WHERE IS THE BALM?

(A One Act Play to be used as Resource Material)

[Grave Music or Poetry. Curtain opens. Sanju sits glum faced on a mat blankly staring at the floor. Catherine is heavily pacing up and down the room. Zarine seems to be arranging and rearranging the books on the shelf, searching for something that does not exist.]

Sanju : [with a sigh] where did you fail? Why didn’t we realize?

Zarine : [abruptly stops] Things are not so simple. Don’t you know from experience the subtlety?

Catherine : why do we have to speak in a negative tone? Wouldn’t there be a positive turn to things? Why always carry this burden of guilt on our heads?

Sanju : It is not the question of carrying a ‘bundle of guilt’ but to effectively work and reach out in proper ways. We even failed to interpret or understand. Deep within, I shiver at the thought that I could be in the same state. Could I be a ‘child sexual abuser’?

Disgusting thought! Sends shiver down my spin.

Catherine : Why shiver at an unlikely possibility? Haven’t we struggled and crossed those obstacles/those thorny paths where we could have slipped. I feel that we have not lost control of the situation. He will recover and we would be able to work with both of them.

Zarine : [pacing & shivering] Let me call the hospital. [Calls. Other wait holding their breath.

Turns back sadly.] Doctors cannot guarantee anything. Situation is the same. His mother has been hospitalized due to frantic weeping. Why can’t we stress more on
the aspect of becoming whole, forgiving, forgetting in our therapy work rather than on focusing only on the individual. I think we have messed up everything. Now this 14 years old would feel terribly guilty if this cousin died.

Sanju: I think you have lost your senses. Do you expect me to forgive all my abusers before I even heal myself. The child within me is crushed, precious moments of my life snatched, guilt and fear grips me and can I talk about forgiveness. Even today, I feel ‘powerless’ in new situations, do not know how to relate to people, build friendships and be assertive. I fail, absolutely fail in even having a sexually satisfying relationship with my wife. I am so lost in pain and depressed that I forget to look at the innocent face of my one and a half year old child gazing at me intently to gain attention and get some comfort.

Catherine: Please, I know it is a tense situation but let’s not argue over what has happened. Mistakes do happen. We will learn to handle them better as we grow, as a team. Let’s stop blaming ourselves. The word ‘forgiveness’ has no meaning in this context. Let’s fling it in to the waste box at the moment. We were exploited, we were made use of by the person whom we most trusted, who we expected would take care of us. This person broke down our trust, snatched away our inner core, made us hollow. We constantly felt damaged and insecure, open to attacks and vulnerable. Whom to trust in this strange and unknown world when this known, trusted and respected person breaks me down.

Zarine: I want to forgive him, after all, he is my father. I hate my mother for letting this happen to me. She must have known it all along and she never protected me. She let him ‘do’ it. She was always nagging and picking up quarrels. She could have divorced him and given us a
life but she dragged on as she needed a bed and shared it with me.

Sanju : (shouting) Zarina, you are crossing limits. The poor woman, your mother, who bore the burden of the alcoholic. maybe he was a professor in college and a reputed one for that matter, struggled to save you atleast using her voice and that’s all she had and you throw all the blame on her. Shame on you! I think you are losing all your senses day by day.

Catherine: I don’t know why you both have to get heated up. She (Zarine) is just ventilating her frustration. She does not mean to degrade her mother. Her father was always in a powerful position, highly moralistic, patronizer married a woman from a slightly lower economic background due to his altruism and benevolence. He had a spark of intellectual enquiry in him, after all, he wrote extremely good articles and used this as a justification for this alcoholism. Your mother tried to defend herself and you using all her strength through speech. She was not bold enough to stop it actually.

Zarine: [Lamenting, sitting on the floor] He made me a commercial sex object. He reduced me to a pulp, a lifeless object which could only gain people’s recognition through sex.

I had plenty of affairs. All of them tore me apart. I never trusted them. I just let them play with my body and today I fail again.

Sanju: [Consoling] We haven’t failed. We are making efforts. He will live through this anguish. Do you know how he turned into an abuser? He was abused in childhood by an elderly uncle who gained satisfaction from using young boys. Mostly oral sex inserting penis into the child’s mouth. I still feel like vomiting and tearing my
throat apart. That dirty, big thing in one's little mouth. He could never reveal this to anyone.

His mother was a strict preacher of morality. He had to focus only on studies and intellectual matters, spent less time with friends, could utter a wrong word. Exploration of sex, development of sexuality was stunned even before it blossomed and he was going to be a man, a provider of the family, growing up to look after his widowed mother and two younger sisters. How could he say that his Uncle, mother's brother, their so-called protector was thrusting his black thing into his mouth and deriving pleasure. Whom could he say it to? To a mother, so frail, so dependent, so moralistic and conventional? Wouldn't she collapse at the very utterance of word? So he kept quiet till it became a habit and he started abusing younger cousins on the pretext of teaching them and after all, he was one of the nicest cousin, so patient. Children would crowd around him. He would never control his behaviour. His hands roved around, he stimulated the genitals of his young cousins, introduced it as a play and then slowly moved into oral stimulation which he habitually practiced. His cousins gave in never realizing till adolescence dawned and she began to resist, run and hide.

Zarine : You know, how she was first brought to me by her mother. There were several complaints lodged against her. She had become rebellious, threw up temper tantrums, vowed that she would not follow any convention. Listening to her day after day at a stretch gave me an insight into the core of the problem. She was abused but she never revealed who the abuser was. I could only communicate parts of the story to her mother but she leaked it out to the whole family and you see the terrible impact. Unable to risk facing the consequences, the bitter truth, the young boy commits suicide, etc.... I had only begun the process and everything comes to an abrupt standstill.
I went through a similar process myself. The same devastating feeling that I am picking up the shreds and sewing them altogether into one unified whole. This child within me....I love her. She is untouched by the malignant, surreptitious bastard. She is beautiful, she is full of vitality and energy and courage to have braved, to have struggled, to have resisted, to have paved a path, carved in a niche for herself. I revolted against any convention. What meaning is there in contradictory moralistic preachings? Confine the girl to the home, this precious home so full of love and trust and affection.... as her virginity and chastity and honour lie in her vagina and the intactness of the hymen. And the sanctity of the vagina is safe only in the four walls of the home. Rupturing of the hymen knells dishonour and disrepute. And within these confines, within this loving and trusting environment, the caring hands begin with caressing to coaxing to destroying to ruining. I rebelled to teach them a lesson, to take revenge on all of them who failed to protect me. I will live as I like for you have failed and don't dare overrule me now. He, my respected Uncle, raised to the pedestal of the divine by the family, had no offsprings of his own, centre of empathy, rich man, generous provider molested me.

I resisted. felt funny and odd. This person, 40 years older to me, whom I held with reverence, so unlike my short-tempered father, was behaving oddly with me. Was shoving hand into the genitals, pushing hand into the dress and fondling nipples and staring at the breasts and the body an extension of love? I was confused. Why? O lord, was I being used for my innocence, my faith, my love. How was I being requited? Whom do I speak to? Send me a messenger, I fervently prayed.

Suppressing did not help my confusion. I had attack of asthma and bouts of fever a intermittently which worsened the situation. My weak state was an advantage for that bastard. He crushed my spirits, my
zest for life. I did not want to face another day. Yet I struggled.... I hit my head against walls but ...

Sanju : [consoling] But you have won the battle. Yes, you do act silly at times but you are our source of strength. This instance cannot sap our energy. We need to pick ourselves up. See, Catharine haven’t I started walking straight. Hasn’t my posture improved. Don’t I speak coherently? Wasn’t there a phase when I would never let you speak like this for I could not bear to hear or see pain?

Zarine : Yes, you have this restorative energy for you can articulate what happened to you. Your pour yourselves open. I just cannot remember. How do I forgive him, why should I forgive my father, when I don’t even remember, cannot recollect what he did to me.

I have stifled those memories. I wanted to look upto this powerful man whom everyone looked upto. My mother seemed a fragile, weak thing which was always making the atmosphere unpleasant by the constant bickerings which the ‘great, altruistic man’ wiffed away with the wave of a hand. After all, he was the provider, he outpoured his love through things, toys, candies, toffees, dresses, outings.

My mother committed suicide, fed up. I hate her. Why did she leave me without an answer? What did he exactly do to me? He stopped when I had my first periods. Should I confront him now? Should I ask him why he gave birth to me to snatch away my life, my inner core, my energy.

Catherine : Let’s take things one by one. Acknowledging and being able to disclose that this is abuse but it is not my fault. I won’t blame myself is the most important stride which you have taken and you need to feel proud of yourself. Memories may surface but let’s not strain ourselves.
You need to talk to him but there is no need to rush. It should be done only when you are prepared to.

For the moment, let’s just celebrate the fact that you are alive. You are part of us, contributing to this endeavour in telling society this bitter truth that children are sexually abused and abused mostly within the confines of the home by known and respected persons who deliberately manipulate situations to whet their appetites.

Sanju: There is an important point to be noted. Do we ever receive any kind of information, right information on our body, sexuality, sex. Everything is hidden in shrouds of secrecy and shame. Yet, everyone is always talking about sex hideously, watching it, thinking about it and wanting to indulge in it. Yet, information about it has to be secretive and shrouded in shame as it is a sin. A creative force is a sin. So we always put on a façade, preach morality but indulge in all kinds of amoral activities.

I had no information when I was used by 5 strong sturdy men, all my brother’s friends, neighbours. My mother baby sat for all of them. They viewed pornography as a hobby. They found an easy prey in me. It began with a threat of raping my sister and forcing me to view pornography and imitating all acts viewed on the screen. I was subjected to oral, anal sex, made to drink my own vomit and their semen till I felt giddy and collapsed.

My mother realized that I suffered as I shrank into one of the darkest corners of the house, refused to have food and had ulcers in my mouth. On my mother’s questioning, I broke down and collapsed into a trauma for a week. I could not eat or drink anything or urinate on my own. I was given Psychiatric treatment. But that was not enough.
I needed therapy to improve my self-image, my posture, come to terms with my sexuality, face the world, the masculine society which indulged in obscenity as a pastime, which viewed human bodies as an object to be possessed and feasted upon. I build my self-image through creative activities, music—my love, my soul. It healed all the wounds, all the blisters. I poured my pain in the form of poetry. Music bathed me in new richness, a treasure deep within myself. I discovered within myself a sensitive person.

Zarine: Let’s just call and see what is happening.

Catherine: I guess we should wait. The hospital authorities would be unnecessarily harassed. After all, they are trying their best.

Zarine: What must have forced him to commit suicide is the fear that his mother may know and falling from the image his mother had carved for him. Perhaps, he was not even ready to confront the fact that the whole extended family knew that his cousin was being abused. Before they could trace the abuser, he wanted to escape. He had no strength to confront the reality. How did he turn into a hard-core abuser? Was it lust, was it the habitual pattern induced by his Uncle or the dichotomy in the moral upbringing where he was forced to repress all his inner urges and act a puritan, responsible and mature person? Will we ever know?

[The phone rings. Catherine rushes and picks the receiver, listens and looks at her friends blankly. Sanju and Zarine await anxiously.]

Catherine: (sitting down) He is gone.

[ Curtain falls]