

The Cover - Up

by

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MY Mother, sister Muni, and I were in the *chubara* when we heard Ambree crying while coming upstairs. Soon she came in and went to mother. She was crying so hysterically that her whole body was shaking. Her little face was drenched in tears and sweat.

"What? What happened?" asked mother.

"Perhaps she got hurt", suggested Muni.

"Did you get hurt?"

To that, Ambree shook her head and tried to say something but the only thing she could say was, "I.....I.....I....". Her legs were trembling so she sat down.

"What has happened to you?"

Mother's voice was irritated now. Ambree tried to speak again but the two or three words that she said were so broken up that they made no sense I was thinking that perhaps we should just ignore her and let her get her crying over

with. Muni had started to fiddle with the sewing machine that she had been trying to fix for an hour or so. Mother was losing her patience too as she said: "I have other things to do besides listening to your screams", and tried to walk away. But Ambree stretched her hand and got hold of mother's *salwar*.

"I.....wen....wen...to Rani's house....."

She tried very hard to keep on speaking but the words drowned in her chest. Still holding on to mother she cried again. Then, when she could control herself a little more she started to tell: "I was playing in front of Rani's house with other children. Darshan, her brother said, 'come here', and when I went near him he said 'come inside'....." Once again she stopped and started to cry.

What she had said so far was quite meaningless to us. "Foolish Ambree", I thought. "Crying over nothing." Mother and Muni didn't look alarmed either. We

suspected nothing. How could we?

For a few months, Muni and Rani had been friends. Both were doing Junior Basic Training (GBT) to be primary school teachers. Darshan was Rani's older brother and some official in the nearby city. For convenience of his sister, he had a room in our village as the GBT college was there.

Darshan started to come to our house quite often. Sometimes he came every day. He called my mother "bi jee". She was much flattered by that as she disliked the way we always called her "bibi".

"It shows that you have no respect for me", she often complained. But we were so used to calling "bibi" that even when we wanted to call her "bibi jee" or "bi jee" we couldn't. Not only was mother flattered by the way Darshan addressed her, she also liked his soft voice. And he always offered his

services. Sometimes, he would ask, "Bi jee, let me know if you need anything from town." To that mother would say: "May god give you a long life, son, may he prosper you even more."

Mother never asked him to bring anything; neither did he do it of his own will. But his soft and courteous voice certainly had won her heart, so, instead of an acquaintance, and brother of Muni's friend, he became our mother's "son." When he would come, she would stop doing whatever she was doing and would start to serve him with tea and food. And when he would leave, mother would praise him to high heavens: "Such a gentleman! So respectful. So caring. In these times, it is rare to find such sons and daughters."

So with this kind of background, how could we suspect that anything bad might have happened to Ambree in that room!

Once again Ambree started to tell: "I went in. He latched the door from inside. Then he pulled my underwear down..." Now mother and Muni looked at each other with shock. Ambree hesitated a little but continued: "Then he started to open the string of his own pyjama. But then he went upstairs to latch the upstairs door. When he went to do that, I unlatched the door and ran outside."

Upon hearing that, mother lashed both her hands on Ambree's back as hard as she could. She went on and on along with verbal abuses.

"You are desired by men from the day you are born! Why were you born to me! Why didn't you die the day you were born!" She was cursing all three of us. Because, just last year Muni had married of her own choice. And from my childhood people had branded me a disobedient girl which to a great extent I was. So now, mother was using this incident to vent her anger and frustration against us, too.

Ambree however, was, very different from Muni and me. She was neither rude and aggressive like Muni nor disobedient like me. Where we would do things sometimes to annoy mother, she

would try her best to make her happy. She ate with mother, she slept with mother, and she went out with mother. Only occasionally did she play outside with children. She was very quiet, frail, passive, and petite. At seven, as she was now, she looked five. I always called her "Her mother's mouse." But mother was very happy with Ambree as she was certain that she finally had a "perfect daughter." Ambree was her comfort, her hope. But now this.....

"It's not her fault. Don't keep hitting her", Muni tried to plead but mother could hear nothing. Her hands were hitting Ambree on the back, on the head, on the face - everywhere. Her face and eyes were burning with fury. She looked as if possessed by a demon. Trembling, screaming, and pale, Ambree looked at mother, her eyes full of tears, terror and shock. She looked at mother as if begging her to stop torturing her, as if begging her to understand that what had happened was not her fault. And shocked because it probably had never occurred to her before that her own mother, whom she loved so much, could betray her!

I stood in the corner worrying that Ambree might faint or that she might even die as she was shaking violently now. But I was too afraid to go to rescue her. Muni eventually was able to pull Ambree away. Mother now started to beat her own chest and then pull her hair. She stopped only when too exhausted to do anything. She sat down against the wall and started to cry.

"I'm going to the police station and have the bastard arrested", declared Muni,

"But what will people say?" said mother while wiping her tears. "How can we shut their mouths! God knows what they will say. They have seen him coming to our house. They will blame us. They will say, why did we allow such a man to come to our house in the first place?"

Muni sat down as if considering it, then asked; "What should we do then?"

"Cover it up. Say nothing to anyone. God will punish the sinner." Saying this

mother heaved a deep sigh.

Darshan didn't come to our house for several days. We thought that he must have suspected something and were relieved to think that he wouldn't come now. But one day while I was sitting in front of our *chubara*, I saw him coming in. Then I heard him saying, "Nanmstay bi jee," and I heard mother answering "Namastay." Soon Muni came upstairs mumbling something like; "Why has this dog come now? What's his business here?" I heard him talking to mother. Her answers were brief but she said nothing to insult him. Soon he left. After that he came a few times again, then he stopped.

On our side, we felt lucky because it was a good cover up. And on the other side, Darshan with his soft and courteous voice must have become the "son" of many other mothers and then, after winning their respect and confidence, must have raped their Ambree-like daughters. And why wouldn't he? In a society like ours, where everything "unpleasant" is covered up to save the "reputation" of the family, rapists like Darshan have nothing to worry about!

Postscript: Much later, I came to realise that Ambree's enemy wasn't only Darshan but her own mother too, who, at such a tragic time, instead of holding her in her lap and consoling her, tortured her-and our society that breeds such monsters and then forces us to think that we have to cover up their acts to save our own "reputation." □

