



A Story Of Hope

KALYANI PARDESHI

Photography: Arun Bhardwaj



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“Sis Mary”, “Sis Georgina”, the other girls would whisper as they walked past her, names given to her insinuating she was a nun. All she could do was bury her face in a book while silently swatting her tears away, swallowing hard, her mouth parched as she attempted to force the lump down past her throat. She had learnt how to hide her tears, crying herself to sleep at night, silently sobbing. Her pillow, the only witness to her agony.

It wasn't just the girls who took jabs at her, the boys were merciless too, scampering away when she walked past, hiding in a corner, covering their noses and hissing at her - “you stink”. “You give off a bad smell”, they would blurt out while guffawing at her.

I was 11, just two months shy of my 12th birthday when I met her. She was different from the rest of us, some might even call her “weird”. She didn't dress like us. While we all sported our tiniest shorts, showing off our legs, she wore long dresses, long enough to cover her legs, perhaps even oversized so that the dresses would cover her legs.



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She was lonely, terribly lonely - no one really wanted to be her friend. She couldn't talk to her parents as she was far away from them, this wasn't just school, it was boarding school. She not only attended classes with her tormentors, she lived with them, day in and day out. She respected her parents enough not to ask them for short shorts like the other girls. Perhaps, she was already driven, at that very young age, to know that it was who she was on the inside that mattered, not what she looked like on the outside.

The bullying wasn't limited to just name calling. She was one person who always told the truth. Her father taught her that if you tell the truth, you don't have to remember what you said. She called out some kids for unruly behaviour on the basketball field. It was called a foul and the other team got the ball. Something really so small and so insignificant yet she was cornered later in the day by two girls who then went on to slap her - twice, really hard across her face until she bruised, she didn't even try to defend herself. How could she?



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These girls were twice her size and had the support of other girls cheering them on through the physical altercation. It broke her heart that no one stood up for her, everyone stood by and watched, laughed even as if some sort of a comedy show was on. Why did no one else see anything wrong with this? What was so bad about her that she was being tormented like this?

She was stuck in the middle. Her parents worked hard to send her to a good school but she wasn't coping. She complained to the teachers, to the senior students, to anyone who would listen but this was the 80's, the tormentors would apologise and then continue to torture her. No action was ever taken against these bullies.

After a year and a half of this, she had enough. She decided to leave the school and even then, her tormentors made fun of her - "She is leaving because people call her names, how pathetic, she is such a loser."

Once she left, no one heard from her, ever again. I often wondered what had become of her, what effect did that bullying have on her, would she ever recover from that emotional trauma? The sadness in her eyes always haunted me. I never stopped thinking about her.



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When I least expected it, our paths crossed again many, many years later and I asked her how she was doing. What she told me, left me awestruck. She went on to another boarding school, though she had only two friends, it was better than none and there was no bullying whatsoever in the new school she chose to attend. She graduated high school and went on to complete both an undergraduate degree and a postgraduate degree at university. During her university years, she was crowned second runner up, amongst thousands, in the intervarsity queen competition and was also elected a member to two committees within the Student Representative Council. She had taken up badminton as well and was ranked 2nd amongst all players in university.

She was known and loved in university for not only being true to who she was, but for being proud of it. After university, she completed her CGMA designation from CIMA UK and CPA (Certified Public Accountant) designation in Canada. She worked for many multinational companies including Pricewaterhousecoopers and Southern Sun International. She had gotten married and had two kids. While taking a career break to raise her kids, she battled postpartum depression and after being declined treatment by a doctor, she took matters into her own hands.



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She started strength training at home with minimal equipment and no support, all she had was her desire to overcome her depression, which she did while also becoming quite fit in the process. She went on to train and inspire close to 1,500 women from across the globe to take on a healthier lifestyle and to believe in themselves. To date, she has close to 3,000 followers on social media.

Through her experience, I learnt so many lessons which I wish to share with all of you:

Be different, don't change just so that people will like you.

If you have to change, do it for your own betterment, for your own growth, not to please others.

Stay true to who you are, your strength lies in that.

If you come across someone who is different, dare to befriend them because I can guarantee that you will learn so much from them.

It doesn't matter what others think of you, what matters is what you think of yourself.



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What others say about you doesn't become your reality, it doesn't define who you are, unless if you let it.

There is a very specific reason you are different. I encourage you to embrace being different because it is in being different that you will make a difference in this world.

Rather walk alone in the right direction than with a crowd in the wrong direction. If the world turns against you, turn around and lead the world. You are a born leader.

Asking for help doesn't make you a weak person, it takes an immensely strong person to seek help, to admit that they need help.

Those who seek help are very, very brave because they have given a voice to their suffering. A voice that matters, a voice that needs to be heard.

You are not weak if you cry, this is especially true for boys. Crying releases pent up emotions, and again, it takes an immensely brave and strong person to cry, to express, truly how they feel.



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Going back to the story I shared with you about the girl I knew in school, in spite of having learnt and grown so much, there was still a yearning within her, to do something, no matter how small, to make a difference, even if in one person's life because she truly believed that, more often than not, all people want is hope and reassurance. Reassurance that you are going to be okay, reassurance that you are going to be more than okay, reassurance that you are going to soar.

How do I know this?

Because this is a story of hope, because this is my story I have shared with you. Yes I am that very same girl I told you about.



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CONTACT KALYANI PARDESHI - AUTHOR OF “A STORY OF HOPE”

If you wish to connect with me for speaking engagements at your events or for podcast interviews, I can be reached at: KalyaniSpeaks@gmail.com

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