keep Max in the Malabar Hill home (remember the boys live in Andheri). They said the servant could look after

him. She relented. While they were away, they missed Maxi and were frequently *FaceTiming* him.

Upon their return, they immediately came home to fetch him and while they were about to drive away they saw their mum come running in the compound, waving madly, saying "Stop. Stop!"

Worried they jumped out and asked what happened. "Nothing," she

replied, "don't take Maxi away, leave him here," she said half in tears.

By now Neil was rolling on the floor. "Can you imagine, what a change in Ma Maxi brought about in just two weeks!" he exclaims.

Nitin adds, "And now there is no separating the two. Even I dare not get in the picture. If I so much as wrap my arms around my wife, Max growls! And when we are lying in bed, he squeezes in between us. And he sits quietly besides her when she is performing *puja*!" At this point I learn that Nitin did grow up with dogs since both his parents, Mukesh and Sarla were fond of dogs and they had four in succession; Mickey, a Silky Sydney, Suzie, a Pekingese, and Robin and Irma, both Pomeranians. The last one, Irma was a gift to Mukesh from Hrishikesh Mukherjee. "My dad loved Irma. And he did not think twice about cleaning up if she messed," reminisces Nitin. Irma's sibling went to Rajesh Khanna who called him Bongo. This was during the shooting of *Anand*.



It really is tough to say who is the handsomer of the two, isn't it!



Neil with baby Max, palm-sized and so angelic



Neil already knows the joys of being a dad with his energetic boy Max in his life

COVER STORY | The Handsome Mukesh Boys

But coming back to Nishi, she has now become such a dog lover that once Neil found her petting a stranger's dog in Singapore. And she hates it when guests in their house ask for 'your dog' to be tied up. None of them in fact like it when Max is addressed as 'dog'. He has a name and a relationship with each. So while Neil is *papa*, Naman is *chachu*, Neha is *bu*, Nishi is *dadi* and Nitin, *dadoo*. And in fact, since Raksha Bandhan was just a while

back, *bu* had just sent a *rakhi* for Maximus with a message that she misses him very much.

"We all love Maxi very much," says Nishi in her soft spoken manner. "We can't imagine life without him. He has changed us so much. Look at my house, I don't care anymore. He destroys all the cushion covers, I simply change them. He chews on the furniture, but I don't really mind..."

How nice is that. Nitin informs me that his wife doesn't shop for much herself, but for Max she will go to any length! "And I am convinced, Ma does not love me as much as she does Max," pipes in Neil. "Once while returning from Lonavala, I was really hungry and wanted to stop to buy some fudge but she said we were running late and did not let me. So I just sat nibbling at some dry fruits kept in the car. And then when we are nearing Bombay she suddenly says she wants to take a detour to go to Lokhandwala market because she has to pick up some food for Max! Can you believe it? Here her son was dying of hunger, his stomach is growling and all she could think of was Max will be waiting

at home, hungry!!"

Naman, the quieter of the lot is the one who plays the bad cop, says he, "While everyone spoils him silly it is I who is firm with him and he is a bit scared of me. Though I am the one who usually walks him. You should see how beserk he goes, when I say, 'Max, *patta!*'" Max is a smart boy, he knows *chalo* and *ghoomi ghoomi* means an outing, *ao* means get into the house, he hides Nishi's sandals when she is dressing to go out, chews her spectacles when he feels she should give him attention and best of all he knows who will soon ring the doorbell 'coz he recognises the sounds of the different cars – Mercedes, Fortuner, Creta or the Audi Q7 – as they drive in through the gate (they live on the first floor). Though it's the Q7 he likes best. That's the car he rode home in less than two years ago.

It was so much fun to hear Max stories, I was loath to leave. Some lads are like that, they take over your heart quite completely. And this one, addressed alternatively as Max, Maxi, Chandan, Dantan, Max, the Pantan, and Sister Nancy, does just that!



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Rockstars: Neil Nitin Mukesh and Maximus

