**The Spiral**

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Episodes of domestic violence are incredibly commoner than what formally comes to the fore. While we have a law against it in India since 2005, a social acceptance of its prevalence and consequences has a long way to go. Yet, with interventions such as Maharashtra’s Dilaasa, Kerala’s Bhoomika, Haryana’s Sukoon (and a few others), visibility has increased; and so has the support seeking behaviour. The narrative here is based on my personal observation – with some extensions from my imagination built in to give a structure to the narrative – which jarred me as I saw how the consequences of violence can be so debilitating, how violence begets more of itself, becomes a question of contingent power; how it flows on through the survivor as well, creating more survivors. Does the chain ever break, and how?

She walked out the day he hit her with a hot ladle. Dragging her wailing four-year-old along and holding an oil stained cloth duster to a bleeding forehead, she left the one-room tenement that had been her address these past six years, as soon as her husband went up to the terrace for his evening smoke; a neighbor called out after her, surprised, but she rushed past him. Time is surely short when one is running away.

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I met Shabnam Soni, a 25-year-old driven-up-the-wall woman at a crisis counselling centre at a public hospital in Mumbai. She had come with her aunt, who waited outside, barely managing to run around after the skinny, hyperactive four-year-old boy who she was baby-sitting ever since Shabnam had taken shelter at her house. Shabnam was dried eyed, tears had fossilized long back and now her eyes burnt like embers. The scar left behind by the gash was just over a month old. Shabnam shared with the counsellor how the beatings had increased over the past six months; she said she did not want to go back to that house, and at the same time she knew she could not stay with her aunt for long; her uncle was ill and there were serious space issues in the house. Shabnam did not know where to go to.

Shabnam had had a job till she moved to her aunt’s house, and it was the job that had been the root of the ever-escalating arguments; her husband suspected her of infidelity at the workplace and insisted that she give up the job. She used to work as a saleswoman at a big departmental store, on a 10-hour shift, six days a week, earning 12 thousand a month. Once she moved to her aunt’s house, she was too far away from her workplace to make it on time everyday. Also, she could not leave her son to be taken care of by the elderly lady either. The boy had not been going to school ever since she had moved out. Shabnam was angry that her husband had finally succeeded in making her give up her job. The fossilized anger glowed in the tips of her fingernails, the edges of which she bit off from time to time. I watched her in silence, I was observing the counselling session – a social science fly on the wall.

Shabnam started off easily, much unlike the other survivors who took a lot of prodding to open up; she told us of the slaps and the punches, the accusations and the abuses. The verbal abuses had been increasing over the past few months, the slaps had then begun. The slaps became more and more frequent and provoked by less and less, even as she kept hoping that the violence would stagnate someday, if not stop.

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When Shabnam paused, the counsellor asked if the husband had had a problem with her job from the very start; ‘no’, Shabnam clarified, the problems began only after he lost his job and began staying at home. Before that, when they both worked, he was a much better husband. That was about seven to eight months ago. After the beatings began, Shabnam did toy with the idea that she would give up the job; but with the changed circumstances, how could they then afford the rent, the school fees? She said that she had tried negotiating with her husband that once he got another job, she would give up hers and stay at home. But he did not act on that either.

The counsellor wanted to know if he abused her sexually as well. Shabnam responded that he had stopped having sex with her more than six months now. Did he have any extramarital affair, she was asked; no, she was sure, he did not. In fact, he had stopped stepping out of the house almost, he hardly went out to meet his friends. ‘He used to be home the whole day! It would suffocate me. I would go mad on my off-days – he would be home and keep abusing me the whole day – if I asked him to go for a walk or go meet his friends, he would think I needed privacy to call up some boyfriend or the other and would start abusing me. He would hit me on the smallest of pretexts.’

The day he hit her with a hot ladle because he felt she had not folded his trousers properly, she left him. Shabnam set down the paper cup – the last dregs of the hospital tea, utterly syrupy, were drained off the cup. The counsellor offered her another cup which she coyly declined. We had covered close to three quarters of an hour now; from my seat, I could look through the ajar door – the hyperactive four-year-old had fallen asleep on his grandmother’s arms. I wondered if he was hungry.

‘How did your husband lose his job?’ Shabnam said that he had worked as an office boy at some small private organization; he used to earn 15 thousand a month. around eight months ago he had fallen ill with high fever and severe joint aches; he had not been able to get up from bed for three days at a stretch. Finally, when he could, he went to work after a week, and half an hour after he had stepped into office, he was unceremoniously fired. The ‘boss madam’ told him he was no more needed as he was not dependable, took leaves without prior intimation, and so he would also have to forego his salary of the first few days of that month as penalty. ‘He was very afraid of boss madam’, Shabnam added, ‘he did not say anything to her; just walked out’. That afternoon he got home and shut himself from the world. The abuse, cynicism, suspicion, and the beatings actually began thenceforth.

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The counsellor was writing into a form, asking some further questions. My mind wandered to Shabnam’s life at her aunt’s house, back to her husband’s office … a three or four bedroomed rented apartment, on some obscure floor, up some semi-residential building, now converted into an office space, cheap plyboards roleplaying as walls, overlooking some other equally nondescript building, or maybe the chaotic arteries of the city below. This city was a human being, it grew taller with each passing decade, people stayed further and further up in the air, balconies were co-opted into rooms, toilets so cramped that they were ready to implode, walls thin, space at an unimaginable premium.

Some small private organization, running on low salaries, no social security, no accountability; an office boy, a month before Diwali, falls ill, takes leave when he has none allotted. Nobody asks him why he had to take the leaves, nobody enquires after his health, nobody is worried how he shall take care of the family – there are no unions, no policies, no understanding (or willingness) to seek legal redress for the sudden termination. The boss madam knows no questions shall be asked by the office boy; additionally, no Diwali bonus would have to be paid to him; too many potential office boys were available in this vertical city which thrived on the collective dreams of the migrants of India; this office boy would vanish into the crowd at the foot of the building, he would be lost forever. It hardly mattered to the boss madam – she had shown him his rightful place, besides setting a strong example to future transgressors and leave-takers. Way too many birds had been killed with one stone.

She would never know of Shabnam and the beatings, the ex-office boy self-confined to the house, the humiliation and helpless anger that had been buried deep within him, the thoroughly hidden pleas for help.

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Shabnam walked out of the door; her son had woken up by now. Since morning he had been waiting at the lobby for close to four hours now. Shabnam looked exhausted, reliving the pain can be both therapeutic and agonizing, all at once, one feeling bleeding into the other. I looked out at the crowded ward outside; lunchtime had come and gone. The boy began whimpering on seeing his mother. He tugged at her salwar while she tried to put her papers back in her bag – she wagged a finger at him, said something, evidently asking him to keep quiet. When the boy tugged at her again, she turned around and slapped him, across the cheeks, once, twice, thrice.

Harder each time.