

The Accused

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It was past midnight and the road was almost deserted!

Generally Pusa Road is one of the busiest roads in West Delhi. You never find it so empty, that too on a Saturday night when one finds lot of midnight bashers driving their cars in high speed, many of them in open roofed imported cars, couple of brawls happening on the roadside, uncontrolled bouts of laughter laced with choicest vulgar words and popular film songs rendered as parodies in a chorus. But Manish found the whole atmosphere much different than what it normally is, partly due to incessant rain for the last one hour.

Manish was on the driver's seat and his uncle Pandit Gouri Shankar on the passenger's seat quietly sitting with the seat belt safely wrapped around his chest and both his hands hanging loosely on his side. This was for the first time Gouri Shankar was sitting on the passenger's seat. He always resisted that seat because he never felt comfortable with the seat belt and therefore preferred to sit at the back without the seat belt. One of the reasons for his reservations for visiting his daughter in USA was that she insisted he secured himself with a seat belt even while

he sat on the rear seat. He was dead against seat belts in the car but didn't want to break the traffic rules. Of course he had his own logic to support his views on seat belts because as a young man he had almost lost his life when his car engine caught fire and he saved his life by immediately jumping out from the driver's door. He had a deep seated belief that if he was wrapped with a seat belt that day he would have never got time to jump out. But today when they left the police station after midnight he did not even open his mouth, no resistance, no argument, not a slightest gesture of unwillingness to sit in front. He just followed Manish's instruction like a zombie. Manish preferred his sitting on the passenger's seat in order to firmly support him with the seat belt.

Everybody inside the car was silent and this deadly silence was interrupted by regular up and down movements of the wipers superimposed by sound of low pitched gasps and moaning with long pauses coming from the rear seat. It was Bimla sitting by the side of Sharda Devi, Gouri Shankar's wife, unsuccessfully trying to control sobbing with her sari stuck in to her mouth. Bimla was conscious that after whatever happened during the last 12 hours, her wailing or begging for mercy from Gouri Shankar will not have any effect but she couldn't help control her feelings. All along their return from the police station Bimla was holding on to Sharda Devi's feet as if seeking forgiveness for what had happened earlier that day!

When Gauri Shankar put his right foot inside the car to sit on the passenger seat he was unsteady, partly because of his old age and poor vision but more because of a stream of thoughts gushing down his mind and a strange feeling of emptiness inside him as if somebody was draining him of his energy, forcing him to close his eyes and letting every part of his body loosen. Manish first lifted his right foot and pushed it inside the car and then supported his left foot from the ground and struggled hard to push it inside before firmly closing and locking the door on passenger side. Gauri Shankar felt listless as if he had stepped in to his own coffin. When Manish tied the car seat belt across his chest he felt suffocated as if somebody had closed the coffin top. But he did not make any sound or gesture. He quietly sank in to the seat and closed his eyes. Everything that had happened in last 12 hours flashed before his eyes and a cold wave of gloom jarred his mind.

It was a usual morning time like any other day when Gauri Shankar came out of the bathroom refreshed after taking a bath. He was slowly moving towards his bed when he realized that the string of his pyjama suddenly got loose as if it tore off. But before he could hold on to it to prevent it slip down, the disaster took place. His pyjama fell down below his knees exposing him completely because he was just wearing a banyan without a kurta. At 80 plus he was too slow to control the situation and failed to quickly lift the pyjama up to cover his private parts. Without his

glasses he was unable to get to the pyjama. In that state of utter confusion he rushed towards his left where he thought he had left his glasses on the dressing table before going to bathroom. He did not realize that Pinki, Bimla's 19 year old daughter, was dusting the dressing table at that time. Bimla was their domestic help for the last 10 years. Sometimes Pinki used to help her mother in domestic chores and that is why she was there at that time. In an attempt to find his glasses Gouri Shankar almost stumbled on Pinki who screamed with full pitch, "Mummy save me....!"

When Sharda Devi and Bimla entered the room they were aghast to see Gauri Shankar standing naked near the dressing table and poor Pinki standing in front of him and screaming in panic!

Gauri Shankar tried his best to explain to the S.H.O. at the police station about what had actually happened and he repeatedly told him, " How can anybody make an accusation like that about a person of my age.....Can't you see my age and my health.....:

"Baba Jee, a police case is a police case. I am just doing my duty, Sir " The S.H.O. did give some weightage to his being a senior citizen and tried his best to appear more polite than he usually was.

"Inspector Sahab if you accuse me of a murder I can still stand up in the court to prove my innocence. But not this charge This is shameless accusation...absolutely

disgusting...” Gouri Shankar’s self-esteem was at its lowest ebb. He was shattered with this kind of accusation. He felt as if the whole world was looking at him with disgust and looking down at him as if he was a mentally ill tramp crawling in a gutter. “Pinki is like my granddaughter...how can you even think of such a thing....”

“Now Sir, don’t try to bring that kind of morality to defend yourself.....don’t you read newspaper.... we are living in Kalyug! We have on record even rapes committed by real fathers.... real brothers... the less we talk about morality the better it is.....” The S.H.O. was not prepared to succumb to Gouri Shankar’s emotional plea and signaled that his kindness need not be taken for granted.

“I know that officer, but why do you think I can be a man of that type....” pleaded Gouri Shankar.

“Because the girl has given a written statement” S.H.O. announced as if Honourable Judge of the court has given a final judgement.

“Pinki ?.....You mean Pinki said that I did something to her....” Gouri Shankar almost trembled with anger. His faith in humanity got shattered and he felt like shooting himself dead rather than live with this humiliation.

“Yes.... here is her statement...” The S.H.O. didn’t want keep him in dark and made it very clear so that Gouri Shankar very well understood the gravity of the charges.

“Her written statement....?” Gouri Shankar felt as if the roof was falling down on him and he was getting buried

alive under the debris of bricks and stones. With his jaw locked when he tried to shout, he felt tongue tied, not a word came out from his mouth. He felt as if he was sinking in a furnace and his voice was getting louder, louder and echoing, with a sudden avalanche of unfamiliar loud noise and sounds like meaningless jargon of a child. He became completely deaf to external sounds !

“Gouri Shankar Ji, now you tell me what exactly did you do when you came out of the bathroom.....I am going to write your statement.....” The S.H.O. started his interrogation. Gouri Shankar did not hear anything except for the loud noise and meaningless voices echoing through the noise. His heart sank with grief and he was crestfallen after he learnt what the teenager girl had said against him. This wild allegation tore his very existence in to pieces. Before he went in to a stage of stupor flashes of images of his daughter, his grand children and Pinki created a visual clutter in front of his eyes , images overlapping each other and changing their shapes!

Gouri Shankar’s deadly silence did not have any effect on the S.H.O. He was clear in his mind that the written statement from Pinki was enough to nail Gauri Shankar and keep him in police custody at least till Monday because it was already Saturday afternoon and no bail was possible at that time.

After Gauri Shankar lost his only daughter along with her kids and husband in an air crash he had literally become insane for a long time before Sharda Devi brought him

back to normalcy. It was at that stage of his life when Bimla and her family came to live in their servant quarter and she took charge of their household chores. Though his social status and traditional upbringing in a Brahmin family did not allow him to adopt the family as such but he always considered Bimla as his daughter and Pinki as his granddaughter. It was only because of his persuasion and counselling that Bimla got Pinki admitted in a school after he promised all possible financial support for her education. Sharda Devi also treated them well as if they were a part of the family. Gauri Shankar always wanted to be a good human being and a kind master. But the scenario before him was absolutely pathetic. He was undergoing an interrogation inside the police station with an alleged charge of molestation and sexual assault of a teenager girl! His head dropped down in shame because of this accusation particularly after the police officer mocked at his statement that Pinki was like his granddaughter!

Gauri Shankar was not able to figure out why Pinki made such an allegation against him. He could very well understand that any young teenager girl would get scared when suddenly she finds a naked man in front of her. But her verbal statement was recorded almost two hours after the S.H.O. decided that she was fit to give a statement. It was possible that she was still in a state of shock and didn't realize the legal fallout of her statement against a person who was so kind and affectionate towards her, like a blood related grandfather. But her accusation that Gauri Shankar had tried to molest her earlier also was

something like a sharp weapon piercing down his heart. It was an absolute lie and baseless accusation, both Sharda Devi and Bimla were sure about. But the S.H.O. asked both the women to sit outside the room before their statements could be recorded.

Bimla was desperate to be heard first because she knew pretty well why Pinki did what she did to tarnish their master's image. She considered it her moral responsibility because of extreme sense of guilt which was deeper than the loathsome expression she saw in Sharda Devi's eyes. It was barely a month ago when Gauri Shankar had seen Pinki roaming around with a young boy of dubious background. And on another occasion he saw that boy in the company of drunkard drivers in their neighbourhood. When Gauri Shankar one day saw Pinki and that boy together in Bimla's quarter when the family was away, he was concerned about Pinki's activities. He reminded himself that Pinki was not his real granddaughter and that he should not get in to their personal life. But considering the vulnerability of a young girl in such circumstances he couldn't ignore what he saw and feared. He finally cautioned Bimla about this pernicious affair. Bimla and her husband nipped the evil in the bud and thanked their master for informing them well in time. Pinki could do nothing but to hold a grudge against Gauri Shankar for whatever happened to her romantic adventure. As head of the family Gauri Shankar was happy that he was able to prevent a catastrophe in young Pinki's life but Pinki was not prepared to forgive him for this act of commission. Bimla was more than sure about the reason behind Pinki's

statement against her master. She tried to reach out to Pinki to talk to her and clarify the situation but the S.H.O. pushed her away saying, “She is an adult and doesn’t need your advice !” Bimla helplessly looked at Sharda Devi who was fuming with anger and nervous at the very thought about what could happen to her aged husband if he remained in police custody for a longer time.

It was after waiting at the police station for more than 2 hours that Sharda Devi was able to contact Manish, Gauri Shankar’s nephew, on phone. It was already evening time and there was no possibility of a bail for Gauri Shankar. When Manish asked him about the incident, Gauri Shankar remained mum as if pleading guilty. Since Manish knew his uncle pretty well, he did not give up. He checked with Sharda Devi what exactly had happened. It was only after discussing the matter with Sharda Devi and Bimla for over an hour that Manish had a faint expression of optimism on his face. He convinced the S.H.O. to record Bimla’s statement.

It was past midnight when the S.H.O. decided let the old man go home on humanitarian grounds till the time the court opened on Monday. Whether it was as sympathetic view of a kind police officer for a senior citizen, or a positive attitude because of Manish’s personal and political influence or a reflection of truth which he could see in Bimla’s eyes, the S.H.O. had finally agreed to record Bimla’s statement. Everybody in the police station was stunned when Bimla dictated her statement “Sahab is

innocent. It was my fault that while ironing his pyjama I didn't notice that its string was semi-torn and gave way when he tried to tie it up. My daughter has made a false allegation against him because of her personal vendetta against Sahab. It was just a week ago when Sahab had seen Pinki in a compromised position in the store room. He told me about it and warned me about the potential problems with her friendship with a ruffian school drop out. Pinki did not say anything to me but I know she was upset and very angry with Sahab. As her mother and a round the clock caretaker in the house I have never seen any thing like what Pinki has said. She is just lying to punish Sahab.....”

The S.H.O. read out the statement before Bimla. Once she endorsed her statement and put her thumb impression at the bottom of the statement, he felt sorry for the old man and decided to help him.

When Manish parked the car inside the house, Gauri Shankar opened his eyes once and looked at his surroundings. Once again the images flashed in his mind....his daughter's face, her husband and kids and then Pinki and Bimla..... and then the police station....the S.H.O... and images getting blacked out with deafening amplified voices coming from all around him! While Manish was struggling to unlock his seat belt, Gauri Shankar heard a strange sound as if somebody was hammering nails in to his coffin.

When Manish finally loosened the seat belt, he screamed after he touched Gauri Shankar's lifeless body!

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