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INTD-100

8 October 2022

The Time I Was a Leader

I walk into a hazy and dark hall that is ill-lit with dim theater lights. I see someone timorously practicing their theater lines for the upcoming show on the stage, and a few too many groups of friends scattered throughout the tiered seating. Amongst the low mumbles surrounding me, I hear a loud whisper from the middle of the seat, “Psst! Evana! Here!”, my friend Riley waves and gives the beckoning sign. I amble down and awkwardly squeeze into her seat row. Amidst the darkness, I see a guy leaning against the seats in front of us, facing my friend who is sitting down a little uncomfortably. I take a seat and we just talk for a bit until I realize that the guy, Ritam, is rubbing his leg against Riley’s thighs.

I freeze to enter a mental state I have never been in. I can not figure if Riley gave consent to him because neither of us was close to him. I am within my own solitude as I watch him get closer to her. Frozen and unable to decide what to do or say, I let out an awkward whimper, “Uhm...”. They both look at me a little confused. It looked like they were both okay with what they were doing. “I have a class soon so I’m gonna go now”, I say and hurriedly leave. Mortified and demented by what I just saw, I spend the next couple of hours contemplating if I did right by simply walking away. Should I have asked Riley if she was okay? Or should I have asked them if they are dating? Deep in my thoughts, I decided to talk with Riley just to ensure that everything was consensual.

It was, but it also was not. It was consensual because she did not ‘mind’ it. It was not because he harassed her on Instagram that led Riley giving in because she could not find a way out.

Anything other than a ‘yes’ is a no. This felt like second-hand trauma to me. I was remorseful because I could not stop an incidence of sexual harrassment that unfolded in front of my eyes. At the same time, I was glad I talked to Riley which helped me help her out of the situation.

Brimming with disgust, anger, and frustration, I called in a student council meeting.

Why did I not just complain to the teachers? Here’s a little context. Most private schools in Nepal are run by powerful and wealthy individuals, and some students who go to these private schools – regardless of how good or bad they are academically – are children of other powerful and wealthy individuals that have strong connections with the school directors. It is usually such students who are the big troublemakers because they are almost always guaranteed a way out.

Ritam was one of such students.

Knowing this, the student council led by me collectively decided to gather as much evidence as we can, reach out to our counselors, and approach the school with a strong claim with backing information that they cannot just let go. In the process, more victims came forward to us with their own stories of online or physical sexual harassment. Feeling horrible for what they had to go through, we worked together and finally set a meeting with the responsible teachers. The meeting room was the tensest room I have ever been in, but we felt relieved as every minute passed and the teachers sounded like they were going to take serious action against him.

He was suspended for the rest of his time left at the school. They were kind enough to let him take the exams and graduate, but he was not allowed to enter school on a regular day. No one saw him the same way, and his closest friends rightfully cut ties with him as well. The victims were accommodated with counseling services and a school environment where they felt safer.

Although a little late, I still feel a glimpse of relief and gratitude that I decided to talk with Riley that day. I could have stopped it earlier, but I am glad I did not wait until later. Perhaps if I had not taken any action, someone else would have at some point in the future. But how many more girls would he have harassed or have taken it even further by then? It was skipping 4 classes to be in a state of mind where there was no one and nothing else except myself that helped me make the decision I made. This state of mind helped me think clearly, flexibly, and independently. It could have been that Riley and Ritam started dating and were just hanging out. Something felt off, and rather than having the sexual harassment continue forward, I chose to talk with Riley that may have ended up in an awkward conversation with me accusing her boyfriend of something that they both consent to.

I built the courage to talk with her, then helped my student government body build the courage to stand up against Ritam, who was strongly favored by the school because of his parents. It was standing up for what we believe in despite the constraints or consequences that we may have faced if we did not spend a couple of days gathering a strong base of evidence against Ritam that helped us fight for justice.

A leader may be someone who always leads a team, but I believe that I was my own leader when I approached Riley with a serious question. I may have been leading the student government body, but what we did would not have been possible without our collective effort as group. We are now dispersed into different parts of the world, but our vision and our accomplishments will always be remembered.