



THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

No one can recall that they were stunned into silence followed by indescribable stress if they were told that they had been invited to a birthday party. In the case of Putul who had just turned 14, it was not any different. She was thrilled to bits, whatever that meant. So long for her birthday parties had been about parents, uncles, aunts, cousins, neighbours and schoolfriends. Such fun it was though she could not help feeling guilty as she watched her mother slogging excitedly in the kitchen, when it was her birthday party.

At 14, Putul was no longer a little girl. She felt something was happening to her. The mirror told her that she was pretty and had beautiful wavy hair. She kept smiling at herself in the mirror. What a charming smile, the boys in the park remarked as she walked past them on her way back from school. Her friends giggled. The boys thought it was a welcoming onomatopoeic signal. They walked the girls.

The girls walked away shyly. The boys asked them their names, in which class they were studying. Not all of them had their personal mobiles, A few did. Numbers were exchanged. Missed calls connected them. From strangers to acquaintances to friends, all this happened within days. After all these were the fast and furious times. From pretend accidental meetings to arranged meetings and then watching movies together became common for quite a few girls in her class. Putul with her charming smile and wavy hair and lissome limbs was the most stared at, among the other schoolgirls, all class mates, students in the local state aided girls' school.

They were ambitious girls. They did not fancy a life like their grandmothers, mothers and aunts. Most of them slogged ceaselessly at home, these non-working, jobless women. They worked because with were in love with their homes, kitchens, plates, glasses, family members, children and husband. How could they ever think of payment! Sacrilege! Only- Alakshmis, witches in disguise ever asked for returns for services rendered. These senior women led the lives were complacent robots whose brain cells had ceased to function. Rust had enveloped their brains. They were all educated. Mostly high school drop outs. Some even had graduation degrees, some even postgraduate degrees. But they preferred temples to libraries. They depended on God's blessings. They were humble, good women, who were trained to scream and fight for loss of material possessions, like a serving spoon or a broken plate. They were trained to save money and spend money for the family, minimizing their personal needs and desires. Needs and desires were urges that transformed Lakshmis into Alakshmis. They could not be too careful.

Putul and her friends Parul, Sandhya, Rakhi and Mira were growing up in lower middle class homes. Their fathers were mostly front desk staff at offices, schools, government establishments, banks and courts. There were some families where both parents worked in schools, banks, offices and colleges. But this was low in percentage in that particular neighbourhood in the Bardhaman district of West Bengal. After all the falling ratio of educated women working in organized sectors is appalling, even In the 21st century. Women and cooking gas cylinders were paired without embarrassment as Siamese twins. That of course was the hallmark of development and twinning. Progress and regress were trapped in a viscous embrace.

The daughters of these good mothers detested cooking gas cylinders, chopping vegetables, scrubbing utensils, folding clothes and cooking the traditional fish curry. If they did want to try their hand at cooking, they wanted to try out making chilly chicken, maggi noodles and cakes. Outrageous to say the least.



These millennial cool kids from the suburbs wore jeans, kurtas, leggings, saris, skirts and kaftans. The copy paste pavement stalls had all designer clothes, almost that is, waving like flags and butterflies. Whatever money they got from their fathers they stashed away in secret purses and plastic storage boxes,, shaped like urns with a slit on top. Coins and paper currency could well be pushed into the open slit, like a half-open smile. Some of them tutored primary and pre primary school kids at their homes. Life was so exciting. They decided they would take up nursing courses and go off to Dubai and maybe London. Dreams can travel everywhere with visas, passports and those exorbitant flight tickets.

One of those boys, invited Putul and Rakhi over to their house. It was his birthday, Badal said. Badal was the son Ratan Sharma, the local party councilor. Ratan Sharma was a powerful man; he was always accompanied by bodyguards and lackeys. Badal's father owned a car. Not common at all in that neighbourhood. The neighbours regarded the Sharma family with much awe and respect that came from fear. Rakhi said she would not be able to join them that evening as she and her mother were going to Liluah to visit her ailing grandmother. "Putul, you please come along for some time", Badal pleaded.

Putul's parents were a bit hesitant, but Putul's eagerness was such that they did not want to disappoint her. "OK, go, he asked you to go at 6pm. You must reach back home by 8pm. Be sure to touch the feet of Badal's parents and don't be cheeky. Take this money. Buy some sweets or a small cake from the local shop and give it to Badal. Tell him, we have sent our blessings."

In her room at home, all by herself, Putul sang softly and twirled around on her toes, as though she would take flight and leave for the beckoning skies. A room at home was too tiny for the immensity of her happiness, boundless and overwhelming.

Around 6pm she reached Badal's home. Badal's home was about ten minutes' walk from hers, his in the more affluent area, where all the houses were at least double-storied, many had garages, waiting for the first car to be welcomed. In her part of the neighbourhood, the houses were small, nondescript, some were still waiting for the first coat of exterior painting, though a number of years had passed. Putul stayed with her parents in one of these two roomed houses, with a tiny kitchen and a tinier bathroom.

Before she could even knock on the door Badal opened the door. Badal's friend Subir stood next to him. Putul shyly handed over the box of sweets to Badal. "Ma has sent these for you, for your birthday,". "Thank you", said Badal, as he wrapped his arm around her slim waist. Putul was taken aback but did not say anything. "Where are uncle and aunty", she asked, as she tried to peer into the other rooms of the large house. "They went out to purchase some gifts for me. When they are back, we will all have dinner together." . Bollywood film songs were screaming from Badal's mobile. He offered Putul a glass of Pepsi and a slice of fruit cake.

As Putul chatted with Badal and Subir about her plans to study nursing, her dream of seeing the world, Badal slowly drew her towards him while Subir pushed her back on the sofa. The two boys, pinned down her arms, stuffed her mouth deep down with a ball of cloth, parted her legs wide apart and began to take off her underwear, as they pulled down her leggings. She writhed in mad frenzy. They laughed. The music was full blast. She became numb. They had drugged her Pepsi.

Later, much later, after the ruthless adolescent rapists felt they had enough, they pulled the ball of cloth from her mouth, laughed at the bruises on her arms and thighs, and asked her to go home.



“Not a word, remember. Or else nothing will happen to us. Everyone will say you provoked us and that you are a whore”.

Putul stood up. Smoothed her crumpled clothes and said in a steely voice, “I am going to the police. You knew your parents would be out, so you lied to me about a birthday party so that you could do what you did.” “ Please Putul, don’t be silly. N one will believe you. Anyway this happens to every girl. So what’s the big deal,”

Putul said nothing. She seemed to have grown very tall. Her calm face made the boys uneasy. As she walked towards the front door of the house, one of the boys hit her with a heavy iron hammer on the back of her head. As she screamed they gagged her mouth again and kept hitting her like wild animals. Just then Ratan Sharma and his wife entered their home through the front door.

It took Badal’s parents probably about two minutes to understand what had happened. They saw Putul moaning as she lay on the blood-drenched floor of the living room. Ratan Sharma was a powerful man. The rickety ambulance arrived to take Putul to the hospital. No one knew whether she was brought in dead, or whether she had died while in the hospital. Putul was unconscious. Excessive blood loss from slipping and falling from her bicycle, that she had ridden to reach Badal’s house, was the cause of death.

By the time Putul’s parents reached the hospital, they were told that Ratan Sharma and his army of volunteers had taken Putul’s body for cremation to the electric crematorium, quite some distance away. Returned

When Putul’s parents reached the crematorium Putul was burning to ashes inside shakti, the sole electric crematorium, just about ten miles, from their locality. Ratan Sharma consoled them. He said the education of Putul’s younger brother Pranay, would be his responsibility. He asked the parents to stay away from the police, lawyers, NGOs and party cadre of opposition groups. Putul’s grocery shop keeper father and her homemaker mother returned home. They did not file any FIR; They accepted a monthly envelope from Ratan Sharma. As the months flew past, the envelopes became irregular, till they stopped all together. A clear POSCO case was not even registered.

Putul’s brother Pranay too never asked his parents why they had surrendered to the pressure created by these gangsters. He was happy that he could continue his studies without any financial problems.

Ratan Sharma could be generous during festivities. He knew for people like Pranay and Putul’s parents an envelope of currency notes was like divine blessings and worth much more than praise for being noble and courageous. Nobility and courage expressed by the poor often ended in their lifelong misery, ostracism, indescribable suffering, including murder.

Pranay cleared his higher secondary examinations with modest scores. He left for Kerala and joined a male nursing training institute. He worked in a factory night shift in order to complete his studies. Pranay now lives in Muscat. He sends money to his parents as and when possible.

Since the day Pranay left for Kerala, he never again visited his home in the Bardhaman locality where his ageing parents still lived. He knew if he did ever return he would have to kill too many people.

Instead, as he was a good boy, he smiled at the picture collage of Putul, pictures of his parents Mukul and Seema, and his own picture, he was a boy then. His parents and sister beamed from



silver-plated large rectangular photo frames, placed lovingly on the shelf of his living room in the small apartment, where he stayed alone, in the outskirts of Muscat.

SANJUKTA DASGUPTA August 1, 2025

<https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/kolkata/bengal-rape-murder-accused-son-of-tmc-leader-14-yr-old-girls-family-says-too-poor-to-complain-7866802/>