

Silence ...

and Worse Silence to Come...

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It all happened a year ago, or maybe it was just three months ago ... yesterday...today or even tomorrow. I do not remember ... Perhaps I just don't want to remember.

The newspaper I worked for asked me to write an article on female sexual abuse in Beirut. I was ecstatic. I've always loved investigative articles...probing into causes, effects ... facts, explanations ... I've always been so naive.

I rushed to a police station. One situated in the heart of Beirut, and where nothing escaped its notice. The best way to learn the truth is to go through police records. To talk to those who really know what's going on ... or do they?

The officer was extremely cooperative. He invited me into his grand office. He offered me coffee ... I do not drink coffee. "It's our duty to put a stop to these abuses," he boasted. "It's our duty to warn others," he insisted ... He brought me tea. "What an excellent article it'll be", he exclaimed...He offered me biscuits.

I asked to see the official records. The officer said there's no use seeing them ... the phenomenon has long been curbed...there are only a limited number of cases ... "Women have changed," he repeated, "they deal with abuses themselves"... I drank the tea ... we talked about the weather ... we became friends.

Again I asked to see the official records...again the officer said it was no use checking them. He admitted I shouldn't rely on them ... the numbers weren't reliable ... weren't accurate really.

"You know how things are", the officer said ... I didn't know. "You understand we just can't report everything"... I didn't understand. "You should see how vital secrecy is!" ... I didn't see ... So the officer let me know... he let me see ... he let me understand.

The officer said victims were advised to remain silent ... to forget the incident ever happened ... to refrain from filing a suit. After all, it was such a long and complicated procedure. The interrogations ... incriminations ... the press learning about it ... journalists not sparing the tiniest detail. And the name of the family ... the victim's reputation in the mud ... Yes, victims were definitely advised to remain silent. To wake up the following day and forget there was ever a day before.

Of course that didn't mean the aggressor escaped unscathed. "We give him a severe scolding," explained the officer... "We even beat him," he said proudly. And of course, the officer couldn't prevent some cases from being reported...what could one do when a victim insisted... "except let her face the consequences of her decision", he said regretfully.

We shook hands...I thanked the officer for being so cooperative. He said he was only doing his job. He offered me more biscuits... he insisted I take one more...we shook hands again. At the door he urged me to continue writing such excellent articles.

I told my friend everything.... I raved, I ranted, I swore. My friend nodded his head, arched his eyebrows, and smiled every now and then. He also said I was over reacting... I was too sensitive... I needed a psychotherapist.

I went on complaining. My friend went on trying to convince me the incident wasn't worth the anger... the pain. I cursed the world...society... discrimination. I cursed them all. My friend admired the officer... his sound advice to victims...his insight into our society. He admired everything. "You're too young to understand the ways of the world," my friend said over and over again.

My friend also said he wouldn't want his sister to drag such a shameful affair to the police. The knowledge would destroy his family name...it would make him lose his mind.... Wouldn't even be able to face his sister. Wasn't it best to spare them all ...to spare their peace of mind. Yes, wasn't it best to remain silent?

I didn't pursue my investigation. I didn't seek other organizations. I didn't check other records. I didn't write the article. Really there wasn't much to write about...Just a number of unreliable records... an officer with a sound advice and a bunch of friends who thought it was best to keep silent... who urged me to keep silent...so I keep silent. So silent I forget the sound of sound. But that is not all.

Sometimes when I am in a crowded place, I hear total silence. I see lips moving, hands rotating, expressions changing.... I hear no sound. So I scream. I scream so hard, I scream so loud. I scream until I hurt my vocal cords, my lungs, my chest...yet I cannot break the silence...I am too weak to break a history of silence and a future of worse