

# Sleep

by Sanjukta Shams

At four years of age, I knew that evil lives in the darkness. Sleep deprivation is often used on criminals in order to "break" them down but if you are deprived of sleep each day of your ordinary life what happens to you? I often contemplate that question as I lie on my bed and watch the minutes pass, one at a time.

Windows covered with old newspaper, lanterns burning low and pitch dark hallways are some of my memories from when I was four years old. We spent nearly a year in the darkness while Bangladesh fought for its independence. People in fear of retaliation hid in their homes. Sirens would echo throughout the streets letting the residents know that fighting was about to begin. The streets would clear up within minutes. I was never allowed to go out so the sirens only meant that I should crawl under my bed. In the darkness, terrified of the gun shots and tanks moving outside of our house, I laid there without a soul by my side. Often I would be too afraid to get up and go to the restroom. In fear of the darkness and gun shots, I would pee on myself knowing that Amma, my mother, would punish me later. I didn't move. Still, in my own urine for hours at a time. Often the fighting would last for hours but I remained alert. I would count the gun shots and listen closely to hear if they were moving closer to our house.

Eventually the sirens would ring again letting people know that the fighting was pausing. People would rush to local shops and walk out to assess the damage. Often Amma would find me under my bed, soaked. She would beat me and lock me out of the house. Standing outside, I would see dead bodies and wounded men, bleeding and begging for life. I would bang on the door and beg Amma to let me in but she would ignore my plea. So I watched these men die, begging for their life. I felt helpless; I could not help them or myself. Amma would eventually let me in, saying that "if you do it again, next time I will leave you out longer." I would walk into the house wanting someone to hug me and tell me that what I witnessed outside would not happen to me, except I found no one. No one was there

to console me...no one noticed me.

A year later, I found myself in Dinajpur. Only a few months after Abba's departure, Amma packed her suitcase, along with mine, for what she said would be a short trip to Dinajpur. But Amma had no intention of returning to Dhaka. Leaving my two sisters behind at my Aunt's house, we arrived in Dinajpur late one evening in a rickshaw. I would spend the next two years in this village with my mother as she dedicated herself to a man named Golam.

It is there that I hoped sleep would protect me. I shared a bed with my mother and Golam. Often I would go to bed earlier than the rest. My mother, along with other women, would be in some prayer ritual every night. As I drifted off to sleep, I would hear heavy breathing and Golam's footsteps coming towards me. I would lie there still, hoping that he would let me sleep. But my efforts were always in vain. He would drag me to the center of the bed as he would climb on top. I kept my eyes closed most of the time because I didn't want to remember. He would lift my nightgown and frantically pull down my panties as he would spread my legs. I would cringe and grab the sheets or the mosquito net that hung from the canopy bed. Golam would push down my neck with a rough hand causing me to gasp for air as he went inside of me.

Most of the time, I would feel no pain. I was no longer that girl under Golam. I just sat and watched this horror film. Other times, I would run off with my imaginary friend, Randall. We would run through meadows in search of daisies and sunflowers. Randall and I had always had a contest to see who could spot the most daisies. I was determined to win so I searched very intensely. I didn't pay any attention to the girl lying under Golam bleeding, quivering as her flesh ripped. I paid no attention to Golam's sweat that soaked her nightgown or how his breathing got heavier by the moment. I paid no attention to her small hands and fragile body lying lifeless waiting for it to end. Golam said nothing to her, as he didn't even notice her.

When he finished, he would just walk away. Often he would mumble "shue a bacha" (you whore) as he left the room. I could barely move my legs together. The sting of ripped skin was unbearable. Covered in my blood...wet, I would lie there. No one came for me. No one comforted me. Only Golam's words echoed in my ears, as they still do.

Soon darkness would pass and light would shine over the bed. With crusty, bloody legs, I would take the sheets off the bed and limp to the water well. I used soap to scrub the sheets as well as myself. The clothes line would dry the sheets until the following day when I would return again.

I don't remember how many nights he came for me, nor does it matter. One night was enough to scar me, the rest was just ritual. Eventually, I learned to spread my legs for him as I learned where all the daisies were on that meadow. I learned to put a cloth under me in order to keep the sheets from getting blood stained. I just threw away the cloth and saved myself the chore of washing the sheets every day. I learned to sleep listening for his breath, his foot step. I learned to cry less. Golam eventually stopped holding my neck down, as I learned that resistance was useless.

I do not know why my mother did not come for me. She slept in the same bed. I do not know if she just didn't hear us or just pretended to sleep. I never called for her for she taught me early on that she would not answer. My mother called me her "throw away baby" and she had thrown me away long before Golam entered my life.

Two years after living at Golam's house, I arrived at my Nani's house. Unlike Golam, my uncle insisted that I sleep. He would sit on my bed with a belt and slap my face as if throwing a fish hook into the water. The belt would often hit my eye lids and cause them to shiver in pain. He would continue to hit me until I "fell asleep." In fear of the belt, I lay there pretending to sleep. Focused on my stillness, I lay for hours on end until I felt him get up and leave the room. I lived at Nani's house for two years and in those two years I learned to pretend to sleep for my uncle.

To this day, I cannot sleep without a blanket or a sheet over my face in order to protect myself from the belt. The fear of being hit in the middle of the night still haunts me.

From Nani's house, I moved to America. No one stood over me; no one went inside of me in the middle of the night. I was finally safe under Abba's watch. Yet, I could not sleep. Now, I keep watch throughout the night. I still listen for the gun shots, Golam's and my uncle's footsteps. I still listen for their breath over me.

Lying safely in my bed next to my husband, I still find no relief. My childhood has robbed me of many things but sleep is what I miss.

## Glossary

Abba – Father

Amma – Mother

Dinajpur – City in Bangladesh

Nani – Grandmother