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A Lamb to the Slaughter

Dr. Kusumita Mukherjee

In my mind I had always known this was coming. This kidnapping. I had tried my very best to prevent it. But all my attempts had gone in vain. And I was in his house. A lamb to the slaughter. No I was not going to give up easily. My kidnapper was shrewd. He had left for work to keep suspicion out of the way. He was not going to be back till late evening. Yes I had a window of opportunity. Yet I could not run because he had bolted the door from outside assuring me that he was doing it for my safety. And I would not run. If I ran away then I would never be able to prove my kidnapping more importantly I would never be able unmask my kidnapper.

I had got roughly five hours before he returned. My mind was a mess. I just could not think straight. I needed to calm down to make my plans. I opted for a bath. Inside the washroom I let the tap run. As the cool water hit my head I sensed my nerves were easing. I could not bring myself to use the towel of my kidnapper. Even though I was thoroughly wet I pulled on my clothes. I had to eat. Hunger was never kind to man. But I also knew that I must be careful of what I ate in this man's house. He had kindly left me a cooked lunch. Rice and my favourite egg curry. Too tempting and that was why I chose to avoid it. I entered his kitchen. It was a cozy little space. A glass top gas oven; wall cabinets on all sides; jars impeccably arranged according to their sizes. A woman's handiwork was evident. I started opening the cabinets one by one. Bingo. I finally found the one which had some packaged food. I boiled some pasta to pacify my hunger that had grown intense by then.

My eyes scanned the rooms even as I gulped down the pasta. I needed to make my plans. Foolproof plans. I knew that the odds were against me. Not even my family would believe me if I told them that I had been kidnapped. So I could not leave any loopholes since my kidnapper seemed not to have left any. There was no landline in the house. He had taken his cell phone and laptop with him. And the house too was in an awkward place. The nearest house was separated by a mile and the ancient mango grove fell in between. So there was no question of asking help from the neighbours. What could I possibly do?

I failed to get answers; my overworked brain refused to cooperate. The previous night was my most difficult one. I had to vomit all over to keep myself safe. I knew very well that he had not got me there to leave me untouched. He had gone to the balcony to smoke when I had crawled from the bed and stealthily entered the kitchen. That little journey from the bedroom to the kitchen was one hellish experience. All the while as I was crawling my heart was in my mouth. I could be caught any second. I had planned my

excuse. Luckily when he did find out that I was in the kitchen my mission was accomplished. I had emptied half a packet of salt in a glass of water and gulped it down.

He took my hand and guided me back to the bedroom. As he tried to settle down beside me a huge grin hanging on his face I puked all over. I was in a sorry state and so was the bed. He was too taken aback to react. I played along. Acted embarrassed for having ruined his bed. He cleaned off the mess while I was left to myself. Even then he wanted me to join him on the couch since the bed was ruined. I excused myself saying that I was not feeling well and puked some more to convince him. He let me be as the specter then was too much for him to bear perhaps.

I slept just outside the washroom. I closed my eyes and pretended to have a fidgety sleep. I was actually thanking Tani Di a million times for having taught me this trick. Tani Di is my cousin. She is the one person who is closest to me on this planet. It is to her that I have effortlessly opened the door of my secret soul. It is through her that I came to understand that I was being abused by a pedophile.

I was five when I met my kidnapper. I had met him at a wedding, his wedding to be precise. Yes he is my uncle, the husband of my *Pisi* (my father's sister). That is the sad fact. All over India there are millions of girls like me who face sexual exploitation at home and at the hands of their very own relatives. They can do little to prevent it. I know why.

It was a few days after their wedding that *Pisi* had come to visit us with her husband. It was a hot afternoon. They wanted a nap. He invited me to join them on their bed in the guest room. I was ecstatic. I was happy to get such attention from the newest member of our family who was at the moment the apple of everyone's eyes. He started telling me the story of Beauty and the Beast. I was listening to him, eyes wide open in wonder. A little later as *Pisi* started snoring lightly he moved in closer. I was too young to know what was happening when all of a sudden he started to feel me all over. Women are instinctive creatures. My *Pisi* certainly is. She sat up with a jolt and looked directly into my eyes. "What has happened just now?" I don't know whether it was shame or fear but I failed to open up to her.

They left that evening and I forgot all about it. But he was like the tiger who has tasted human blood once. He kept reappearing in my life time and again. But thankfully there were always too many people in the house so he never got a proper chance till Ayush's Birthday Party. Ayush is the younger brother of Tani Di. They are the children of my *Jethu* (father's elder brother). It was Ayush's tenth birthday so the family wanted to celebrate in style. A huge cake in the shape of a toy car had been ordered as per the wishes of the birthday boy. I was a seven year old myself and was very excited to taste the exotic cake. He came to me with a big piece and I was too piqued to notice that he

intentionally let some of the icing fall on my dress. He swiftly picked up a tissue and took all the time in the world to clean the mess off my chest. I was having that unpalatable feeling once again when Tani Di noticed what was happening.

She literally snatched me from him and took me to her room. “Don’t you even understand what he is doing to you?”

----“What Di?”

----“He is abusing you my poor girl. How do I make you understand?”

Tani Di looked like she was battling a lot of demons within her. She became absolutely quiet for a while. Then what seemed like an impossibly long interval she suddenly turned to me. Firmly holding my shoulders she looked into my eyes and said, “No matter what happens do not let him anywhere near you in future. He is a bloody pedophile.”

I was about to ask what she meant when my father appeared on the door to summon us to dinner. That night I had a strange nightmare. I was in a garden full of wild flowers of all colours. I was about to smell a red flower when a huge swarm of bees attacked me from nowhere. I felt stifled and I was about to give up when I saw Tani Di at a distance. I wanted to reach her at any cost. But she turned away from me. She kept moving further and further away. I woke up in cold sweat crying for my Ma.

That night I could not fall back to sleep even as my Ma lay beside me. She was telling me a story; I stopped her midsentence to ask, “Ma, What is bloody pedophile?” She looked thunderstruck. Never in her wildest dreams had she imagined that her daughter of seven years could utter such words let alone ask questions about it. “Who has told you all this? Just tell me the name.” She shrieked forgetting that it was the dead of the night. When I told her all the details she grew deadly quiet. She later spoke in such a solemn tone the like of which I had never heard from her before in my life.

“Thank God you did not say any of this before your *Baba*. He would have been so mad at you. You are accusing Partho of doing the unthinkable. He is such a nice man. He takes such good care of your Snigdha *Pisi*. They have been married for two years now and I have rarely heard them disagree about anything. If anything was wrong with him Snigdha would have definitely told me. You know how close we are. On the contrary she is all praise for Partho. She just can’t make enough of her husband. Remember one thing dear. Family relations are built on trust. I don’t want to ruin that just because Tani had some stupid suspicion. How old is Tani any way to make such sweeping comments? She is hardly fifteen. She is a child herself. She must have misunderstood Partho. Now you go back to sleep and behave yourself. Do not speak to Tani too much. You are just an

adorable baby and everyone including Partho loves you. There is nothing wrong in love is there?”

I was just too young to explain all that I was feeling. That it was not merely Tani Di's suspicion. His intentions were far from noble that I was sure of. And there was certainly something wrong in the way in which he wanted to love me. I was not comfortable with that version of love. Since I failed to convince my mother against him, he continued visiting us from time to time. He had an irritating habit of bringing ice cream for me whenever he dropped by. Once I had lost my patience and asked him why the same thing always? I can never forget the impish twinkle in his eyes when he had replied, “I love to see you lick your ice cream.” While my parents took it for an innocent remark I was shaken to my core.

It was partly because of my parents' overweening confidence in him that I was under his house arrest that day. My parents had to attend a relative's funeral at short notice. My exams were underway. That was when he appeared as their knight in shining armour. He said that I could give my exams from his house while my parents were away. I could not stay at Tani Di's house since my *Jethu* was no longer living at Kalyani. My father was more than happy at his proposal. When my mother seemed doubtful, he lied. “*Boudi* (sister-in-law) why are you worrying so much? Snigdha will be with her at all times.” My Ma agreed not knowing that *Pisi* would not be at home for the first two days of my stay since she was participating at a Yoga camp in Haridwar.

The sudden thunder and lightning reminded me of the situation from which I had to save myself. I took a deep breath and patiently calculated my chances of getting him convicted. When I was about to give up I suddenly remembered that he had a desktop at home. The machine had been giving him trouble. It took a painstakingly long time to boot. When it finally did I found the means to the end. He had perhaps forgotten that I knew his wifi password. He had given it to me when I had come to this house with my parents on a previous visit. I prayed to God zealously as I typed in the password hoping against hope that he had not changed it. At last fortune seemed to be smiling as I was able to log on to Facebook.

I did not know when I had fallen asleep. My terrible nightmare had awakened me. I was having the same dream about the wild flowers and the bees furiously stinging me. Except this time it was my mother who had turned her back on me instead of Tani Di. Daylight told me that the night was over. But where was he? Just then there was a knock on the door. Why would he be knocking? He had taken the key with him I reasoned. Just then I heard the slow turn of the key in its socket. So my nemesis was back.

It was *Pisi*. She had returned from Haridwar. I hugged her so tightly that she was taken aback. “Yes I am happy to see you too but please let me go, I can't breathe.” I

pulled back embarrassed. “Where is Partho? And why was the door locked from outside while you were still in here?” *Pisi* did not wait for my answer and dialed his number. I myself was confused. What could have happened to him? Why hadn’t he come home that night?

Sometimes life isn’t as cruel as it seems it is. I had given up any hopes of salvation but there I was all safe and sound gratefully lapping up *Pisi*’s *khichdi* and *Illish maach bhaja*. It was past twelve in the afternoon when he eventually returned. By his haggard appearance I could tell that he had had a hard night. Something seemed broken within him. His eyes seemed devoid of any purpose. *Pisi* pestered him with her questions but he did not make a single answer. Just dismissed her in a tried way saying, “Something came up at office. For God’s sake please leave me alone now, I need to rest.”

I somehow I went through my exams turning millions of possibilities in my mind each day. But everything remained shrouded in mystery till my parents returned. Back in my room as I turned on my laptop and logged on to my face book account I had several messages waiting for me. And a friend request from someone called Sunaina. My eye halted on her profile picture. She had one of the prettiest faces I had ever seen. I accepted the request. She immediately sent me a message, “I know you are safe now.” How the hell did she get to know what had happened to me?

I typed in “Do I know you?” Sunaina typed back, “Right from your birth. I am the one who kept him away that night.”

----“I need to talk to you. Please give me your number.”

She did. I dialled the number. What on earth was happening? Tani Di had picked up my call. I am sure I hadn’t dialed *Jethu*’s number. She clarified most of my doubts when she said, “I have got my personal number now.”

----“So you are Sunaina.”

----“Yes. That I am. And I know his darkest secrets.”

We kept giggling for a good ten minutes before Tani Di had to disconnect as she was getting late for her coaching classes.