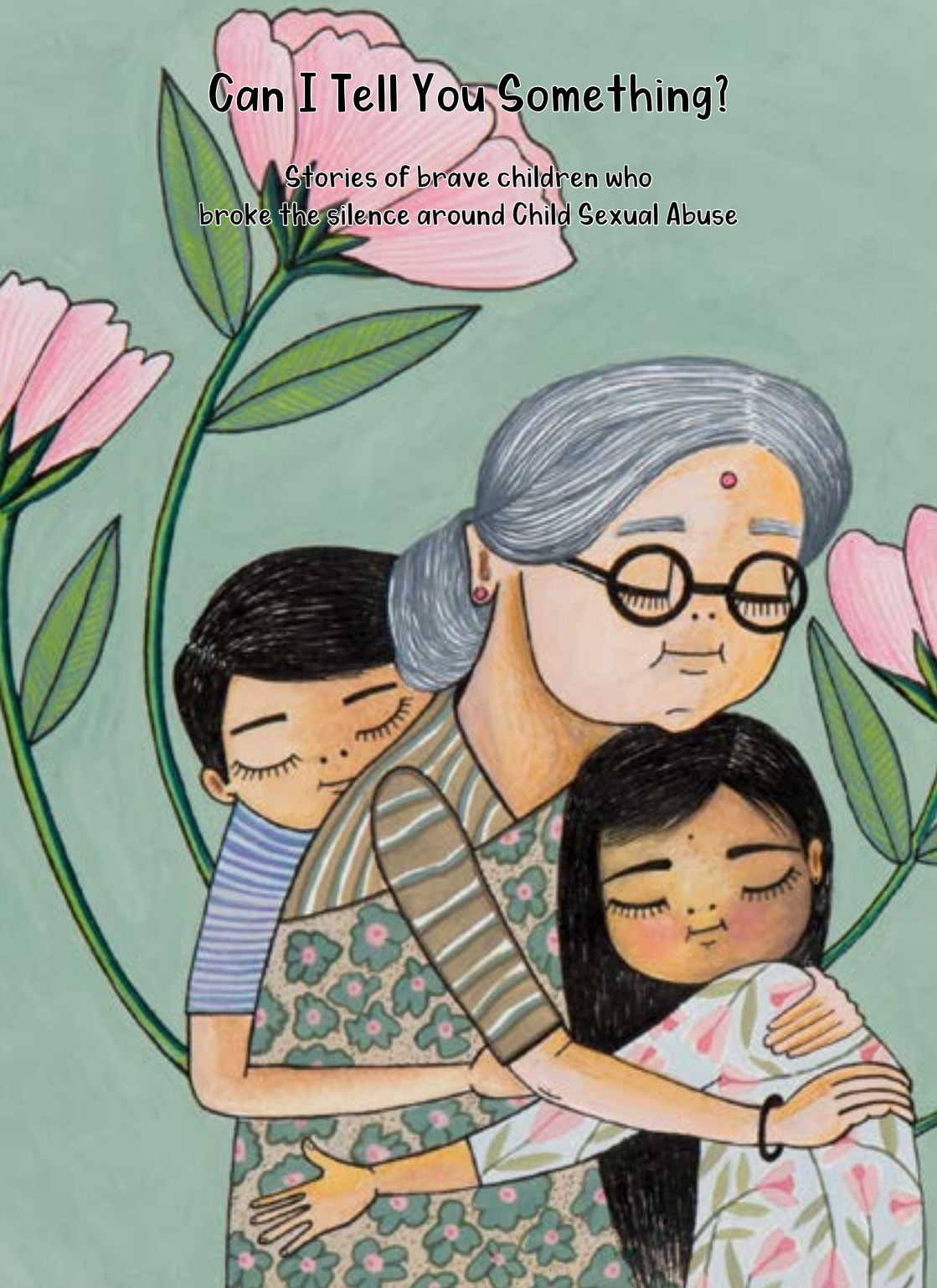


Can I Tell You Something?

Stories of brave children who
broke the silence around Child Sexual Abuse



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Acknowledgements

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Preface

Dear readers,

Imagine a child who is being abused, but doesn't know how to describe it, or understand what he/she is being subjected to. A vast majority of children never open up about sexual abuse, thinking it was their fault or realize only too late that what was happening to them was abuse.

53.2 % of children in India have experienced one or more forms of sexual abuse (Source: Ministry of Women and Child Development study, Government of India, 2007). This makes India home to one of the largest populations of sexually abused children. Globally, too sexual violence is one of the largest most unsettling of children's rights violations. Although children of every age and in every part of the world are susceptible, adolescence is a period of pronounced vulnerability.

Most people tend to dismiss sexual abuse incidents as random occurrences, which are not necessarily indicative of the society at large. However, statistics seem to tell a different story. In India alone, a child below 16 years is raped every 155th minute, a child below 10 every 13th hour and one in every 10 children sexually abused at any point of time. Though there are already a few programs in preventive communication on Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) targeting parents and schools. However, children, who are at the receiving end of abuse, are largely ignored in such programs. This comic book aims to break the communication barrier about the issue between parents and children and encourages children to break the silence about a 'touching problem' and openly communicate on the subject with a trusted adult.

Protsahan's Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) Awareness Program reaches out to children between the age group of 7-15 years specifically, teachers, parents and caregivers. This illustrated story book is an excellent resource to start reaching out to children, and create an atmosphere where they don't hesitate in reporting sexual abuse at any time. It also helps parents and guardians to understand what they must do in case a sexual offence has been committed against a child. Through the medium of interactive storytelling, this storybook will help in understanding the reporting mechanisms that are designed to safeguard children, duties and responsibilities of those who are aware of a child being subjected to abuse, the role of police officers, constitution of special child friendly courts, and their procedures etc.

We are extremely thankful to Jaswinder Singh, the author of this storybook for thoroughly researching the legal framework in India, UK, USA, and South Africa, and then weaving his words into these informative stories. A special thanks to all our supporters, especially Sudha Suri and Anupam Suri, who believed in us to go ahead with our vision to publish this educational storybook for millions of children.

We hope that this book will help children and parents to understand the legal framework available for their assistance in the simplest language, and most importantly, help them break the silence on the issue of Child Sexual Abuse by starting conversations right inside a classroom or a home and creating an ecosystem where our children are safe and protected.

Sonal Kapoor
Founder - Director
Protsahan India Foundation



Breaking The Silence

The beautiful summer evening in London would've been incomplete without a cup of tea and some very traditional English scones. But Rebecca was not about to let it happen. She was with friends after a long time, and all three of them had traveled long distances to be with her on her request. Sasha, Agnes, and Christine had been looking forward to spending time with Rebecca and her family in London as well. It was almost twenty years ago that all four women had been in the same backyard, sipping tea over endless raucous conversations. Back then, they'd all been students at the King's College, London. And now, all of them were highly successful professionals in their own countries.

Sasha and Rebecca had since become mothers. Rebecca had a 14-year-old daughter, and Sasha had two children. The women were enjoying the time together, and reliving the conversations they used to have back in the day. Just then, Rebecca's daughter, Alyssa walked in. The slightly disturbed look on her face had scared her mother, who was promptly at her side as soon as she'd put down her school bag in the closet by the door.

'What happened, my darling,' Rebecca asked, 'why do you look so upset?'

'I'm fine, mum, thanks. But, can I tell you something,' Alyssa replied. 'It's Justine I'm worried about. Remember I'd told you that she's been missing school for almost a month now?'

'Yes, I thought you said she told you that she'd been keeping unwell for a while. Are things better with her now?'

'No, not at all, mother. It's gotten worse. We just learned something from our teacher after the lunch break. She told us that Justine had to be taken to the hospital today. Apparently, she'd tried to commit suicide in her home early this morning soon after her parents left for work.'

'Oh, dear. I'm sorry to hear that, Alyssa. We'll visit her tomorrow at the hospital.'

'Yes, that would be nice, but that's not all. Apparently, she was under a lot of stress





because her neighbor had been sexually abusing her for a while now. Both her parents are doctors, and they're often away from home when she returns from school. This neighbor had been taking advantage of that,' Alyssa informed them.

'Have the police filed a case and arrested the man yet,' Agnes asked.

'He has been arrested by officers from Scotland Yard this morning, there was a big ruckus in her street earlier today. So our teacher wanted us to know what's been going on with her before we saw it on the telly,' Then after a short pause, Alyssa spoke again, 'I still can't figure out why would Justine stay quiet about all this for so long. It's not like her parents were going to blame her.'

'That's a bit rude there, Alyssa, don't you think,' Rebecca was not happy with her daughter for judging her friend's circumstances for staying quiet against sexual abuse.

'I'm sorry, mum. But I'm angry right now at everything, and I can't figure out if I should be angry at Justine or not,' Alyssa retorted.

'I know what you're saying, Alyssa,' Christine chipped in, trying to calm the youngster

down, 'but it would be best for us to first know Justine's side of the story as well before we jump to conclusions, don't you think?'

'Yes, I agree. And I'm sorry for what I said,' she said with a deep sigh.

'We know you are, sweetie. But that brings us to a very important topic of discussion, Alyssa. You know all four of us in our professional capacities witness cases of child sexual abuse everyday. Plus, we've known you all your life, so you need not feel inhibited in our presence,' Rebecca said.

'Yes, mother. And yes, I'm fully aware that I can come talk to you about anything and everything, and that I need not be scared or ashamed if someone tries to touch me inappropriately, or if someone tries to bully or threaten me. I can bring it up with you or dad at any time,' Alyssa said with a wry smile on her face that Rebecca was familiar with.

'It is no laughing matter, Alyssa. You need to know that we trust you, and we are always available to talk to you about anything and everything.'

Alyssa chuckled, Rebecca and her friends knew that laugh all too well. It was an uneasy one that clearly showed the mask on Alyssa's face, the one she was using to pretend to be brave. Then she sighed, and spoke again, 'I wish all parents trusted their children as you do, mum. Justine would not have been in this situation today.'

'Don't lose heart, dear,' Sasha said, 'we're all here with you, not just your mother.' She smiled as she spoke to Alyssa, trying to comfort her.

'But, aunt Sasha, why can't more parents be like mine?'

'Yes, that would be nice. More parents need to learn these things, about talking to their children, listening to them, and informing them of the threats in the real world.'

Alyssa turned towards her mother once again and said, 'but what about the police and the law? Are they going to be able to help Justine and make sure she doesn't have to be scared of this man ever again when she recovers?'

'Don't you worry about that, darling. The UK law is quite well defined in cases of sexual offences. The Sexual Offences Act of 2003 lays out the definitions of various sexual



offences against children and adults, and prescribes the quantum of punishment for all such offences,' Rebecca told her. 'As you and I have discussed earlier, it is a comprehensive legislation that has been designed to protect the survivors of abuse, not the perpetrator.'

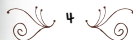
'Hmm... but then that's about here in the UK. I remember Justine telling me that her neighbor is from another country. Would the law apply to him equally?'

'Of course, child. If that man is living in the UK, then the law of the land will apply to him as well,' Agnes replied.

'But what if he gets bail and leaves the country? Would the law catch up to him even then? British law will not be applicable in other countries. I remember you and dad telling me about jurisdiction of law,' Alyssa's ability to grasp the legal terms always made Rebecca very proud of her daughter.

'Yes, there is a very remote possibility of that happening, like one in a thousand. But even if he does manage to leave the country, there are provisions in the UK law, and arrangements with many countries to extradite individuals accused of committing heinous crimes in the UK. Apart from that, other countries also have their own laws that address cases of child sexual abuse,' Rebecca told her.

'What are those? Could you give a few examples of

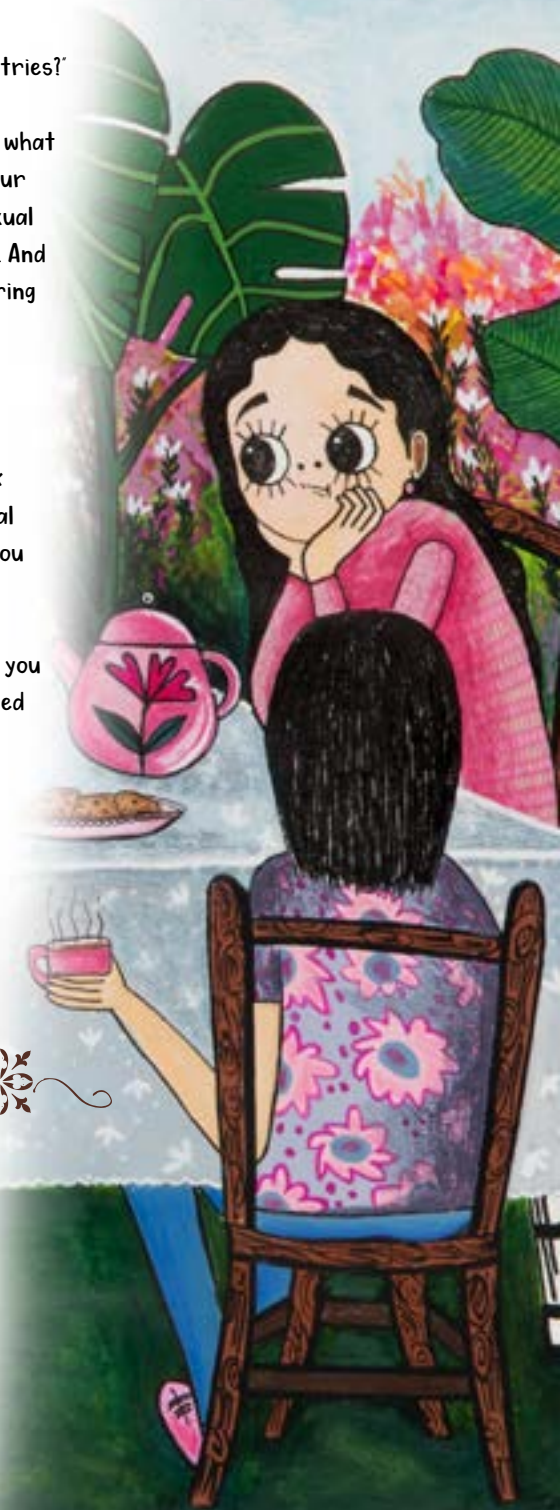


laws against child sexual abuse in other countries?'

'Of course, dear. You are old enough to know what the world outside is like,' Rebecca said. 'All four of us will tell you stories of cases of child sexual abuse we've handled over the course of time. And in return, we would request your help in sharing the knowledge you gain today with other children around you, so that they may learn as well. Okay?'

Sasha volunteered to be the first one to talk about the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (the POCSO Act, 2012). 'I'll tell you a story, Alyssa, of one of the cases I handled recently. I'm going to make up names as I go along, because I'm required by law to not tell you the real names of the children who've survived sexual abuse in India. Is that okay with you?'

'Yes, aunt Sasha. I'm all ears.'



Maya's Triumph

Neil and Marissa were sitting on the couch in the living room, their usual place as they wait for me to return from work. It was an important day for me, and my family, because judgement on a very important case I was working on was due that evening. My husband, Jude who is a senior journalist with a television channel in the city, had taken a day off from work to be with the kids all day.

No one was interested in the television, or the food on the table. They were all stealing glances at the door, eagerly awaiting the news that I was expected to bring with me. The doorbell rang, and Neil sprinted to the door to open it. The room lit up with smiles all around as I entered the house. I'd brought good news about the court case, and that's what everyone was hoping for. It was very important for both kids, afterall, it was their friends Maya and Avi whom I was representing.

Maya studied in Marissa's class, and Avi was Neil's classmate. Their parents worked in private firms, and traveled a lot for work. Both Maya and Avi would spend most of their time with their grandparents in their three-storied house a couple of streets away. While both of them were good at studies, Avi was a good athlete as well. He would participate in swimming competitions regularly. Maya was just as good at swimming and badminton, and looked up to her elder brother. They would fight, be angry, have shouting matches, but both of them knew they could not live apart. They were always there for each other, especially in the absence of their parents.

It was the fall of last year when Avi's father had agreed to rent out one of the three floors in the house to Samir. He was a corporate lawyer, and his father was a retired senior police officer. His credentials had checked out, and there was nothing to worry according to the background checks. Samir moved into the third floor apartment with his belongings and his dog within a week. He had a pleasant demeanor and was always helpful to Avi's grandparents. Even his dog was very friendly and well trained to be a nuisance for anyone in the neighborhood.

A month later, Avi and Maya started preparing for their mid-term exams. This time, their grandparents had little to offer in terms of help in their studies. Avi was lost without the



help he needed with his probability and trigonometry. Samir saw the look on Avi's face as he walked upstairs and called out to him from the first flight of stairs, 'What's wrong, kiddo? What's bothering you?'

'I have no idea whom to seek help from for my exam preparations. It's just three weeks away, and I am stuck with trigonometry equations. Probability is a beast in itself.'

Samir laughed, and offered to help Avi with his exam preparations. 'Let me go upstairs and get changed out of my work clothes. Then I'll sit with you and we'll sort all of those equations out,' he said, and rushed upstairs. A few minutes later, he was back with Avi in the living room, while his grandmother made preparations for dinner in one corner of the room. Over the next hour, Samir showed Avi every trick he'd learned to solve those particularly difficult trigonometry and probability equations from his tutor in school many years ago. While they were at it, Maya had wandered inside the living room as well, seeking her big brother's help for her English homework. She sat next to her brother as Samir took him through some very ingenious ways to handle probability equations. When he was done with Avi, he turned his attention to Maya, who had been looking at him with the hope of finding a moment when he would stop talking so she could start asking her questions. She asked him about past participle, present perfect, intransitive verbs, transitive verbs, and kept going on for a while. Samir helped her with a smile on his face. When both

kids were done with their set of questions, Samir got up to leave. At the doorstep, he turned towards them once again and said, 'don't let these be the last of your questions. If you have more, come to me tomorrow morning. It's a Sunday, I'll be upstairs all day.'

Next morning, it was Avi who had to seek Samir's help with another equation. Both the grandparents were not at home. He went upstairs to Samir's floor and rang the doorbell. Samir was

still in his pajamas at ten in the morning, unlike his attire that he wore to work much before 8am everyday. They quickly settled down to work on the mathematics equations Avi was not able to solve. Samir showed him a quick and easy way to do that. Suddenly, Avi felt Samir's hand slowly making its way up his thigh and into his pants. He shook it away with a look of disgust clear on his face. He picked up his books, hurried down the stairs, picked up his bicycle, and rode off without saying a word to anyone.

Maya had never been afraid to be by herself in the house for short durations. She was used to it, especially with her parents traveling most of the time and her grandparents visiting friends in the neighborhood frequently. They were never gone for more than an hour. She saw her brother leave in a hurry from the living room window as she picked up her books to go upstairs. She needed Samir's help again with her English homework. The door was open, but she chose to ring the doorbell anyway. It was impolite to barge into anyone's home, her grandmother had taught her. Samir came to the door in his boxer shorts, he wasn't even wearing a shirt. That made Maya blush a little, and turned around to leave. Samir stepped outside the door and grabbed her hand gently.

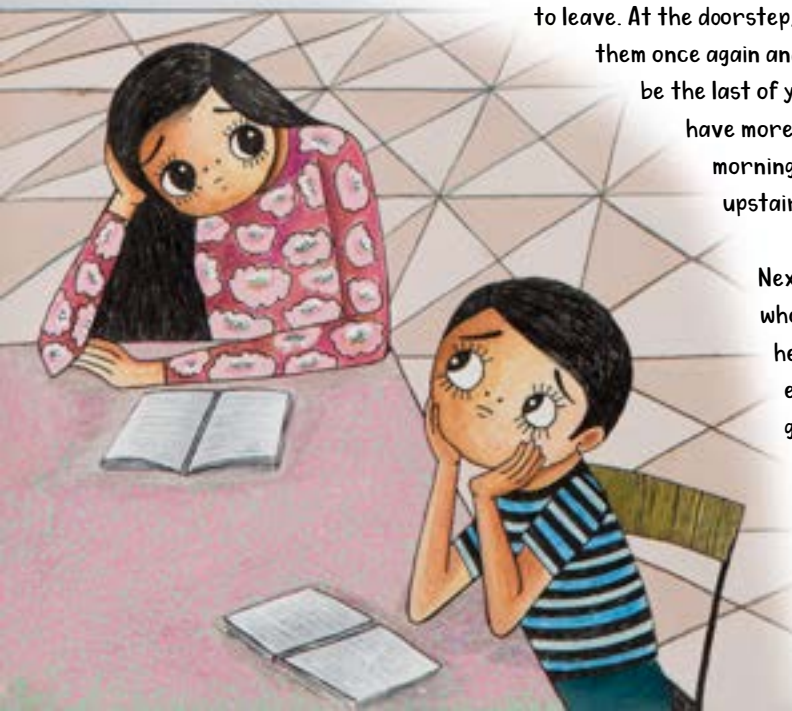
'Hey, Maya. Don't be shy. You still have doubts about your English homework,' he asked.

She nodded, keeping her gaze away from him. He pulled her inside the doorway, asking her to wait there while he went inside to get dressed. She breathed a sigh of relief as Samir walked into his room to put on some clothes. He was back outside with her in the living room in less than five minutes.

'I just had a shower. I'm sorry,' he said.

'That's okay, Samir uncle. Could you please help me with understanding some of these things about English grammar?'

'Sure, kiddo. Could you be a sweetheart and pick up the two glasses of lemonade on the kitchen counter? I've poured one for both of us,' he said. Maya went inside the kitchen and came out with two glasses of lemonade in her hands. Both of them sat down at the dining table with the books, sipping the lemonade in between their conversation. Maya had not noticed that Samir had already locked the door from inside as soon as they sat down, and that she was feeling light-headed. When he was done explaining her everything she wanted to know, Maya picked up her books and got up to leave. But something was not feeling right. She collapsed on the floor. Samir was too close to her in that moment. She



thought for a second that he was probably trying to help her get up, but she could not. Her thoughts were not clear, and she was beginning to feel a searing pain between her legs. Then she had passed out.

When she woke up, Samir was right next to her, naked. And so was she. She started sobbing, as Samir started talking about how it would be better for Maya to keep things between them.

'First of all, no one will believe you, Maya. Trust me on that,' he looked straight into her eyes and spoke with a stern face. 'Even if someone does, remember that I have a video of you lying naked in my bed on my phone. I can send it to everyone I know, and to everyone in your school, that will be the end of the line for you, your brother, your parents, and your grandparents as well. Your grandparents will probably have to commit suicide after that, or maybe even your parents. And your brother will never speak to you again.'

Maya listened to everything with tears in her eyes. She put on her clothes and walked down the stairs. No one was home yet, not even her brother. It had been almost two hours since everyone had gone out, leaving her alone at home. It was the first time in her life she hoped that someone would just come back so that she could be with them. Her brother was the first to arrive.

As he walked inside the main gate of the house, she saw Samir walking down the stairs as well. She moved slightly to hide herself behind the curtain. She saw him walk over to her brother and say something to him. She had no idea what was spoken between them, but her brother seemed scared. She'd never seen Avi scared of anything. He came inside and locked the door. Then he went straight to his room, without uttering a word to his sister. That was very unusual for both of them. They may have had their fights with each other over the years, but there was no way Avi was capable of ignoring his sister, especially when she was visibly in pain. At least that's what Maya had thought so far of her brother. But something had scared him too, just after he spoke to Samir in the courtyard of the house. Maybe Samir had told him something about me, she thought.

Just then, she saw her father walking in through the main gate. Maya unlocked the door and ran to him with tears in her eyes, putting her arms around him as far as they would go. Her father was on the phone as he walked in. He hugged her back half-heartedly. Maya felt a sudden rush of anger and disappointment course through her. She wanted to talk to her father, her protector, but he was busy with his phone calls. He had no time for

her. Her tears started to flow once again as she walked over towards her room, and locked it from the inside.

Avi heard his father talking on the phone, and came out from his room to meet him in the living room. His father was still talking on the phone. He pointed at the couch, asking Avi to sit down while he finished his phone call. When he was done, he turned towards his son and smiled a little. 'So how's it going, ace?'

'I'm okay, dad. But I... I wanted to talk to you about Samir uncle,' he said hesitatingly.

'What about him? Anything specific you can tell me about?'

'Dad, I feel weird around him. Especially when no one else is around,' Avi added.

'That's nonsense. He's a good man, a respectable man. His father has been a very reputed senior police officer, and he himself is a corporate lawyer. Why would he make you feel uncomfortable?' His phone rang again, and he was once again busy talking to some people about money and his work. Avi saw that his father was not willing to listen to him. He felt maybe it was his fault, that Samir was perhaps not a bad person like his father just said.

man, a respectable man. His father has been a very reputed senior police officer, and he himself is a corporate lawyer. Why would he make you feel uncomfortable? His phone rang again, and he was once again busy talking to some people about money and his work. Avi saw that his father was not willing to listen to him. He felt maybe it was his fault, that Samir was perhaps not a bad person like his father just said.



But his teachers had told him the difference between a good touch and a bad touch. And he had definitely not felt any good about Samir touching him in the morning. He started walking towards his room. He saw Maya's door was open, she was peering through the slit at him. He looked away, went inside his room, and closed the door. Maya too shut her door.

Both kids were quiet at dinner time. They did not look at anyone in the room, just kept their heads buried in the table. Their grandmother had to remind them to finish everything on their plates, but neither child could. Their mother was still traveling, she was expected to return in another couple of days. Even if she was around, Maya felt that it would not have made a difference, because she too was busy with her phone all the time, just like dad. It made her very angry, angrier than she'd been earlier in the day when she realized how helpless she'd felt in that moment when Samir forced himself on her. She was just a 13-year-old girl. She glanced at her brother who was trying to finish his dinner, but failing to do so. She wanted to talk to him, but she had seen Samir talking to Avi in the morning, and her brother had hurriedly walked inside only to shut himself inside his room for the rest of the day.

She waited till everyone was in bed, then she walked over to her brother's room and knocked on the door lightly. He knew it was her, so he asked her to come in.

'Bro, why did you run inside when Samir was talking to you this morning,' she asked.

'Nothing, I just had some things to finish,' he lied to his sister.

'Bro, do you think he's a bad person?'

'Why do you ask?'

'Because, I think so. He's been....' Maya could not find the right words to tell her brother what had happened earlier in the day with her. She was still angry, with Samir, with her own father, but most of all with herself for allowing it to happen and not speaking up against it. The anger surged through and she decided 'no more'. 'Bro, I'd gone to ask for his help with my English homework. But he drugged me and then raped me. He says he has a video of me lying naked with him on his phone, and he will send to everyone in our school.'

Avi looked at his sister in shock. He could not find the right words to say anything at that

moment. Just then, their grandmother walked in. She had a shocked expression on her face. She'd heard their conversation by accident from right outside the door. She hugged Maya and Avi with tears rolling down the corner of her eyes. She took a deep breath while holding both of them in her arms. She pulled them gently towards the living room. Both Avi and Maya were scared as to what was about to happen to them. Their grandmother had not said anything so far, she had just been crying softly. She called out for her husband to join them in the living room. Within a few seconds, he was there with them. Grandma proceeded to tell him what she'd heard from the kids' room a little while ago. Now it was grandpa's turn to be shocked by the events of the day in his absence. He felt guilty of having left the kids alone with a stranger in their own house. The elderly couple gathered themselves, and turned towards the siblings. They calmly asked them to repeat what had happened through the day to them. Maya was the first one to speak. Avi tried to shush her. He was afraid Samir will harm the entire family, just as he had promised him when he had returned home earlier in the day. He remembered how Samir had said that his father was an ex-police officer, and that he would ruin his father's career if Avi spoke to anyone about that morning. But Maya was angry. She wasn't going to let Samir do anything to her ever again. She told her grandparents everything that had happened. They listened to her patiently, with tears in their eyes that casually rolled down the cheeks with their own weight. When she was done, grandma hugged Maya once again, and praised her for being brave even when she was scared by Samir's threats. She told Maya that she need not fear for her safety, or that of the rest of the family, because she was going to call the police and lodge a complaint under the POCSO Act.

'What's that, grandma,' asked Maya.

'It's the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, or simply the POCSO Act. It came into effect on 14 November 2012. It is a powerful law against offenders like Samir,' grandma said while grandpa called the police on his cellphone. He looked at them and said, 'the police are on their way right now, as are people from Childline. I called them on 1098, they're sending a senior social worker over to talk to Maya in some time.'

'How will that be helpful to us? Am I a child according to this law,' Maya asked.

'Yes, dear. According to the definition in the POCSO Act, a child is anyone below the age of 18 years. And as for the Act, it is a gender neutral law that provides clear definition of all types of sexual abuses against children.'

'What is the difference between the POCSO Act and other provisions of the Indian Penal Code, grandma,' asked Avi.

'The IPC has no distinguishing mechanism between adult and child victims. Therefore, it does not offer much effective protection to children from sexual offences. Hence, the need for a special act like POCSO.'

'But grandma, what's special about the POCSO Act?'

'That's a good question, Avi. The Act has provision for very strict punishments, that have been set as per the seriousness of the offence. The punishments could be simple or rigorous imprisonment of varied duration. There are also provisions for fine, which is decided by the Court on a case-to-case basis.'

'Do I have to repeat everything I told you in front of the policemen,' Maya asked.

'Yes, dear. You will have to give your statement. But you don't have to worry. It would be a woman police officer, not below the rank of sub-inspector,' grandma said.

'How do you know, grandma? It could be a policeman as well, he could take me away with them to the police station, and put me in jail,' Maya asked.

'No child, it will be a woman police officer, that's the law as prescribed in the POCSO Act. It says that, recording the statement of the child must be done at the residence of the child or at a place of his or her choice, and for girls, it must be done by a woman police officer not below the rank of sub-inspector. But before that, I think we should wake up your father first.' She called Maya and Avi's father to the living room, saying that it was an absolutely urgent matter that he needed to attend to. When he learned about the day's incidents with Maya, and that it had happened a few minutes before he arrived, he was shocked and saddened. He sat down with a thump on the couch next to his son.

'How could this happen to my daughter,' he said with tears in his eyes. 'I thought Samir was a decent man. I never imagined that this would even be possible in my own house. What I don't understand is why did you go to him in the first place, Maya?' His voice was beginning to shake with rage.

'It's not Maya's fault. Do not make the mistake of pointing a finger at her. I will not allow



that at all,' grandma raised her voice a little at that remark against Maya. 'The police will be here in a few minutes, if you're going to help, please make sure that Samir hasn't left the premises when they arrive.' She turned to Maya and Avi once again, 'so where were we?'

'You were telling me about recording my statement. But before that, grandma, what if the police take Samir's side. His father was a police officer himself.'

'Don't you worry about that, dear. In the POCSO Act, the accused has to prove his innocence during the trial. So until he is proven innocent, he will be considered guilty. And as for his father being a police officer, then he should know better that the law will catch up to him.'

'But don't these trials continue on for a long time,' Avi asked.

'It's not like the movies, child. The Act issues guidelines for the establishment of Special Courts for trial of offences under POCSO. These Special Courts must complete the trial within a period of one year in the best interest of the child. Let me do one thing, I'll tell you everything I know about the POCSO Act, so that you know your rights. And in return you have to promise me to tell everything to the police officer who'll be coming over to see us without hesitating. Will you promise me that?'

'Sure, grandma,' both kids spoke together.

'Ok, so according to the Act, when a crime against a child is reported, it must be followed up by the police and judiciary in a specified time frame. Like I told you earlier, the statement must be recorded at the child's home or a place of his or her choice, and for girls, it must be done by a woman police officer not below the rank of sub-inspector. Apart from that,

- The evidence must be recorded within 30 days.
- The child is never to be detained at the police station, especially during the night for any reason.
- Police officer will not be in uniform while recording the statement of the child.
- The statement of the child is to be recorded as spoken by the child. And the child must be accompanied by an adult at all times during the procedure.
- Medical examination of the child must be conducted in the presence of a parent of the child or any other person in whom the child has trust or confidence.

- In case the victim is a girl child, the medical examination shall be conducted by a woman doctor. But medical examination can be conducted only if the child or the parents/guardian of the child give consent for this.
- Trial happens in a special court for children where the accused cannot come in direct contact of the child in any way, and the trial happens in-camera.
- Frequent breaks for the child during trial, especially if the child is distressed.
- Child not to be called repeatedly to testify.
- No aggressive questioning or character assassination of the child by lawyers is permitted during a trial under POCSO. All questions of the lawyers must be routed through the judge only.
- Disclosing the name or identity of the child in media is a punishable offence according to the Act, with jail time of up to one year for the offenders.
- The police are required to report the matter to the Child Welfare Committee and the Special Court within 24 hours of receiving a complaint.

'So you see, Maya, you have nothing to be afraid of,' she said.

Just then, the doorbell rang, and everyone looked towards the door while grandpa opened it. A lady police officer in civilian clothes stood there with a folder in her hand, and her handbag slung over her shoulder. She identified herself as a senior inspector of the police department, and showed her ID for everyone to see clearly. Grandpa escorted her to the living room, and brought a glass of water for her. After a moment of settling in, she started asking questions, and grandma responded to her clearly and without holding back any information she asked for. Both ladies then looked at little Maya



who told her story in front of the police inspector without hesitating even for a moment. When she was done, Avi came closer to the three of them, and said, 'I would like to add something to Maya's statement.' Everyone looked at him with surprise.

'Go on, Avi, don't be afraid son,' grandpa said.

'I want to tell you that Samir had tried to put his hands inside my pants as well this morning when I went to ask for his help with mathematics. I ran away. Then when I came back home, he threatened me that if I spoke to anyone about it, he would hurt me and everyone in my family' Avi said, his voice shaking with fear.

'That scoundrel,' grandma glared. 'I will make sure that he rots in jail for the rest of his life. I'm calling Sasha, and asking her to represent us for the court trial. In the meantime, inspector, I request you to file another complaint on behalf of my grandson as well.'

The inspector proceeded to record Avi's statement as well. Given the heinous nature of the offences, and the repetitive pedophilic habits of the offender, she called for backup from the nearby police station. Within half an hour, the police party arrived, and knocked on Samir's door. He shouted and screamed as the policemen handcuffed him to take him to the police station for questioning. He threatened them with dire consequences, saying that his father was a senior police officer, and he himself was a lawyer. As the police were taking him away to the car, he turned towards Maya's grandparents and threatened them as well, saying that he will make sure the case is dismissed and that their family is ruined in every way. Maya and Avi were in the living room, listening to everything. When the ruckus settled, grandma came in first and hugged the kids, telling them that everything was going to be okay now. Maya said that she was afraid of Samir's threats, to which both grandma and the lady inspector assured her that they will not allow Samir anywhere near her again.

When the trial started, with me, Avi and grandma at her side, Maya fearlessly told the judge everything about Samir through video conferencing. The judge asked if she wanted to rest, then they would continue to talk on another day. Maya refused, she was okay with telling everything to the judge right now. When she was done, it was Avi's turn. He too recited the entire incident just as fearlessly as his little sister. Maya's medical reports, and other evidence was provided to the court as well.

'After going through all the evidence against him, the judge pronounced Samir guilty on

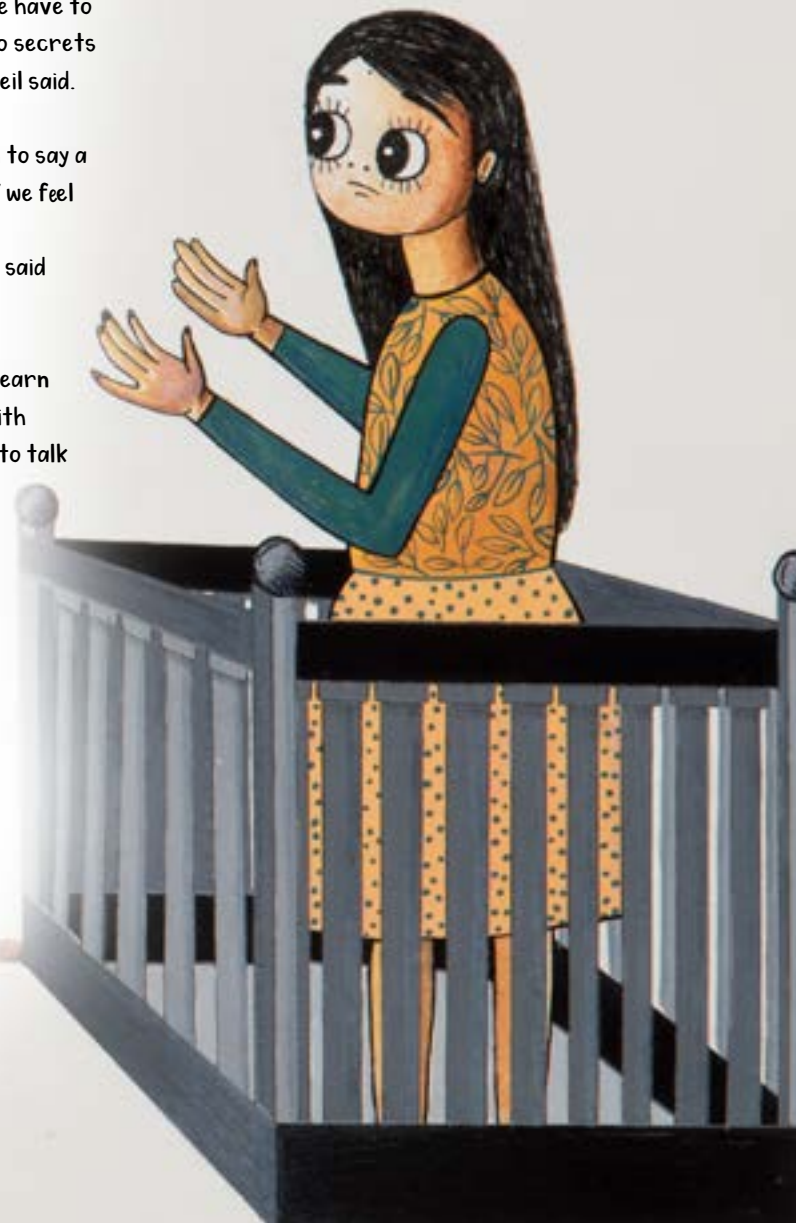
all charges under the POCSO Act, and awarded him a life sentence without the possibility of early parole,' I said. 'And that brings us to a very important topic once again, children.'

'Yes, mom, we know. We have to tell you everything, no secrets from either of you,' Neil said.

'And we have to learn to say a clear 'no' to anyone if we feel uncomfortable in a particular situation,' said Marissa.

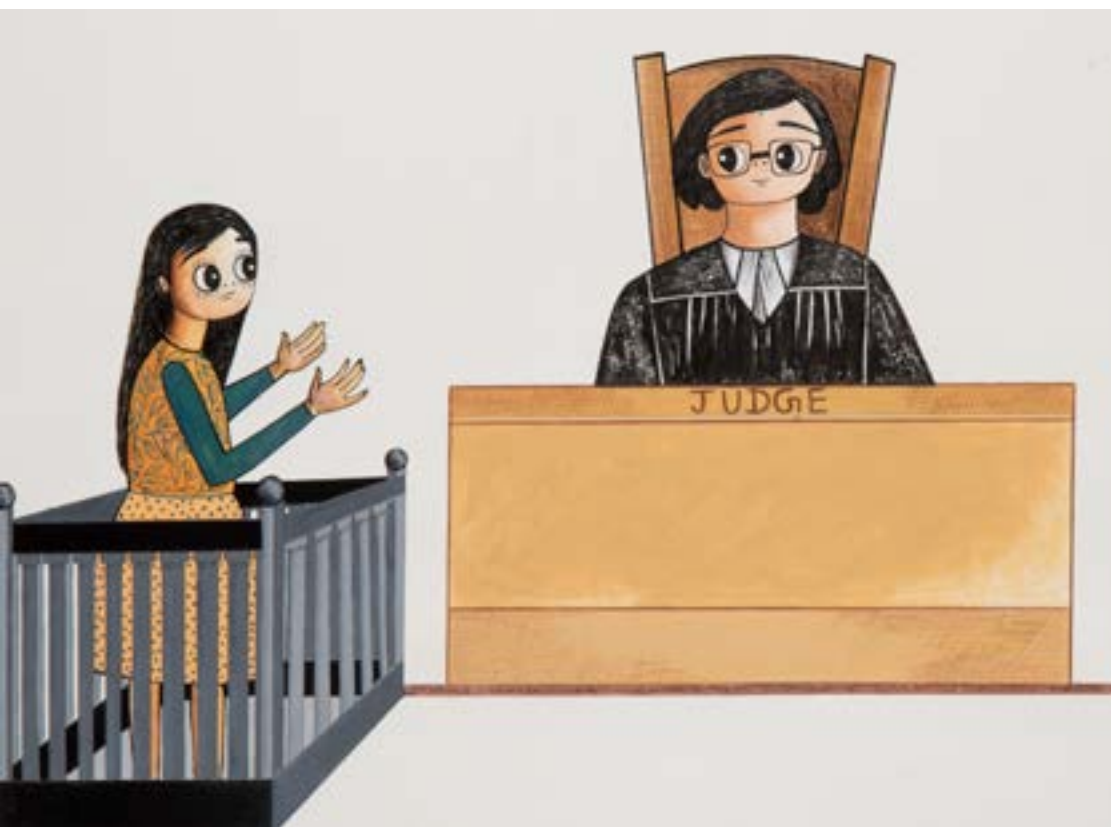
'Right, and I have to learn to spend more time with the two of you, learn to talk and listen to you, believe you when you sincerely tell me something, and be there for you no matter what,' added their father, Jude.

'And remember, all of you, there's no shame in talking to your parents about your bodies, and your own safety. You kids are absolutely



safe in this house, but in order to stay safe outside the house, you need to talk to us, and learn to speak up whenever you feel you're not okay with the situation you are in. Never feel ashamed about your body, and never be scared of anyone. Remember that, because we'll talk to you often so that you don't forget any of it,' Sasha said. Then she got up and went into her room to take a shower, while Jude went into the kitchen to make dinner for everyone.

Marissa was happy, her friend Maya had shown immense courage in speaking up against her abuser. She knew her grandparents were really sweet to all the kids, and she respected them a lot. But she'd never thought that they knew so much about the law to support Maya so strongly. The respect Marissa had for Maya's grandparents had increased to a whole new level today, and she knew it. She looked out the window, then at her brother, and both of them smiled at each other. Their friend Maya had triumphed over evil today, and they were all very happy for her.



'So you see, Alyssa, it is very important for kids to talk to their parents or elders. And it is equally important for elders to listen to the kids, and be aware of the laws, so that they know their rights, and are equipped to handle any situation when it comes to the safety of their children.'

'Yes, aunt Sasha. And the POCSO Act is quite simple to understand for everyone, especially the way you described in your story. Thank you for sharing with me, I'll remember it for sure,' Alyssa said.

'You're welcome, dear.'

'Aunt Agnes, you said there is a similar law in South Africa as well. Could you tell me more about it, please?'

'Yes, Alyssa, there is. It's called the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, it was established in 2007. I'll tell you the story of a very brave girl and her equally brave parents who took on a drug dealer in the Khayelitsha neighbourhood of Cape Town. It'll help you understand the framework of the law in a better way,' Agnes said. 'And I'll be changing the names of the child and her parents as well. It is important that we respect their privacy at all times.'

'Sure, I agree,' said Alyssa.



Londiwe's Freedom

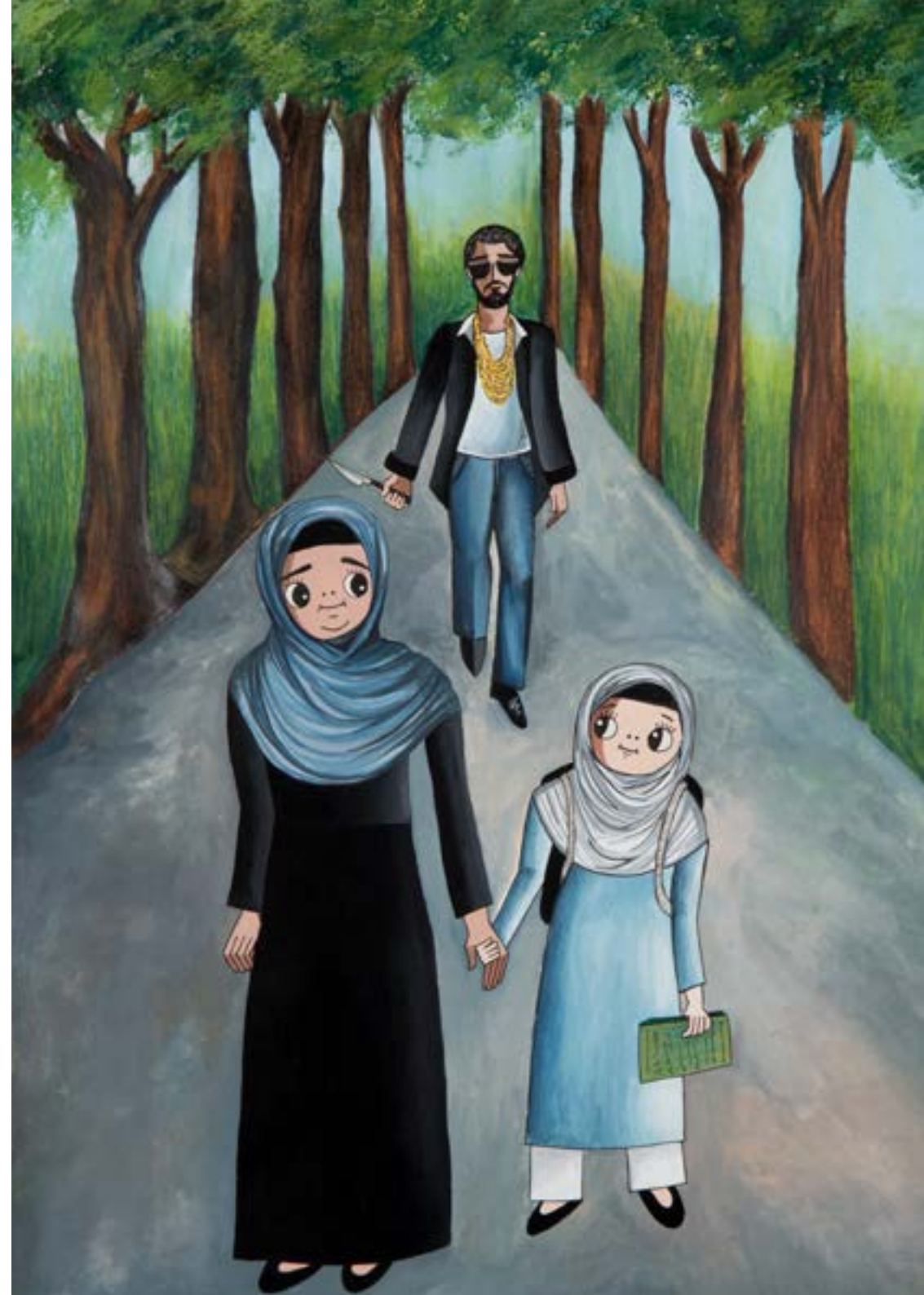
Early this year, one of my very brilliant students, Londiwe Afua turned 9-years-old. Her parents, both devout Muslims, were told by the cleric in the local Mosque to immediately stop her schooling. Londiwe's father, Mzamo is a daily wage laborer at a local factory, and her mother Sizani is a health worker at the government run clinic in the Khayelitsha slums outside Cape Town. The neighborhood is best described as an under-served community, where everyday is a battle for survival for the residents. It isn't the safest place for children, especially young girls.

Her name means 'Protected' in Afrikans. One of her parents would accompany her to school everyday, and pick her up afterwards. They would stay in touch with all her teachers to ensure that nothing came in the way of her education. Neither Mzamo, nor his wife Sizani was well educated, but they wanted their daughter to make a better life for herself through education. So when the local Imam objected to their daughter's schooling, both parents decided to defy him. They were adamant to get Londiwe an education.

Her parents came to me, asking for my advice. I told them that if Sizani can wear a hijab and be a nurse, why can't their daughter wear it and come to school. Mzamo and Sizani were convinced, they decided that their daughter would go to school and follow their religion as well by wearing a hijab to school everyday. The Imam was okay with that too, and Londiwe's education continued.

Also living in the same neighborhood was a man named Wandile Jaz, a horrible man who made his living by selling death. If anyone needed guns or drugs, Wandile was always ready to provide them that for a price. He was unanimously hated by the entire community. He would influence young boys with money to work for him, running guns and drugs for him.

One day, while returning from school with her mother, Wandile stopped them in the middle of the road. Sizani was scared and outraged at this behavior by him. She'd been living in the neighborhood for many years with her husband, and this was not the first time someone was misbehaving with her. But this time, she was scared for Londiwe.



'I see your daughter is growing up very fast. Soon she will be just as pretty as her mother,' Wandile said to her with a menacing voice.

Fearing for the safety of her daughter, Sizani chose to stay quiet. She tried to walk away, but Wandile would not let her walk away that day. He grabbed her hand and tried to pull them aside towards his shack.

'Why are you in such a rush, Sizani. I have air-conditioning in my home. Why don't you and your daughter step inside so we could talk,' he said.

Sizani pulled her hand and broke free of Wandile's grip. She pulled Londiwe close to her and ran away from there. She ran straight to her home, went inside with Londiwe and locked the door. They waited for evening when Mzamo would return home from work. Sizani made sure that Londiwe finished her homework while they waited for her father.

Mzamo returned home in the evening to find the door locked. When he went inside, Sizani and Londiwe were waiting for him. He could see that his wife was very scared. She started crying on seeing her husband. He sat her down, brought her some water, and asked her why she was upset. Sizani narrated what had happened earlier that day. When she was done telling him the story, Mzamo got up and walked towards the door with his fists clenched tightly. Sizani begged him to stop and talk to her first.

'What is there to talk about this, Sizani. He threatened my family, my daughter. I will teach him a good lesson,' Mzamo said, seething with anger.

'It is for the sake of our daughter that I ask you to stop. Please don't do something rash at this moment,' she pleaded with him. Mzamo took a deep breathe and calmed himself down a little.

'But I think, we should talk to the Imam at least,' he said. 'We should tell him that one of the members from his Mosque is doing such horrible things.'

'Yes, we should tell someone. But I'm afraid, Imam would say that this happened because we didn't listen to him and continue sending our daughter to school....' Sizani was interrupted by a knock on the door. Mzamo opened the door to find Wandile standing there wearing sunglasses and a big smile on his face. Thick chains of gold were dangling around his neck. Each of his fingers had a gold ring with diamonds studded in them. And

every time he smiled, his gold tooth would shine in the light.

'Salaam Alaikum,' he said.

'Wa Alaikum Assalam,' Mzamo found himself bound by religion to respond politely to the man who had threatened his family earlier that day.

'May I come in,' Wandile asked.

Sizani saw her husband's fist clenching again. She quickly walked up to him, and put her hand on his shoulder. She was scared that he might have a weapon and would harm her family. He glanced at her, then looked at Wandile again, and stepped aside to let him inside.

'I have something I want to talk to you about,' he said as he walked inside the door. 'First of all, I'm sorry to you both for my behavior this afternoon. I should've come straight to you, Mzamo, and not bothered your beautiful wife.'

'You better not say another word about my wife, Wandile. You know people like you are not welcome inside my home. It is only because you go to the same Mosque that I'm allowing you in here,' Mzamo could not hide his anger at him.

'But I come with an offer of peace, and happiness for your family. Would you not even listen to me for a moment,' he said with a smile that made Sizani wince. 'I've come to ask to marry your daughter.'

Mzamo and Sizani were shocked to hear Wandile say that. He stayed quiet for a moment and allowed them to understand what he was saying. Then he spoke again.

'Your daughter is growing up. She's already wearing the hijab, how much longer are you going to wait to get her married? You will be stupid not to agree, especially when I'm prepared to offer much gold for her dowry.'



Mzamo glared at him. He looked at his wife who was still in shock.

'My daughter is not for sale, do you understand, Wandile. I will not let my daughter's future be ruined like this. She is better than you, better than all of us. I will educate her so that she can build her own life away from these slums, away from people like you' Mzamo's voice was shaking with rage.

'As I thought, you are stupid, Mzamo. I gave you a chance to change your daughter's life, but you won't listen to reason. Now you'll be responsible if something bad happens to her,' Wandile said as he walked towards the door.

Sizani shut the door behind him as he walked out, fear and anger clearly visible in her eyes. She was afraid for her daughter, a man like Wandile Jaz could do anything. Even the beat policemen were friends with him.

Meanwhile, Londiwe was performing brilliantly at school as always, oblivious of the threats that Wandile had made against her to her parents few weeks ago. He continued to harass her and her mother as they walked back home after school every other day. Sometimes, he would follow them all the way to home. Londiwe did not like that at all. In June, Londiwe was to appear for her exams. That posed a problem for Sizani. She was afraid that she might not get time off from the clinic to pick her up from school as the school closed earlier during the exams. Mzamo did not get permission from his bosses to pick her up after school either. It was only a matter of two weeks, but Londiwe's parents were scared that Wandile Jaz may harm her on her way from school if he saw her walking home alone.

Finally, Sizani got permission from the doctors at the clinic to pick her up, drop her home, and then come to the clinic. She would have to work in the next shift as well as a result, but her work and her daughter's education would not be disturbed. She agreed.

On the day Londiwe appeared for her English exam at the school, Sizani was waiting for her outside the school gates as always. She didn't realize that Wandile Jaz had been waiting there as well. He was hiding behind a tree on the opposite side of the road. He saw Londiwe step out of the school, and hug her mother even as she ran past me at the gate. Sizani greeted me, spoke to me for a few minutes, and then walked towards her home holding Londiwe's hand. The two reached home without any trouble. Sizani was happy that it was one of the rare days when Wandile Jaz had not stopped them in the street. She

gave Londiwe some food, and watched her get back to her books before walking out of the house towards the clinic. Wandile Jaz was hiding behind a wall, and saw her leave. When he was sure that Sizani had gone off to work, he stepped out from behind the wall, and started walking towards her home where little Londiwe was all alone.

He knocked on the door, and called her, 'Londiwe, your mother was hit by a car. She's hurt very bad, come with me quickly.'

Londiwe started crying. He put his hand on her head, and spoke very softly to her, 'don't worry, child. I've taken her to the doctor, she will be alright. But she's asking for you to be with her.'

A neighbor who knew him well, saw Wandile speaking with her, and came over to inquire. 'What is happening here,' she asked.

'Sizani was hit by a car. I took her to the doctor, he's called for an ambulance. She asking for Londiwe to go with her,' Wandile Jaz lied to the neighbor as well.

'Oh, God. Okay, I'll come with you as well,' the neighbor said.

'No, no, it's alright. Sizani has asked for her daughter, and the doctor will not allow anyone other than family to be with her right now. You can help me by informing Mzamo about the incident, please.'

'Okay, my husband works in the same factory. I will inform him,' she said.

'Thank you. I'll take Londiwe to her mother,' Wandile said as he lifted Londiwe in his arms. The neighbor saw him walking towards the clinic, and went in the other direction to call Mzamo on the phone.

Mzamo was shocked to hear the news from his neighbor. He hung up, and immediately called the clinic where Sizani was working. When his wife answered the phone he was relieved for a moment, but that relief was short lived. Mzamo was horrified when he realized what the neighbor had said - 'Wandile Jaz took Londiwe to see Sizani at the hospital.'

He told Sizani what the neighbor had told him over the phone. It was Sizani's turn to be

horrified. Mzamo told her to stay calm, and start looking for their daughter in the neighborhood while he called the police.

I was in the middle of correcting exam papers when Mzamo called me, asking for help in speaking to the police. I dropped everything, picked up my handbag, and started walking towards the police station where I'd asked him to meet me. He was already there waiting for me when I reached. We walked inside and asked to speak with the duty chief. His name was Musa Goetzee. He was a student of my mother many years ago. I was sure he would help us, and he did.

Officer Musa listened to Mzamo very carefully, and assured him that Londiwe would soon be with him, safe and sound. He asked Mzamo if he had a picture of Londiwe. I told him that I could get one from the school records, but he would need a warrant from the court for that. Officer Musa had a better idea. He made a few calls on the police radio, and asked for a lookout for Wandile Jaz. The police already had a file on him with his latest picture. Policemen all over Cape Town started looking for him at railway stations, bus stations, hotels, and any other place they suspected him to be at.

By late afternoon, there was no news of either Londiwe or Wandile Jaz. No one had seen them. Sizani had also come to the police station to be with Mzamo. They were very worried for the safety of their daughter. Eight hours had passed since the police had started looking for Londiwe. Officer Musa was sure that his men would find Wandile Jaz before he fled from their jurisdiction. At around 9pm, officer Musa stepped out of his office in a hurry. He walked over to where Sizani, Mzamo and I were sitting on a bench in the waiting room. He told us that one of his informants had spotted Wandile Jaz going to the bus station, and he was carrying a little girl in his arms. Officer Musa had immediately called for his staff to accompany him to the bus station. He was sick of getting complaints about Wandile Jaz, and every time he would get out jail because the police could never find any evidence against him. Officer Musa wanted to arrest him with the evidence that he had abducted a little girl, and charge him under the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act of 2007.

The police party rushed to the bus station, and arrested Wandile Jaz while he was boarding a bus to Port Elizabeth. Londiwe was with him. It appeared that he had drugged the little girl so that she would not scream for help on the bus. Mzamo and Sizani held her, tears rolling down their eyes. Mzamo was thanking the policemen for saving their daughter that day. He held officer Musa's hand and cried, thanking him many times.

The police took them to the hospital to get Londiwe medical attention. The doctors checked her, and told the police that the child had been sexually assaulted. They also said that a detailed report would be available after the child had regained consciousness, as they needed to speak to her and conduct more tests. Officer Musa requested my help to convey that to Londiwe's parents who were waiting outside.

When she was safely tucked away in her bed at the hospital, Sizani decided to stay with Londiwe while Mzamo and I accompanied a policeman to the station to speak with officer Musa. Mzamo was not going to let Wandile get away with his crime, he wanted the law to punish the man who sexually assaulted his 9-year-old daughter.

'I am a simple man with no money, officer. But I will not rest until this man is punished by the law,' he said to officer Musa.

'I understand your anguish, I do. I'm a righteous man, Mr. Afua. I will help you in every way I can within the law to bring Wandile Jaz to justice,' officer Musa assured him.

'But I don't have any money to fight a long court battle against him....' Mzamo said.

'Please don't worry about that. If you can't afford a lawyer, the government will provide you one free of charge. All the evidence in the case is against him, and he was arrested with your daughter in his possession. He will be charged under the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, 2007. It is a very strict Act of law that is designed to protect the survivor and puts the responsibility of proving innocence on the accused.'

'I believe there is the Sexual Offences Act of 2007, but I'm not aware of this Act, officer,' I



asked him.

'It is the same as you say, Ms. Falomi. The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act is also known as the Sexual Offences Act, 2007,' Musa replied.

'So in what ways will it be helpful to bring justice to Londiwe and her parents? What about Wandile Jaz's statement that he was married to the little girl in a legal ceremony inside a Mosque.'

'Then that would make the Imam of that Mosque just as guilty as Wandile Jaz of sexual crimes against a child,' officer Musa said. 'Okay, I will tell you about the basic structure of this Law. It will help you understand things better. Like I told you, the responsibility of

proving his innocence is with the accused according to the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, which is also called the Sexual Offences Act. The law states that -

- It is gender-neutral, that means, it applies to both girls and boys
- Consent for sexual activities given by children under the age of 12 is not considered by the court as 'consent'
- It covers all known forms of sexual crimes against children, including sexual assault, rape, sexual exploitation or grooming, exposure to or display of pornography and the creation of child pornography, and trafficking
- If the accused claims to have been 'married' to the child, it is not an acceptable defence in a court of law against sexual offences
- The law criminalizes any attempt conspiracy or incitement to commit a sexual offence
- The law creates a duty to report sexual offences committed with or against children or persons who are mentally disabled
- It provides our courts with extra-territorial jurisdiction within South Africa when hearing matters relating to sexual offences
- The law enables the South African Police Service with new investigative tools when investigating sexual offences or other offences involving the HIV status of the accused
- The law mandates protection of complainants of sexual offences and their families from secondary victimisation and trauma by establishing a co-operative response between all government departments involved in implementing an effective, responsive and sensitive criminal justice system relating to sexual offences.

'So you see, the law has been written to support the survivor, not the accused,' officer Musa added.

'But what about collecting of evidence, and interviewing the survivor, or any possible witnesses,' I asked.

'The law is very clear about setting up of child-friendly courtrooms with provisions of recording testimony of children below the age of 16 through closed circuit television. It also mandates the training and sensitization of police officials in handling interviews of the survivors, to ensure that a child is not put under any amount of stress while doing so. The law also states that the identity of the survivor is not to be disclosed by any



officer of the law.'

'How would the case proceed from here on,' I asked.

'We'll have to wait for the detailed medical report of the child. Once we have that, my department will be filing charges against the accused,' he told us with confidence in his voice that Wandile Jaz will not get away with his crimes against little Londiwe Afua. 'In the meantime, I will depute officers around the clock to provide security for the child and her family.'

'Thank you, officer. That's very reassuring to know,' I said.

'Please don't mention it. I will do anything within my authority for you. After all, you are my teacher's daughter, a sister to me.'

'I appreciate that very much.'

The next morning, doctors at the hospital gave a detailed medical report of sexual assault on the little girl. Blood samples taken from Wandile Jaz confirmed that he was the perpetrator. The police then charged him under various sections of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, 2007, making a strong case for his conviction. They also tracked the Imam of the Mosque where Wandile Jaz claimed to have married 9-year-old Londiwe Afua. Both the Imam and Wandile Jaz were also charged under various sections of the South Africa's law against child marriage as prescribed under the Children's Act, 2005.

The judge saw all the evidence against Wandile Jaz. Little Londiwe Afua gave her statement to the judge over CCTV, and answered all her questions with a confident voice for a 9-year-old. The police had also submitted evidence to the court against Wandile Jaz's other activities. They had recovered many guns and drugs from his home in Khayelitsha. In the end, Wandile Jaz was convicted for all his crimes, and was sentenced to 14-years in prison for sexual assault on Londiwe Afua under the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, 14-years under the Children's Act, and another 7-years on illegal weapons and drugs charges. The judge also directed local authorities to support the family's medical expenses and rehabilitation counseling for Londiwe.

'Today, Londiwe is back to school, happy and strong as ever. She continues her

education, and is a brilliant student, always at the top of her class. I'm very proud of her as a teacher.'

'But aunt Agnes, what if Wandile Jaz has friends who might harm her, or her parents,' Alyssa asked.

'Good question, Alyssa. The court also directed the police department to provide security for the family for as long as it is required, or until all known associates of Wandile Jaz are in custody.'

'I also noticed many similarities between the South African Law, and India's POCSO Act, 2012.'

'Yes, very good observation, dear. The issue of sexual offences against children is prevalent in every part of the world. So governments take that into account, often consult each other, and then form laws according to the constitution of the country. That's why many parts of the South African law are similar to the Indian law.'

'Thank you, aunt Agnes, for sharing Londiwe's story with me. It's reassuring to know that South Africa also has very strong laws to protect children from sexual abuse.'

'It's not just about forming the laws, Alyssa. It is also about being aware of the laws that matters. People like you and me, police officers like Musa Goetzee, and parents like Mzamo and Sizani who make the effort to understand the law makes the real difference.'

'Thank you once again, aunt Agnes. I will remember your words for sure,' Alyssa said.



Max's Strength

"Max is 12-years-old now. He's always been an excellent student who never let anything come in the way of his education, not even the accident that left him without the use of his legs at the age of 6." Christine was telling Alyssa. She nodded.

The family lives in a farmhouse in Strasburg, Pennsylvania, a small farming town. No one in that town ever thought that one of their own would do something horrific to a child, and then try to threaten his way out of trouble. The incident came to light through an intern at 'Bikers For Children', a non-profit organization that provides moral support and counseling to survivors of child sexual abuse in the United States of America. That's where I work.



Three years ago, Max's parents, Jack and Mary Ellen started noticing a sudden change in his behavior. He started staying quiet, much too quiet for himself. His appetite dropped, and he started to lose weight. His parents were naturally worried for him. Max wouldn't tell them what was wrong, or what was bothering him so much that he would rather keep himself locked up in his room, instead of his usual activities that included books and roaming around the neighborhood with one of his best friends.

It all started soon after Jack had bought a new piece of farmland. It meant that he needed people to work for him to maintain that farm. A 23-year-old man named Griffin who lived

in the next town about 60-miles away, was recommended by a friend to him. He met with Griffin, and liked him a lot because he had a lot of experience working on a farm. He was the obvious choice.

Two days later, Griffin was the front door with his few belongings that he had brought with him in a car borrowed from his friend. He was shown the living space in the barn, a few hundred feet away from the house past the backyard. It was a cosy space, with a bed made of straw in one corner on the upper loft, and farm machinery stacked neatly on the ground level. Griffin started living there from that day onwards along with two more people who'd been hired by Jack. Another one, a lady was also hired to help in kitchen during the day because now they had to prepare meals for seven people, and he'd wanted some help for his wife because she needed to pay attention to Max, as well as her job. At meal time, the three farm workers would come down to the kitchen entrance at the back of the house, and have their food at the kitchen counter. Their break time would stretch for about an hour each afternoon.

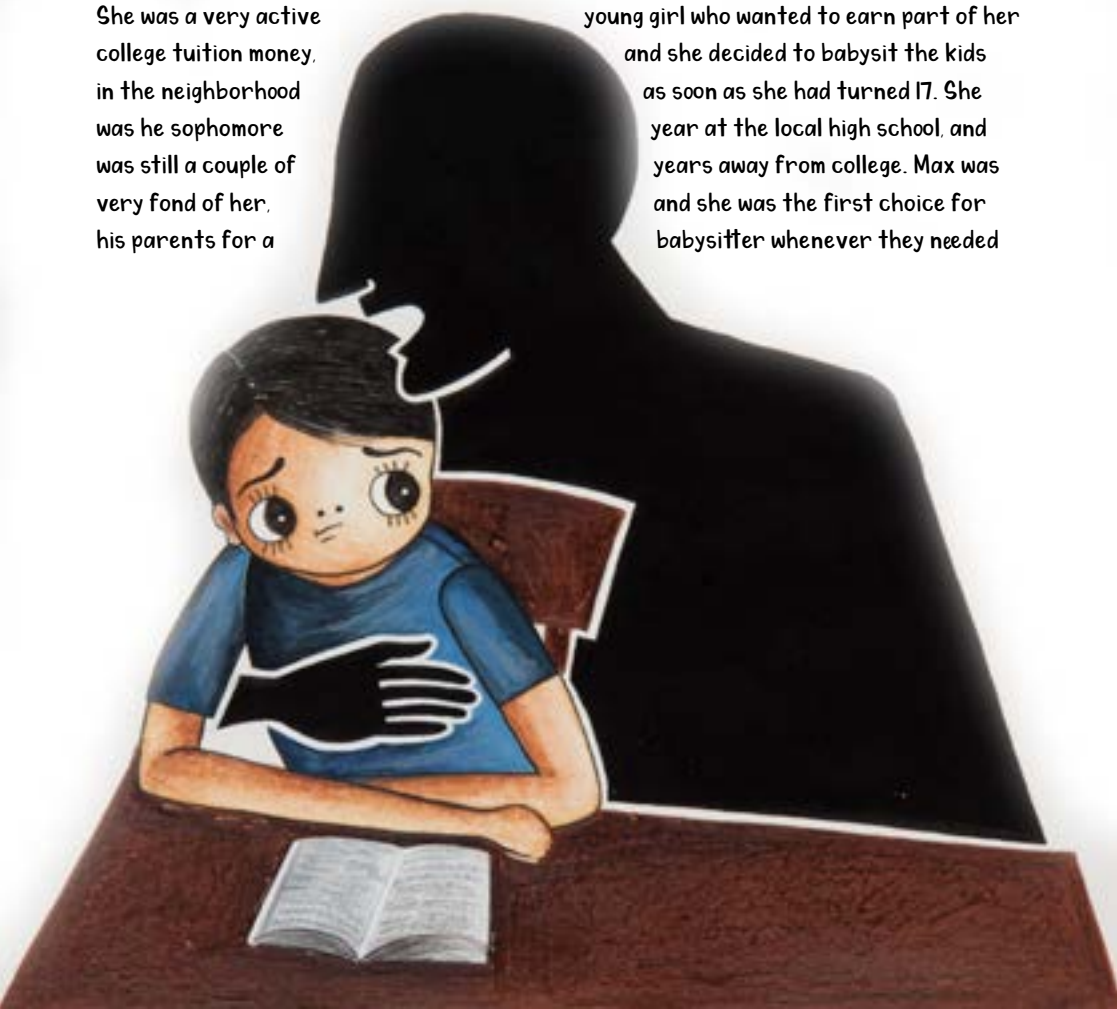
Having so many people in the house seemed like a good thing to both Mary Ellen and Jack. Now there was someone to help around with Max all the time whenever it was needed. Griffin particularly, was proving helpful in more than one way for them. He would often carry Max's wheelchair to the car from the house, and back. He helped bring in the groceries sometimes, and was also a good mechanic. That was very useful for Jack because that saved him a lot of money.

Max too was enjoying the new people around the house at all times. He loved playing catch, or throwing the ball through the basketball hoop with his dad. But now that there was more work on the farm, his father had little time to spend with him. But the new people in the house meant that now he always had someone to play catch with, or practice basketball in the backyard. After he was done with his work, Griffin would come over sometimes to play basketball with Max. They would continue to throw that orange ball through the hoop for as long as they could. Many a times, Mary Ellen had to force them to stop playing because it was too late for dinner. Griffin was quickly becoming Max's best friend.

A few days later, two bullies from school were bothering Max as he got off the bus. Griffin saw that from the front yard, and immediately rushed to be at his side. The bullies backed off as soon as they saw him approach, because Griffin was not their age and was much bigger than both of them put together. Griffin helped Max get off the bus with his

wheelchair, and pushed it along to bring him inside the house. Max felt very safe with him in that moment. Griffin seemed like a big brother to him. From that day on, that's how it became for Max. Each day before going to school, they would spend a few moments together in the kitchen as Griffin and Max had their breakfast in the morning. Then in the afternoon, Griffin would wait for Max to return from school so that they could have lunch together as well. Their evening basketball practice became a routine as well. They would talk for hours, and Max's parents were getting worried that he was spending most of his time playing with Griffin. But that was going to be the least of their problems soon enough.

Max's parents worked very hard, they needed that extra money for his future education. They often had to leave him in the care of baby-sitters who would look after him in their absence. Megan lived in the same neighborhood as Max, and was a few years older to him. She was a very active young girl who wanted to earn part of her college tuition money, and she decided to babysit the kids in the neighborhood as soon as she had turned 17. She was a sophomore at the local high school, and was still a couple of years away from college. Max was very fond of her, and she was the first choice for his parents for a babysitter whenever they needed



help with Max. But there were times when Megan was unavailable due to her studies, and that posed a problem for Mary Ellen and Jack.

They decided that while Megan was unavailable to look after Max in their absence, they would ask one of the farm employees to do that. The obvious choice for the job once again was Griffin. The two of them always got along well, and both Mary Ellen and Jack were convinced that Griffin would look after Max in their absence whenever needed. It meant extra work load for Griffin, but he agreed. He too wanted to make that little extra money, and looking after Max was easy according to him.

The next day, while Mary Ellen was at work, Jack had to go to the bank for a few hours after lunch, and Max was entrusted to Griffin for those few hours that evening. When Jack told him about it, he was very happy. But his father did not want them to play all afternoon, so he left strict instructions with Griffin to ensure that Max finished his homework before he came back. Griffin acknowledged, and Jack left to attend to his work.

Jack and Mary Ellen returned home at 6 o'clock in the evening. But Max was nowhere to be found. They looked everywhere, in the backyard, in the kitchen. Jack went to the barn to find Griffin in his bed, but Max was not there either. A few minutes later, everyone was looking for him. Mary Ellen went up to his room to look for him once again. She breathed a sigh of relief when she found him hiding under the bed, with his wheelchair folded up and pushed under there as well. She pulled him out, and hugged him. They had been very worried for a few minutes.

'What were you doing under the bed, sweetie? What happened,' she asked.

But Max did not say anything. He just hugged his mother and started crying. No one could understand what had gotten him so scared. Jack sat next to him, and asked if something had happened while he was away. But Max said nothing. He just kept looking down at the floor. Although everyone was relieved that he was found safe in his room.

Over the next few days, Max's behavior did not change at all. He had stopped talking to everyone, to his parents, to his best friends at school, and even to Griffin. Whenever anyone tried talking to him, he would just keep looking down at the floor, and not say a word to them. A few days later, one of his teachers called and asked his mother if everything was okay at home, because Max had suddenly stopped participating in the

classroom as well. Once a very bright and enthusiastic child, Max was now just a shadow of his former self, always quiet, scared, and aloof. His parents were beginning to worry as well. They had never seen him like that. But they could not do anything to help him unless they knew what was wrong, and Max was not telling them anything.

A few weeks later, both Jack and Mary Ellen had to go out of town for a day. They were worried about Max, about leaving him with a babysitter. However, it was going to be a different babysitter this time since Griffin was out of town as well. So they called Megan, their 17-year-old neighbor, a bright young girl in her senior year at school who was preparing to go to law college. She was trying to earn some money by doing odd jobs in her hometown till it was time for her to leave for college. Both her parents had been lawyers, and she was very enthusiastic about becoming a lawyer herself, just like her parents. Along with that, Megan was also an intern at the local chapter of 'Bikers for Children'.

Jack and Mary Ellen left a few minutes after lunch, leaving Max and Megan at home. Megan was surprised at this new Max, scared, and quiet. He was nothing like one of her best friends any more. She tried to talk to him, but nothing. They sat down in the living room with their books, and all this while Max kept his distance from Megan. She kept watching him from the corners of her eyes. He was continuing to fiddle with his pencil, and hadn't turned the page of his book for a long time. After half an hour had passed, Megan sat up, put her book aside, and moved closer to him.

'What's the matter, Max? You don't seem okay,' she asked. He didn't say anything. But Megan was not going to back off. She could see that something was wrong with Max. She could see that he probably needed to talk to someone, that he was scared, and she just did not want to leave him alone to handle it by himself. Max was just a 9-year-old boy then.

'Max, you've known me since you were a baby, right? We've had so much fun over the years, when we were little, when your mom used to take us to the county fair all the time. You're like a little brother to me, sweetie. So you can talk to me, I promise. Did anyone hurt you, Max,' Megan asked. Max nodded to say no.

'Did someone at school say something to you,' she asked again. Max nodded again to say no.

'Then what is it, sweetie?' Max did not say anything in response.

'Okay, let's try this. How about we go into the kitchen, and I get us some ice cream. Then

we'll see if you want to talk, okay,' she said, and pushed his wheelchair into the kitchen. She brought two cups of ice cream for the both of them, and sat down at the kitchen counter while Max slowly started eating the ice cream. A few minutes later, he looked up at Megan, and then back at the floor. Then he spoke.

'Do you promise not to tell my parents, Megan,' Max said, his eyes fixed on the floor below.

'I promise you, Max. We've always been friends, and friends look after each other. I promise I'll do everything I can to look after you,' she replied.

'But you can't fight with Griffin. He's bigger than you,' Max said.

'I can get help. Wait, did Griffin say something to you? Or did he do something to scare you,' Megan was getting worried.

'Promise me, you won't tell anyone,' he sounded very scared.

'I promise, honey. What is it? Please tell me, Max,' she pleaded with him.

Max narrated the incident from a few weeks ago when his father had to go to the bank, and he'd asked Griffin to babysit Max while he was gone. Soon after he'd left, Griffin and Max sat at the kitchen counter, and Griffin helped him finish his homework as much as he could. Then they went out to play catch for a while. But Griffin wanted Max to sit with him in the barn before the others finished their work at the farm. It was a hot day, so Max figured it would be better to stay indoors. Griffin pushed his wheelchair into the barn, and then carried him upstairs to his room in the loft. To his horror, Griffin then took off his clothes, and kept touching him for almost an hour. Then he stopped, put on his clothes, and threatened Max to stay quiet if he did not want to get hurt.

Griffin had carried him downstairs, put him in his wheelchair, and took him back to the house through the kitchen door. As soon as they were inside the house, Max wheeled himself up to his room, and locked himself inside. Then he hid under his bed, until his parents came home and found him there. But little Max had been scared from that moment onwards. He was afraid that Griffin might hurt his dad too. So he did not say anything to anyone, even his parents. Megan was shocked at this disclosure. She had no idea about how to help Max get out of that situation, and talk to his parents. Just then, the doorbell rang. It was Griffin. He said that he wanted Jack and Mary Ellen to know



that he was back in town, and then he walked towards the barn in the backyard.

An hour later, just before dinner time, Jack and Mary Ellen returned home as well. They were surprised to see Megan being just as quiet as Max for a change. They asked her if everything went okay, she just nodded as Mary Ellen paid her for taking care of Max in their absence, and she went home for the night.

The next day, it was Megan's turn to be at the local office of Bikers For Children. She came to the office a little early that morning, and was waiting for me outside my cabin when I reached there. She looked scared, and when she narrated Max's story to me, I understood why both she and Max were scared of Griffin. My first task was to assure Megan that both she and Max were safe, and that Griffin would not harm them in any way. I told her that Bikers For Children would help an intervention by authorities to get Griffin arrested, and ensure Max was safe from him.

'You have nothing and no one to be scared of, Megan. You've brought this to our notice, so Bikers For Children will cooperate with the local police authorities to bring this man to justice,' I said to her.

'Thank you, Christine. I was hoping that you would understand the situation,' Megan replied.

'But first, we need to speak to Max and his parents. Could you take us there?'

'Yes, I'd be happy to,' Megan said.

'Okay, I'll ask some of our biker volunteers to join us. We'll show Max he's not alone, and that Griffin can never hurt him again,' I said.

I spoke to Max's parents immediately. I explained to Jack and Mary Ellen what Griffin had done a few weeks ago when both of them were away, and they'd left him in charge of Max. Jack was furious, but I was able to persuade him to stay calm, and let the police handle Griffin.

Half an hour later, we were at their home with ten bikers and three police squad cars accompanying us. The policemen arrested Griffin from his room in the barn, and took him away as the bikers stood around the house as if they were guarding it against any threat.

Then the police had taken Griffin away, Max and his parents came out to meet with the bikers who welcomed the little boy with a big cheer. Everyone sat down on the porch as Mary Ellen asked the cook to bring some lemonade for everyone there.

'Hi Max, my name is Christine,' I told him as he tried to hide behind his mother like any shy little boy. 'We are all friends of Megan, so that means, we are your friends too.'

'That's right, Max. These are some very good friends of mine, and they want to be your friends too. Would you like to be their friend, Max,' Megan asked. She knew that Max was always shy around new people, and she also needed him to know that Bikers For Children were there to make sure that Griffin or anyone like him would never hurt Max ever again. She held out her hand asking him to come forward. After a few moments of hesitation, Max took her hand, and Megan brought him forward so that everyone could see him. He shook hands with Christine and all the other bikers. One of them lifted him up, and put him on the motorcycle's seat. He turned on the engine, and asked Max to pretend he was riding the motorcycle all by himself.

After many weeks, Max was finally laughing and smiling again with his new friends, and Megan. Jack and Mary Ellen looked at him, and breathed a sigh of relief. Their son was now safe from any imminent danger. Just then, the cook appeared with a pitcher of lemonade and a dozen glasses. Everyone sat down once again. Jack and Mary Ellen had questions, and the Bikers were more than happy to address them.

'I feel this is completely my fault, allowing a man like Griffin into my home, and close to my family like that,' Jack said to me.

'Don't say that, Jack. It's not your fault, you could not have known what Griffin would do. But now that you know, it's better to understand what rights and legal options you have to ensure that your family remains safe, from Griffin or anyone like him in the future as well,' I said.

'Okay, I'm certain that would help. But I also believe that state and federal laws are not always the same in our country?'

'That's correct, Jack. The federal laws serve as a guideline for states to draw their own laws. These are not necessarily the same in every aspect, but when it comes to laws against child abuse of any kind, you'll find that the legal system of the United States is very much in favor of the child survivor, not the accused,' I assured him.

'Okay, but I'm not a lawyer, so I would not know how to understand all the legal jargon,' Jack said.

'I understand that, and that's why we at Bikers For Children can help you get legal assistance and advice if you need it. The court can also appoint a lawyer for your family if you need support,' I said.

'No, no. Please don't get me wrong. We can afford a lawyer, but I probably wouldn't understand what they tell me on how to handle this case. I will surely be filing charges against that man for harming my child, but I don't want to do that without knowing how and what to do,' Jack replied, he was still angry.

'Alright, how about we give you a rundown of the basics of the US federal and Pennsylvania state laws against child sexual abuse? That should give you point of start for your case filing, right,' I told him.

'Yes, that should be helpful,' he replied.

'Okay, so the first thing you need to know is that you and your son can't be harassed by law enforcement or lawyers. Then, there are federal laws and state laws, where the federal laws lay out the basic groundwork for the state legal system. So it becomes important to know both. However, both state and federal laws have a few things in common, that is, the best interest of the child who has survived sexual abuse.'

- The federal and state laws are gender-neutral, and set the legal definition of a 'child' as a person below the age of 18 years
- Both state and federal laws put the onus of proving innocence on the accused
- The laws set the definitions of Aggravated sexual abuse, Sexual abuse, Sexual abuse of a minor or ward, Abusive sexual contact, and recommend suitable punitive action against the convicts
- Offenders convicted of sexually abusing a child face both fines and imprisonment
- An offender may face harsher penalties if the crime occurred in aggravated circumstances, which include, for example, the offender used force or threats, inflicted serious bodily injury or death, or kidnapped a child in the process of committing child sexual abuse
- The law also permits the use of two-way CCTV for recording the testimony and deposition of child survivor and witnesses

- The law offers protection to the child survivor by allowing them not to appear in an intimidating courtroom environment with numerous people, that possibly also included the perpetrator
- The law mandates that all information regarding child survivors and witnesses must remain confidential at all times by all law enforcement, government employees or their agents as well as court personnel, the defendant, defendant's employees and members of the jury
- The court must appoint a multi-disciplinary team of dedicated professionals such as police officers, prosecutors, medical professionals, caseworkers and therapists, in order to minimize the number of interviews a child is subjected to in the courtroom
- In certain cases, the court has authority to close the proceedings of the courtroom to anyone who is not directly related to the case
- In some special circumstances, the court may appoint a 'guardian ad litem' who represents the best interests of the child. The 'guardian ad litem' is permitted to attend all judicial proceedings including depositions, hearings and the actual trial, and is responsible for making recommendations to the court in favor of the child
- The child also has the right to be accompanied by an adult attendant who is not a member of the family and is otherwise not involved in the case either, but is present to provide emotional support to the child

'Now, do you see, the law is in your favor, it is written to look after Max and you. And we can make ourselves available at the courthouse to support Max if he wishes to,' I told him.

'So, you're saying we have to request to court to appoint you as the 'guardian ad litem' for Max,' Mary Ellen asked.

'Yes, but that's entirely up to Max if he wants one of us to go with him,' I looked at him, and I saw a new ray of hope and resolve.



He was not scared anymore, he was surrounded by his new friends. He had just sat on a huge motorcycle for the first time, and twisted its throttle. He loved the sound of that motorcycle, and that was giving him a new confidence. He took his gaze off the motorcycle, and looked at me.

'I want you all to come with me,' he said.

Everyone laughed. Max was back. He was a fighter, he wasn't going to give up so easily. The judge gave us permission to send one person as 'guardian ad litem' for Max to the courthouse. He gave his testimony and deposed in front of a jury through a two-way CCTV, and gave all the evidence against Griffin.

'Griffin was sentenced to twenty years in a high-security state penitentiary. The judge told him that he would be registered as a sexual-offender in the county, and his records will be made public. He also gave strict instructions to the local police to ensure that no one from Griffin's family would harass Max or his parents,' I looked at Alyssa who was listening very intently to every word I said.

'Once again, aunt Christine, I observed that the laws and the intent behind them is the same - protecting the child survivor of sexual abuse,' Alyssa said.

'Yes, darling. As a society, we have to ensure that a child who has survived sexual abuse bounces back to normal life at the earliest. Take Max's example, he's 12-years-old now. He is as happy, playful, and actively participating in his studies as he ever was. I believe what helped him further was that the law was quick and decisive, and he had so many people including Megan and the people from Bikers For Children supporting him inside and outside the courtroom. Not to forget, his parents Jack and Mary Ellen, they supported him in every way, and that's very important for every child.'

'Aunt Christine, another thing I just realized is that parental support can make a lot of difference.'

'That's true, Alyssa. It is very important. It tells the child that if no one else would listen to them, he or she can still trust the parents to absolutely trust them and be by their side.'

'Thank you, aunt Christine. You've been a great help with the American laws against child

sexual abuse,' Alyssa said as she watched her mother put down the phone, and walk into the backyard.



Vinnie's Victory

While her friends helped her daughter understand the laws against child sexual abuse around the world, Rebecca was talking to Justine's parents on the phone. She offered them assistance of her organization, 'Mothers Against Child Abuse', and in her personal capacity as a lawyer which they readily accepted. They briefed her on the case details on the phone. She promised to see them the next morning, and then called up the investigating officer at Scotland Yard who was in-charge of Justine's case. When she had acquired all the information about Justine's case, Rebecca rejoined the group in the backyard.

'Hi, mum. Aunt Christine was just telling me about a group called 'Bikers For Children' in the USA. They help young children who've survived sexual abuse through their court cases, just like you do with your organization here in the UK,' Alyssa told her.

'I believe it's a little different than what we do here, Alyssa,' Rebecca smiled at her daughter. 'Bikers For Children only provide moral support and counseling to the survivors and their families. We do a little more than that.'

'That's what I was telling her,' Christine chipped in. 'Your mum does a lot more than Bikers For Children.'

'Fair enough. But that doesn't explain your absence for the past two hours, mum.'

'I was talking to Justine's parents, then to the investigating officer at Scotland Yard,' Rebecca told them. 'I'll be representing Justine. I just offered her parents full assistance from Mothers Against Child Abuse.'

'That would be quite helpful, mum,' Alyssa said, 'but I'm curious, how does the UK law measure up to well defined Indian and South African laws against child sexual abuse that could help Justine?'

'You're asking the right question, Alyssa. Let me tell you about another case, much like Justine's, but this happened about a year ago in Kensington,' Rebecca recalled a case of

child sexual abuse her organization had assisted with.

'I remember that case, the same where dad was helping you with the documentation and evidence filing, right,' Alyssa asked.

'Yes, correct. That case was among the toughest in my entire career so far. I was terrified to see what people could do to a child in their care,' Rebecca paused for a moment. 'It was a huge case, also involving a foreign national, who abused his position of trust as a gymnastics coach over a 12-year-old girl.'

12-year-old Vinnie was a brilliant gymnast, and an equally brilliant student at the Holland Park School in Kensington. Early that year, she'd started menstruating and her parents had a chat with her regarding menstrual hygiene, her body rights, and general body safety. Like all girls, Vinnie was a little embarrassed by the changes her body was experiencing. But her parents, especially her father wanted to make sure that her daughter had all the support from her during this phase of her life. He would have frequent open conversations with her to make her feel comfortable with her body, especially since she was training hard and wanted to become a professional gymnast after school. Her father's encouragement ensured that Vinnie excelled at the sport, and went on to participate in many tournaments.

Not only her father, Vinnie's coach at school, Stephen also took very keen interest in her training. He met with her father many times, and impressed upon him to have Vinnie attend extra training session after school to hone her skills. He agreed, and Vinnie started training after school with her coach.

The coach seemed like a very good man to Vinnie. He had trained as a gymnast in Russia many years ago. He would show her the tricks that his coach had shown him, and encouraged her to go faster and harder on the gymnastics rink. He coaxed her and goaded her whenever he felt Vinnie needed it, and was always there to support her whenever she would fall. He never raised his voice at Vinnie. 'My coach would bully us, I felt horrible when he did that. I would never do that you, my child,' he would say. He would also ask Vinnie about her studies, and whenever her scores would fall, he would make sure attention was paid to those as well. Vinnie started liking him, so much so that whenever her father would scold her, she would tell her coach who would then have a chat with her father.

Vinnie's coach had become more than just her coach. He was her best friend, her guide, and like an elder brother in many ways for the little girl. Vinnie started confiding in her coach about her periods, and seek his advice on menstruating while competing in gymnastics tournaments.

Everything seemed alright to her, until the day she spoke to her coach for the first time about going out on a date with a boy from her class. For the first time in many months, coach Stephen shouted at her, and told her to get out of the gym immediately, as if Vinnie had done something terrible. She picked up her bag, and left the place fuming, wondering what was wrong with coach Stephen. He'd never screamed at her like that, ever.

She reached home early, seemingly upset. Her father asked her, but she did not respond. She was still shaken, hurt, and confused by her coach's behavior early that day. She had her lunch, and went upstairs to her room to study. The break from gymnastics training was a welcome one, and she decided not to think too much about it. She had just opened up her books when the phone rang in the living room. Her father picked it up, and then called for Vinnie.

'It's your coach, darling. He wants to have a quick word with you,' he told her.

'Thanks, dad,' Vinnie said as she took the receiver from her. 'Hello,' she spoke into the phone's receiver.

'Hi, Vinnie. This is coach Stephen. May I have a word with you?'

'Yes, hi, coach.'

'I'm truly sorry about today, my dear child. I don't know what happened to me earlier today,' he said.

'It's okay, coach.' Even at the age of 12, Vinnie had learned from her father to forgive and forget small, inconsequential things. 'I'm sorry if I misbehaved in some manner that I didn't understand,' she said, trying to mend things with her coach. She had been furious and confused earlier, but now she just wanted to think about her gymnastics training, and did not want her coach to pay less attention to that at all for anything.

'No, my dear, I'm sorry. And I hope you will forgive me for shouting at you.'

'All is forgiven, coach. Please don't say anything else.'

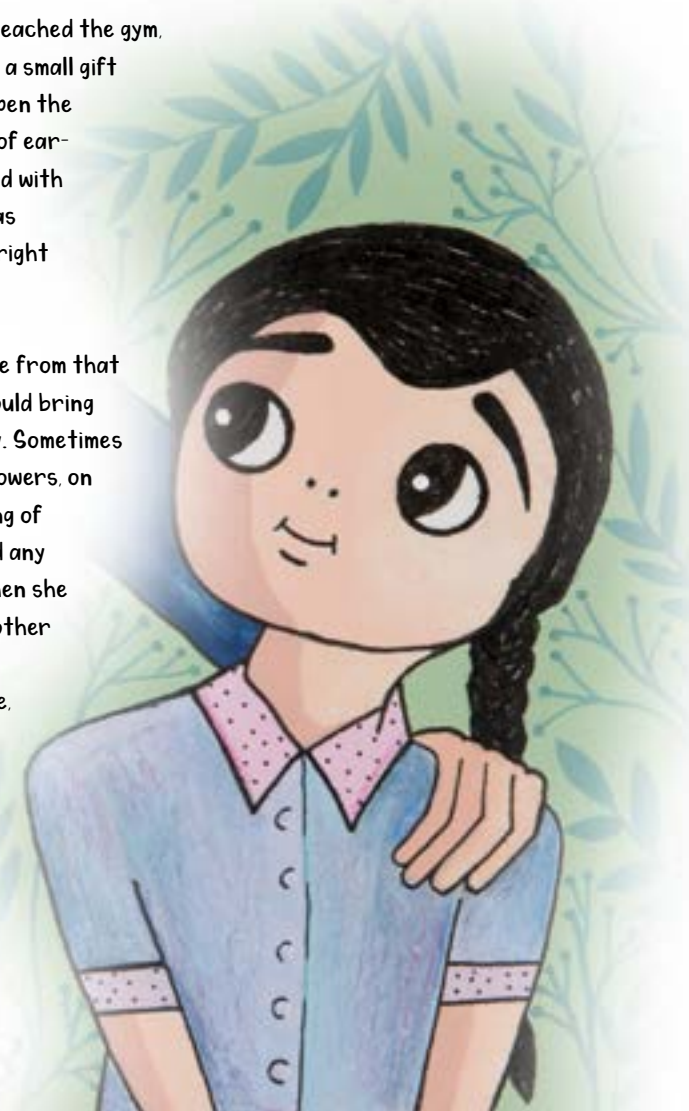
'Thank you. I will see you tomorrow, I want to show you something that will help you in the tournament next month.'

'Sounds great, coach. I will be there at the gym tomorrow, as always,' she said as they ended their conversation.

The next morning, when Vinnie reached the gym, coach Stephen was waiting with a small gift for her. Vinnie excitedly tore open the pack, and found a beautiful set of earrings in a tiny box. She screamed with joy, and hugged her coach. All was forgiven, and everything was alright between the two.

However, things began to change from that day onwards. Coach Stephen would bring gifts for Vinnie every other day. Sometimes it was just a small bouquet of flowers, on other days, it would be something of value. Coach Stephen would find any reason to hug her, especially when she would fall while practicing. The other girls in the gymnastics program started getting jealous of Vinnie, and eventually stopped talking to her because she was the coach's favorite now. He was showering all her attention on one students only, and no one was liking that.

For Vinnie, it had become a routine. Reach school, head to



the gym, and hug coach Stephen. Little did she realize that the hugs were getting longer, and coach Stephen would often touch the straps of her bra from over her shirt.

On the Sunday before one of her big tournaments, Vinnie's father sat her down after breakfast for a chat after a long time. Vinnie had not had a long conversation with him in a while, especially since she had been training very hard for the upcoming tournament. Her father wanted to talk to her about good touch and bad touch, and how she was always welcome to tell him everything without hesitation if someone ever tried to touch her inappropriately. They also talked about gender and sexuality. He told her that her gender was about the sense of who she are as a girl, and her sexuality was about who she was attracted to romantically. 'People who are attracted to others of the opposite gender are known as 'heterosexual' or 'straight', and people who are attracted to others of the same gender are known as 'homosexual', he told her. Vinnie listened to her father



attentively. She believed she understood what her parents were trying to tell her that day, and promised to always talk to her father if she ever felt someone was making her feel awkward by touching her inappropriately. After the conversation, she'd gone out with her parents for lunch. It was a day to celebrate, her father had said, 'my daughter is going to be a gymnastics champion.'

When they reached home that evening, the conversation with her father was still lingering on in her thoughts - 'no one is allowed to make you feel bad by touching you without your consent. Even if it feels okay in the moment, but deep down you feel it was not good, then you tell us. We'll always be there to listen to you without doubting you,' he'd said earlier in the day. Vinnie smiled, thanking God for her parents, and her coach who loved her so much. Then she closed her eyes, and went off to sleep.

The next morning, she went to school as usual. She left most of her belongings in her locker, and walked over to the gym, where coach Stephen would've been waiting for her in her office. Like every other day, the coach hugged her before they went out to join the others, and then headed out to the bus that would take them to the tournament venue.

It was a great day for Vinnie and her team in the gymnastics rink. They won medals, and the hearts of the crowd with their performance that afternoon. Everyone was showering praises on the girls from Kensington. With their medals and trophies, the team came back to their school later that afternoon to find their parents and many of their teachers waiting to welcome the champions. After a very short celebration in the school courtyard, everyone went home for the day, gleaming with happiness.

The next morning was as usual for Vinnie. She reached school, and headed straight to the gym to see coach Stephen in his office. She was happy to have excelled at the tournament, and none of it would've been possible without coach Stephen. She was grateful, and wanted to thank her coach with a bouquet of fresh flowers, just as he liked them. But as she approached, she heard coach Stephen's voice. It was a strange sound she'd never heard. She peeked from the corner of the window to see coach Stephen sitting behind his desk. His hands were inside his clothes, and on his computer screen was a photograph of Vinnie in the gymnasium shower room. Vinnie was stunned for a moment. She realized what was happening. A gush of embarrassment and shame engulfed her even as tears started rolling down her cheeks discreetly.

She stepped back from the window quietly. She didn't realize that coach Stephen had

spotted her reflection in the mirror in front of her. He stopped immediately, and walked out of the office to find Vinnie frozen by a mix of shock and shame. Her thoughts were rushing back to all those moments when coach Stephen had hugged her during the training sessions. Vinnie started crying.

Coach Stephen walked up to her, and put her hand on her shoulder. She shrugged it off and started to walk away from there. Coach Stephen called her from behind as he rushed to catch up to her. Then he stood in her path, and put his hand on the door handle so that Vinnie could not open it. Then he spoke.

'Listen to me for a moment, Vinnie,' he said with the softest voice he'd ever used. 'I don't want to harm you in any way. After all, you're the best, brightest, and the kindest young woman I know of. Please forgive me. Please give me a moment to talk to you. I promise, I don't have any intention to harm you, ever,' coach Stephen told her.

Vinnie thought for a second that coach Stephen's actions needed an explanation at the least. She relented, and softened her stance. The coach held her hand gently and led her back to her office. Vinnie did not notice that he had locked the door to the gymnasium very gently behind him. Lost in her own thoughts and reeling from the shock of that disclosure, Vinnie was only half listening to coach Stephen. She was a little dazed, and confused by the turn of events that morning.

As soon as they were inside the office, coach Stephen had drawn the blinds on the windows. A moment later, he was sitting close to Vinnie, far too close for her not to feel inappropriate. She started crying. It took her a while to muster up the strength to shout, wriggle her way out of the gymnasium, and head straight to the principal's office. Still crying, she asked the principal to speak with her father, and ask him to come to the school immediately. Seeing her cry profusely, the principal was alarmed, and called up both her parents immediately.

Vinnie refused to step out of the principal's office, and kept repeating that she would only speak to her father. She had started sobbing when they arrived. As soon as she saw her father, she started crying again. It was her father's turn to be alarmed at his daughter's behavior that morning. He hugged her tight, and asked her what was bothering her. Vinnie narrated the whole story, she told her father that coach Stephen had just tried to rape her inside his office. Everyone in the room, including the principal, and her teachers were horrified at that revelation.

Vinnie's father asked the principal to call the police immediately. He then asked for where coach Stephen was to be found. The principal then called school security and told them to not allow him to leave the school premises until the police arrived. When they did, the police officers found him in the gymnasium. They read him his rights and arrested him, as Vinnie's father called my office and requested legal assistance from our organization.

Later that afternoon, after a medical check at the hospital, Vinnie, her parents, and her teachers had registered their statements with the police. The next morning, Vinnie and her parents came to my office. She was not crying anymore, instead, she had a steely resolve in her eyes. She wanted to make sure that no other girl would have to go through what coach Stephen had tried to do to her that morning. I asked her if she was comfortable to narrate the entire incident to me again so that I can prepare the case papers accordingly. She did not hesitate for a moment, and told me everything. When she was done, she asked me the most important question that I believe every child must know.

'Ms. Rebecca, what does the UK law say about child sexual abuse,' she asked.

'That's a very prudent question, dear. I'll tell you everything about it,' I told her. 'The Sexual Offences Act of 2003 sets the age of a 'child', lays down the definitions of various sexual offences against children, and prescribes the quantum of punishments for each of those crimes. Moreover, it also defines the difference between rape and sexual assault of a person, whether minor or not. Let me tell you the most important points of the Sexual Offences Act, 2003.

- The law is gender-neutral, which means, it does not make a distinction between girls and boys
- Defines the age of a 'child' at 18
- Classifies any sexual intercourse with a child aged 12 or younger as rape
- Provides a defence for all sexual offences when the child is 16 or over and the relationship is consensual
- Reclassifies rape as the penetration by the penis of somebody's vagina, anus or mouth, without consent
- Creates a new offence of assault by penetration, the insertion of a body part or foreign object into the anus or vagina without consent
- Re-enacts the offences of abuse of a position of trust towards a child. This prohibits sexual contact between adults and children under 18 in schools, colleges and residential care



- Sets the definition of 'position of trust' as a person looks after persons under 18 if he is regularly involved in caring for, training, supervising or being in sole charge of such persons
- Creates a number of offences related to 'intent' including a new offence targeting drinks spiking and grooming of children for sexual offences
- Puts the onus of proving innocence on the accused, not the survivor
- The act allows dual criminality, meaning notification orders can be extended to those convicted abroad, and creates a civil order, the sexual offences prevention order, which combines sex offender orders under Crime and Disorder Act 1998, and restraining orders under Sex Offenders Act 1997
- Requires convicted sex offenders to register with their local police every year instead of every five years

'The earlier laws in the UK were not as well defined as they are now, and that has been very helpful for the legal community to ensure the safety of children in the country.'

'So, by that description, coach Stephen's actions would be classified as 'attempt to rape',' Vinnie asked, in a poised manner that was quite unusual for a girl her age.

'No. It will be classified as 'abuse of position of trust' and 'rape' according to the law. As I said earlier, the law classifies any sexual contact with a child under the age of 12 as rape,' I said.

'Ok, thank you, Ms. Rebecca. Would I be required to repeat everything in front of the judge in the courtroom? Would coach Stephen be there too?'

'Yes, my dear. You'll have to tell the judge exactly as it happened, truthfully. Coach Stephen will also be there, but you don't have to be afraid of him at all. If you wish, we can request the judge to record your testimony on CCTV. Then you won't have to be inside the courtroom for the proceedings,' I wanted her to feel absolutely comfortable, and speak her mind in front of the judge in the courtroom. But I didn't have to, Vinnie was prepared to win over fears, and speak freely in front of the judge.

'Yes, I would like that very much, thank you. It would be better if we request for testifying on CCTV camera,' she said.

'Very well, Vinnie. I'll put in the request along with the case documents.'

A few days later, the case came up for hearing, and Vinnie testified against coach Stephen. Her lawyers were among the best. They were deputed by the embassy of his home country. They argued that since coach Stephen was not a citizen of United Kingdom, he could not be tried by the same laws, and must be deported safely back to his home country. The judge declined, and he was tried under the Sexual Offences Act, 2003, and sentenced to life imprisonment.

'A year later, Vinnie is as confident as ever, and once again competing in gymnastics tournaments for her school. She's even being considered for a position in the under-19 national team.' I looked at Alyssa as I concluded the story of Vinnie's victory over her coach who'd broken her trust.

'Thank you, mum. And all of you as well, my aunts. I'm very grateful to you all for sharing your knowledge with me today,' Alyssa responded.

'We want you to be empowered, Alyssa dear,' Agnes said. 'We want every child to know their rights, so that they don't have to fear anything or anyone.'

'And most of all, we want you and other children to speak up against abuse, and talk to your parents whenever you feel someone is violating your personal space,' Sasha added.

'Remember, you must not keep any secrets from your parents, especially if someone threatens you or bullies you into doing so. Trust your parents, and always believe in yourself,' Christine said as everyone got up from the table in the back yard and started walking towards the dinner table.

Alyssa sat at the table for a moment after everyone had left. Her mind was going over the conversations from that evening with all of her mother's friends. Whether it was Maya from India, Londiwe from South Africa, Max from United States, or Vinnie and Justine from Britain, they all have one thing in common. They had all witnessed the worst side of human nature, and yet triumphed over it.

Alyssa felt there was so much that needed to be done to ensure the safety of children in this world. Equipped with her new knowledge, she was certain that she would fulfill her responsibility, and share that knowledge with everyone she can, starting with her friends. She also decided to write a blog about it and share the information with every young girl and boy in the entire world about child sexual abuse, and the law to fight

against it in different countries. That, she thought, was the only way forward and it begins now.





Protsahan
India Foundation

The story of this book

In the slum neighborhoods where Protsahan works, educating children, especially girls has never been a priority for most families. Sexual and physical abuse is also quite common. Given the situation, it is necessary to educate the children and their parents about sexual offences and their effects on children's health and wellbeing.

It is of utmost importance for every parent to educate their children about the threats of physical and sexual abuse. While planning to launch an educational storybook that talks about sexual abuse and the laws in place to address it effectively for children, we realized the need to ensure that such a book must be written in the simplest of words. Yet, it had to be interactive so that the readers may engage in the book, and then start conversations on the topic of Child Sexual Abuse.

With the help of our donors and supporters, we are now ready to take this initiative to millions of children in India, UK, USA, and South Africa, and educate them about the laws in place to protect them from sexual abuse and abusers.

This book is written and designed to ensure that children and their parents understand the legal framework available to help them if they come across a case of sexual abuse being committed against a child around them. We hope that this book will help all of us understand better that in such a case, a child is not responsible for the actions of the accused. That would be the first step to ensure justice for the children, and eradicate the scourge of child sexual abuse from our society.



About Protsahan India Foundation

“Protsahan” is a Hindi word which means “Encouragement”. We are an action and advocacy based NGO, fighting against Child Abuse in the underserved communities of India with a focus on adolescent girls.

Based on our unique HEART Principle, we strive to break the inter-generational cycle of childhood abuse and poverty with Healing, Education, Art, Recovery & Technology. We use the power of Photography, Filmmaking and Cinema, Design, Performing Arts, and Meditations to heal and transform broken childhoods.

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