The truth remains quiet inside us, floundering like a battered bird, desperately wanting to spread its wings and fly away.

-TARA

One

Mumbai, India
June 2004

The memory of that moment hit me like a surging ocean wave—drawing me into it—the sour smell of darkness, those sobs erupting like an echo from a bottomless pit. I had tried to break away from it for so long I had forgotten that places can have memories too. I stood in the dimly lit corridor outside my childhood home and tried to unlock the door. The keys rattled in my hand and fell to the floor. This was proving to be more difficult than I had thought. One deep breath and you will find the courage Papa used to tell me when I was a child. Now, in my mid-twenties, here I was, standing outside this locked door, feeling like a child once again.

I picked up the keys and tried again. The doors creaked as I managed to push them open. The apartment was dark. Outside, the sky thundered and rain rammed the rooftops. A stray slant of sunlight fell on furniture that had gathered dust over the years, and I stood in that unlit room looking at the old cobwebs crowding the corners of what had once been my home. I switched on the lights and wiped the dust off my writing desk with a smooth stroke of my hand. It is just an apartment, I told myself. But there were so many things from my childhood here—my writing desk where Papa had sat down next to me, teaching me how to write, and the couch where we
had watched television together as a family.

In my bedroom, my bed stood neatly covered, just the way I had left it. I could hear the sound of our laughter, smell my childhood—the food Aai used to cook and lovingly feed me—that wafting floral smell of saffron in the *pulao*, turmeric perfumed *dal*, the sweet *rasgullas*. There wasn’t any such smell of course, not anymore. All that was left was just a musty odor from closed doors, from buried secrets.

A cloud of dust erupted as I parted the curtains. Outside, the rain was falling softly, leaves cradling the raindrops. The scene was still the same as when Papa and I had moved away to Los Angeles eleven years ago: the zooming in and out of traffic, the honking of rickshaws and cars, the distant barking of stray dogs, the sprawled slums in the distance. Standing here, my suitcases lonely in the doorway, I understood why Papa had never tried to sell or rent this apartment. After making a home in America for eleven years, he had hoped to return one day to search for Mukta. After all, this was where she was kidnapped.

It is said that time heals everything. I don’t think that’s true. As the years have gone by, I’ve found it odd how simple things can still remind you of those terrible times or how the moment you try so hard to forget becomes your sharpest memory.

I stepped out of my apartment that day determined to find answers. The taxi drivers stood in a queue, waiting, hoping, begging you to take a ride from them. There was something about this city that I would never forget. I could see it everywhere, smell it, hear it—the dreams that lingered on people’s faces, the smell of sweat and grime, the sound of distant chaos in the air. This was where it had happened—where walls had blown apart, vehicles had blown away, simple shards of glass had splintered lives, and our loved ones had become memories. Standing here, an image of Aai floated before my eyes, waiting for me somewhere, her kohl-lined eyes tearing up as she took me in her arms. It was different before the blasts had come and taken her
“Madam, I taking you anywhere you wanting to go,” a taxi driver called out.

“No here, here . . .” another taxi driver waved.

I nodded to one of them and he hurriedly got behind the wheel. It began drizzling as I stepped inside. The rain fell softly around us.

“Take me to the police station in Dadar,” I told him.

“Madam, you coming from foreign, no? I understanding from the way you speaking. I taking you to the bestest hotels in Mumbai. You will—”

“Take me to the police station,” I repeated, sternly.

The driver was quiet the rest of the way, humming quietly to the tune of Bollywood music roaring through the speakers in his taxi. Outside, the slum dwellers and street children picking through garbage rolled past us. Heat hovered over the city despite the drizzle, and the wind smelled of smoke, curry, and drains. People still walked dangerously close to the speeding traffic, rickshaws sputtered alongside, and beggars knocked on my taxi window asking for money. The footpaths still housed many of the poor who lived in makeshift tents, women haggled with hawkers in the bazaars, and men loitered in corners giving vacant stares. Behind them, Bollywood movie posters on walls announced the latest movies.

When I was a child, Papa had taken me for a walk on these very streets. Once I had accompanied Aai to the bazaars and haggled with shopkeepers alongside her. And there was a time I had sat in the backseat of a taxi with Mukta next to me while Papa had taken us to the Asiatic library. How excitedly I had shown her the sea, the garden, and introduced her to my world. How many times had she walked with me to my school, carrying my schoolbag, or sat with me on the park bench slurping iced golas? Now, sitting in the backseat of this taxi, my stomach churned. These moments seemed to paralyze me; I was unable to breathe, as if the crime I had committed was slowly strangling me. I pressed my face closer to the open window and
forced myself to breathe.

“Here madam, that’s the police station,” the driver announced as he pulled over.

It was raining very hard when the taxi came to a stop, the wipers whipping wildly against the windshield. I stepped into ankle-deep water as I got down, the rain beating against my umbrella. I paid the taxi driver. In the distance, near the garbage cans, children in raincoats splashed water on each other, their giggles coming in waves.

At the station, I found a place on the bench in the corner and dropped my purse in my lap. Eleven years ago Papa and I had sat on one such bench in this police station, waiting for hours, to understand what had happened to us, trying to make sense of it all. Now, as I sat straight, sandwiched between strangers waiting their turn, I wished Papa were sitting beside me. In a way, I still carried him with me—his remains—his ashes, capped tightly in a bottle in my purse. I had brought them here to disperse in the river, something I needed to do, something that was in accordance with his last wishes.

A constable sat at a table nearby, his head behind a mountain of files; another sat behind him at another table, listening to complaints and noting them in a register, while yet another sat on a chair not far away, his head buried in a newspaper. A chaiwala rushed past us carrying chai, placing the glasses of brown liquid on every table. Outside, police sirens pierced the air, and the policemen dragged two handcuffed men inside.

The woman before me sobbed and urged the constable to find her missing son. He yawned, scribbled something in the register, and then shooed her away. When it was my turn, I sat in front of him. He rubbed his eyes. “What is your complaint now?” he asked, sounding bored.

“I want to speak to your senior inspector.”

He looked up from his register and narrowed his eyes, “About what, madam?”
The wooden board behind him had a chart of the number of murders and kidnappings this year and the cases they had solved.

“It is about a kidnapping that happened eleven years ago. A girl was kidnapped. My father filed a report then.”

“Eleven years?” The constable raised his eyebrows. “And you want to search for her now?”

I nodded.

He looked at me curiously and sighed. “Okay, you wait,” he said, then walked to a closed room and knocked on the door. An inspector opened the door; the constable pointed to me and whispered something. The inspector gave me a glance and then walked toward me.

“Inspector Pravin Godbole,” he said, shaking my hand and introducing himself as the senior inspector of the station.

“I have . . . I am . . . looking for a girl who was kidnapped. Please, you have to help me. I-I just arrived after a long flight from America.”

“Give me a few minutes please; I have someone in my office. I can review your case after that.”

The constable escorted me to his office after some time. Inspector Godbole had sharp, intelligent eyes that I hoped would be able to see what others had been unable to see. He asked me to take a seat. His hat with the emblem Satyamev Jayate—truth alone triumphs—sat on the desk.

“What can I do for you?”

I sat down, opened my wallet, and teased out the photograph. How young we looked then—Mukta and I—standing outside the Asiatic library. He took it from my hand and looked at the photograph.
“I am looking for her, for the girl in the photograph,” I said.

“Which one?” he asked, squinting at the photograph.

“The one on the right, that’s me. The other one—she was kidnapped eleven years ago.”

His eyebrows angled upward. “Eleven years ago?”

“Uh . . . yes. She was kidnapped from our home just after the 1993 bomb blasts. I was in the room with her when it happened.”

“So you saw the kidnapper?”

I paused.

“No . . . not really,” I lied.

The inspector nodded.

“Her name was . . . is Mukta. She was a girl . . . an orphan my parents fostered.” I explained, “My Papa was a kind man. He used to work with many NGOs and orphanages in his spare time to find a home for abandoned children. Sometimes he brought them back to our apartment. He rescued street children or poor kids from villages—one or two at a time—and let them stay in our home. They slept in the kitchen, ate food Aai made, and then in a few days Papa found them a place at one orphanage or another. Papa did good any opportunity he got. With Mukta . . . he tried so hard. Something happened to her back in her village. She just didn’t speak for a long time. She—”

“I see, I see,” he interrupted. “We’ll try to find her.”

I wanted to tell him that, unlike the other kids who had lived with us for barely a week or two, Mukta had been with us for five years. And that she was a good friend. I wanted to tell him how she liked reading poems and was afraid of the rain . . . and that we had wanted to grow up together.

“Ms. Tara?”

“My . . . my father had filed an FIR back then . . . of . . . of the kidnapping.”
The inspector took a deep breath, scratched the stubble on his chin, and brought the photograph close to his face, staring at the picture. The photograph was worn out and wrinkled by age like a precious memory frozen in time, both of us smiling at the camera.

“Ms. Tara, this was such a long time ago. She will be . . . older now. And we don’t have a recent picture. It will be very difficult to search for someone without a recent picture. But let me have a look at her file. I will have to contact the missing person’s bureau. Why look for a poor village child after all these years? Has she stolen something precious from your home? Like an heirloom or something?”

“No. No . . . it’s just . . . Papa worked so hard to give the other children a home. I suppose Papa thought Mukta was the only one who slipped through the cracks . . . someone he couldn’t protect. He never forgave himself for that. At the time the police told us they had searched for her. Papa told me she was dead. Maybe a police inspector told him that. I don’t know. Papa took me to America after that. I . . . I didn’t know she was alive. I found some documents in his drawer after his death. He had been searching for her. And all this time he had been looking for her, I thought she was dead.”

“Nobody looks for such children who have disappeared madam. Look at all the children living in the slums—there is no one to take proper care of them, let alone worry how they are doing if they disappear.”

I looked at him, not saying anything. There hasn’t been a moment in the last eleven years that I haven’t wanted to wander back to that summer night, to that split second when I could have done something to stop it. I knew who the kidnapper was; I had always known. I had planned it after all. But I didn’t tell the inspector this, I couldn’t. There would be way more things I would have to reveal than just that.

He flicked the photograph in his hand and sighed loudly. “Give me a few days. I will look through the files. We are backlogged with many cases now. You can give the constable all
the details.” He signaled to him and asked him to escort me outside.

“Thank you very much,” I said, standing up.

At the door I turned to him again. “It would be great if you can help me find her.” He lifted his head momentarily and gave me a slight nod before going back to his work. It took the constable a few minutes to take down the details.

I left the station and stood on the porch watching the police jeeps parked outside, constables carrying files, people waiting impatiently, and suddenly it seemed futile to have come to this place, to have asked for their help. They hadn’t even asked the right questions: Did I remember the day when it happened? What were the sounds I heard before I knew what was happening? The exact time on the bedroom clock? Why did the kidnapper not kidnap me instead? Why did I not scream? Why did I not wake up Papa who was sleeping in the next room? If they had asked me those questions, I was afraid the truth would come spilling out of me.

I lit up a cigarette, took a couple puffs, and let the smoke drift through my nostrils. The two women constables standing on the porch gave me a dirty look. I smiled to myself. Not many women smoked here. My first cigarette had been in America with Brian when I was eighteen. Brian, my fiancé, had once been the love of my life, and I had conveniently left him behind in Los Angeles. If things hadn’t changed, Brian and I would be lolling lazily on a beach right about now, watching the waves surge and recede. I sighed as I noticed the lack of a ring on my finger, threw the cigarette butt on the floor, and squashed it under my foot.

A cold wet breeze hit me as I walked outside onto a noisy street. A six-year-old girl in tattered clothes scurried toward me, unmindful of her soiled and bleeding feet, spread out her palm, and looked at me pleadingly. I looked into her hopeful eyes for a second. She held my gaze. A team of child beggars watched me curiously from a distance. I searched my purse to find some rupee notes and handed them to her. Within seconds all the beggars enveloped me, begging
for money. I distributed some notes between them. The children whooped and screamed in joy as they darted away.

“Is there a restaurant nearby?” I asked one of the beggar boys. He smiled; his pearly whites shone against his dark skin.

“There madam, the best chai . . . very good, very zhakas” he said, and waved me a goodbye.

The restaurant wasn’t very busy this time of the day. I plopped my luggage on a chair and ordered a sandwich and tea. Ten to twelve-year-old boys were wiping the tables. Flies lingered on the damp surfaces. A waiter brought me a glass of chai. Outside the sky was clearing, the clouds making way for the clear blue. When Mukta had first arrived I had often found her sitting in our dark and dingy storage room, gazing out the window, staring at the stars in the sky as if seeking something in them. I remember a night when my parents had been asleep and I had tiptoed to her room to find her looking at the sky. She turned to me, surprised that I had appeared in the dark.

“What do you look for in the sky?” I had asked.

“Look,” she pointed to the sky, “you can see for yourself.”

I entered her room, sat beside her, and looked at the stars sparkling like diamonds in the night sky.

“Amma used to say that when we die, we become stars. She said when she died she would become a star and watch over me. But you see, there are so many of them. I don’t know which one of them is Amma. Probably if I look hard enough, I will be able to see. She may send a signal to me. You don’t believe it?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. If you believe it, it might be true.”

“It is true,” she whispered. “You just have to look hard enough.”
We sat there for some time, watching the stars in the cloudless night sky.

I sat with her late that night and for many nights after that one. For many nights over the years, we sat under the moonlight in that dark dingy room talking about our lives. It became our way of escaping the world. It was Mukta who taught me the sky was like a stage where clouds formed characters, morphed into different shapes, and drifted toward each other. It told us more stories than we could have ever read, more than our imaginations could afford.
Before she died, Amma told me dreams aren’t meant for our kind. Desire, aspiration, hope, love—everything that a person talks about—isn’t meant for people like us. I was ten when I watched her die. I watched how her breathing grew softer and softer and her eyes closed slowly as if she didn’t want to go, as if she didn’t want to let me go. She held my hand tightly, and all I could see of her face was blood dripping out of every wound. But I remember her eyes. I remember what I saw in them one last time—fear—the fear that my life would be just like hers.

-MUKTA

Two

Village of Ganipur, India

1986

We are like the datura flowers that unfurl at night—intoxicating, blossoming in the dark, wilting away at dawn. It’s something my grandmother, Sakubai, used to tell me when I was a child. It sounded so poetic to me back then. I used to like listening to it, even giggling at it without understanding what it meant. It’s the first thing that comes to my mind when people ask me about my life.

For a long time I did not know I was the daughter of a temple prostitute, that I was born into a cult that followed the sacred tradition of dedicating their daughters to the Goddess Yellamma. When the British ruled our country, Sakubai used to tell me the kings and zamindars would act as our patrons and support us with money. People used to revere us as if we were priests. We danced in temples, sang songs of worship, and villagers sought our blessings for important occasions. The tradition is no different today. Except that patrons owned us and
supported us then, but now there aren’t any kings and very few upper caste men who are willing to support us. Lower caste girls as young as eight are married to the Goddess in a dedication ceremony. In this tiny village of South India we are also called Devdasis—servants of God.

Coming from a long line of Devdasis, I was bound to become one eventually. But as a child I did not know that. I did not know my body did not belong to me. I sometimes forget that I was a child once, that everything was foolish and naïve to my eyes. It all seems like a dream—those serene mornings, waking up in the village when all you could see were clear skies, sunshine pouring in—it’s slanting rays so thick you would be convinced that was all life had to offer. Our village had a lot of farms filled with rice, maize, and millet. Greenery swayed in every corner of the village. With every gentle whiff of wind that caressed my cheeks, Amma would say God’s hands were patting my cheeks. She used to tell me that God overlooks my every move. I believed it then and feared God would punish me every time I plucked mangoes from the trees that did not belong to us. It was such a different life as a child, back when I didn’t know what was coming for me.

My Amma was a beautiful woman. I once told her that her clear, honeyed complexion was like glittering gold, and the whites of her eyes shone like diamonds set in that gold, and she laughed.