



PHOTO: FARIDA ALAM

The monster under the bed

My experience with sexual assault as a seven-year-old

SARA RASHID "Don't let strangers touch you." And yet it is seldom strangers, I learned long before I was a teenager, who do you harm. It is always the ones closest to us: the suave chauffeur, the skilled photographer, the kind music teacher, the good friend's sober and dignified husband, the pious man of God. They are the ones your parents trust, whom they don't want to believe anything against." – Azar Nafisi

I've lost count of the number of times I've thought about sharing my sexual abuse experience in the last few years. What stopped me was my family; a Bengali Muslim family's reaction to their daughter publicly admitting to the violation she had to endure as a seven-year-old. Somehow, and not surprisingly, it was more of the stigma around sexual abuse that bothered my parents, rather than the trauma of what I had been through. They were worried about how society would perceive me—tainted, a lifelong "*bechari*", quickly forgetting the perpetrator and his repulsive actions, but always viewing me as a girl who had been dishonoured.

According to the National Sexual Violence Research Center, 34 percent of people who sexually abuse a child are family members of the child, and 93 percent of sexually abused children will be abused by someone they know and trust.

It didn't help that my abuser was my cousin, my mum's sister's son, and the fear of a strained relationship, as well as

the pity with which I would be viewed, kept my mum from addressing the issue with anyone. I still have vivid memories of the abuse: his dirty hands sliding into my skirt and aggressively making their way inside my panties, his mouth forcing the air out of mine and the continuous and painful rubbing of my flat chest. He used to lock me up in rooms inside houses full of relatives, houses that were supposed to be my safe places, to perform his perverse acts. His audacity took a deviant turn when he was joined by one of his cousins who had found a prey of his own; the two of them would act in pairs and make a show out of it. While one experimented with new ways to violate us, the other watched and then repeated it on the second girl. Till date I detest the corners of rooms where walls meet, which is where we would be forced to hide and partake in their nameless "games".

During the course of my abuse and even before, I wasn't fond of my cousin and found something dubious in his excessively sycophantic behaviour. I dreaded being a part of his games, and till date ask myself why I didn't stand up to him, why I didn't go talk to my mum. I realise now that it was because I didn't fully understand what was happening to me and didn't have the courage or language to describe the abuse. I was scared of a negative reaction from my parents, and terrified that the games he played with me would become more

unbearable. What keeps coming back to me even now is the exact time these horrifying games came to an end—my mum had discovered me, drenched in sweat and panic after my cousin finished off with me at my grandmother's house.

I can never erase the look of horror and helplessness on my mum's face when she found me in that condition. She looked like someone who had died a thousand deaths in that one moment, unsteadied by the cruel shock of her reality, her entire body shaking as tremors traveled down her hands to her feet and her face drained of all colour. She composed herself quickly enough though, acutely aware of her presence in my grandmother's house and all the relatives who were nearby.

What followed was a hushed and incomplete conversation between my mum and I—after she went through the details of what my cousin had done with me, I was made to promise that I would never go anywhere alone with him. In between sobs and words of regret, I was told that whatever he was doing would make me pregnant, and that was the end of our conversation. I was ashamed, panicked and physically broken, and was left with questions that wouldn't be answered for the next 14 years: what were the games he was playing and why did I have to keep them a secret, why were my insides filled with sharp

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