

Something You Should Know

The email from Kalpana's niece showed up at the top of her personal inbox. There were no other addressees and only one Cc appeared displaying her niece's email address. The subject line read: *Something You Should Know*. Kalpana thought the subject odd, but she closed the email without reading it; she didn't have time this morning. Her day was filled with meetings; the email would have to wait until tonight when she returned home.

The last time she received an email from Jyoti was after her high school graduation, about ten years ago. Unlike this email, that one was sent en masse, to relatives and family friends thanking them for their generous graduation gifts. All of the addresses, some fifty or sixty of them, were clearly displayed in the recipient line. Kalpana recalled that Jyoti excelled in both academics and the arts, graduating from high school at sixteen and wanting to use her talents to "make the world a more beautiful place," as she'd written in her thank you email. She added that she would be thinking of them all as she went off to study architecture at Cornell.

Jyoti did not last long in Ithaca. Kalpana never received a complete answer from Jyoti's mother, Radha, and was reluctant to press her on the issue. Later, Kalpana learned from another relative that Jyoti had been having problems acclimating during her freshman year. Feeling isolated and depressed, her grades were dropping. There were rumors of boyfriends, too. Each time she heard of Jyoti's transgressions, Kalpana used it as a teaching moment for her sons. "Your cousin may have attended an Ivy League school, but that does not give her license to have boyfriends, especially Americans," she'd say. She couldn't understand how Radha would allow Jyoti to veer so far off course. But her cousin-sister was her elder by fourteen years; it wasn't Kalpana's place to question her parenting. The college from which Jyoti finally obtained her degree was a state school; she graduated by the skin of her teeth. After graduation, Jyoti promptly moved three thousand miles across the country, far away from her family in southern California, to New York City.

In spite of Jyoti's errant tendencies, Kalpana had fond memories of her

niece as a little girl. On break from college in India, Kalpana visited Radha, staying in her cousin's new tract home in Orange County, waiting with Jyoti at the bus stop, waving goodbye as her face grew smaller from the back of the bus. Later that day, Kalpana had awaited her niece's return at the same street corner. Jyoti jumped into her aunt's arms as soon as she got off the bus. When Jyoti pulled away, Kalpana saw her face wet with tears. "The kids can't say my name. The teacher wants to call me Jody," she said. She wiped her nose. "Do you think that's okay, Kalpana Masi?" Kalpana considered the new name for a moment before responding, "It sounds quite close to your real name." Jyoti took Kalpana's hand and the two skipped the two blocks home. Kalpana thought of her own sons and how she went back to work at the bank right after her maternity leave was over. Her children never rode the bus to school, instead Hemant dropped off the boys at seven-thirty in the morning on his way to work, while she picked them up at six o'clock from aftercare.

The only news of Jyoti lately had been that she had abandoned her profession as an architect and was working in New York at a clinic for wayward youth. Kalpana thought it a waste of her niece's education. What kind of a husband could she secure now that she had abandoned a degree from a prestigious university and was working with teenagers who lived on the street? Could she still write on her resume that she had spent two years at Cornell only to graduate from a state school? Her mother had always told her that girls were more difficult than boys. She sought solace in the fact that her boys would never do such things to their parents.

Later that afternoon, while Kalpana prepared for her weekly status meeting with her boss, she received word from his assistant that his meeting was running long and needed to be rescheduled for the following morning. This was the break she was looking for. If she got home early, she could have a few moments to herself before she picked up the boys from soccer practice. While packing up her bag she glanced at her computer screen and noticed Jyoti's email again; she would read it at her leisure when she returned home.

On the drive home from San Francisco, after she got off the MacArthur maze, she decided to take surface streets instead of the freeway. The traffic on Highway 24 always added stress to the end of her day. She took the Claremont Avenue exit and slowed down as she drove by a home that looked familiar. She and Hemant had toured it when Jyoti visited them on her own, years ago when she was a teenager. In those days Radha thought

it would be good for Jyoti, an only child, to spend time with them for a change instead of trolling the mall with her American friends. Besides, she and Hemant were only fifteen years older than Jyoti and served more as older siblings than aunt and uncle.

During that visit, Kalpana was pregnant with Rahul. Amit had just started walking and would only fall asleep in the car. Kalpana thought to occupy Jyoti, while Amit napped, with a drive around neighborhoods looking for prospective homes. They hadn't planned on stopping, but Jyoti begged them to stop at an open house in Elmwood, a neighborhood in Berkeley well beyond their means. At that time, Jyoti had talked about applying to Cornell and Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, two of the top architecture programs. She raved about the curb appeal of the Julia Morgan-designed home and begged them to attend the open house.

Hemant stayed in the car with Amit asleep in the car seat, while Jyoti and the realtor chatted about the home's architecture as if they were long-lost friends. The realtor glanced at Kalpana and said, "It's a great commute location if you work in the city. The house will go quickly. If you're interested, I'd make an offer soon. Your daughter has great taste in homes." Though Jyoti was small for her age, Kalpana was taken aback that the realtor would think she was old enough to be the mother of a teenager.

They ended up in the home's library where Jyoti became mesmerized by the built-in bookcases, running her hands over the spines of the books, saying that this was how she wanted to live someday, among treasures. Kalpana thought of the expensive repairs required for the aging house and the amount of dusting involved with so many books. On the way out, Kalpana caught her reflection in the entryway mirror. She touched the dark circles under her eyes, then looked down at her stomach. With both pregnancies she had gained weight evenly all around her middle and back, making her look more overweight than pregnant. She never did look like other pregnant women with their basketball-shaped bellies.

They wound up buying a tract house in San Ramon, in a reputable school district, a fifty-minute drive from Elmwood depending on traffic. They furnished their home with mattresses on the floors of every room including the family and living rooms, "Indian style" Hemant called it. The only room that had chairs was the eat-in kitchen. They thought this situation temporary while they saved for good furniture. But now, even though their boys were in middle school, she and Hemant still lounged on those same mattresses covered with batik bedspreads, watching Hindi movies on cable TV.

The house in Elmwood still stood as it had all those years ago. Kalpana thought it funny how just the mere sight of something could trigger a string of memories, but that was how the mind worked sometimes. On that same visit, Jyoti and Hemant had sat on the mattress in the family room, watching *Jeopardy* while helping Amit build a pillow fort. Hemant gave Jyoti liberal sips of his vodka tonic while she cooked dinner. She didn't approve of Hemant including their niece in his drinking at such a young age, but Hemant explained that Jyoti had been studying hard and needed to have some fun; it was only one night. Besides, she was safe with them. It wasn't as if she were out with her high school friends drinking unsupervised. "Don't worry, Masi, I've tried other drinks, you know," Jyoti had said. After dinner, while Kalpana did the dishes, she heard Hemant ask Jyoti what her favorite drink was. "Alcohol," she laughed. She could still hear her niece's giggles and Hemant's deep laugh while she put Amit to bed.

Later, in her own bed, she worried that Jyoti would tell her mother about the drinking. Hemant laughed. "If she tells on us, she gets into trouble, too." Then he rolled on top of her, but she resisted, keeping her hands on his chest, pushing him away from her stomach. "She might hear us," she had said. "She's an American teenager," he replied, moving Kalpana to her side. "I'm sure she knows what we're doing." Afterward, while Hemant lay snoring next to her, she thought of how Jyoti would be applying to colleges soon, how she had her whole life ahead of her, her figure still slim and lithe, her hair silky and long, unaffected by humidity, unlike her own coarse, unruly curls.

Kalpana was almost home now. She had managed to beat the traffic even though she had taken surface streets. She was always grateful for the good in her life, no matter how small. When she pressed the garage-door opener attached to her car's visor she saw her husband's Toyota Camry parked next to her space. The hood of his car was cool to her touch. She found Hemant on the patio smoking, his back to the house. His college habit had resurfaced. Not wanting to open the sliding-glass-door and let the smoke inside the house, she knocked lightly. He turned around, opening the door a crack. He didn't bother hiding the cigarette.

"What happened?" she said.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"You're home early. Anything wrong?"

He tossed the burning cigarette onto the cement patio and stubbed it out with his shoe. He pushed the sliding-glass-door open all the way and brushed past her exhaling a plume of smoke as he entered the house.

“Your niece’s email,” he said turning to look at his wife. “You didn’t see it?”

Kalpana shook her head. “I didn’t get a chance. What did it say?” She found herself feeling hot even though the thermostat read 65 degrees, the usual daytime temperature that Hemant had programmed for the house.

“Well, what did it say?” she said.

He laughed. “Read it and have a good laugh,” he said.

As she pulled off her coat, her phone fell out of her hand and landed on the hard tile floor. “Did you break it?” Hemant said as he pulled a beer out of the refrigerator. Kalpana wiped the phone’s glass on her skirt. There was no crack. She shook her head. Hemant sat down on the dining chair, tilting it back, so that only the chair’s back legs balanced on the tile floor. Automatically, Kalpana opened her mouth to warn him that he might fall if he leaned back too far, like she always told her boys, but this time, she said nothing to her husband.

Her hands were trembling as she read the email. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Hemant looking at her, as if trying to gauge her reaction. After reading the email once, she put the phone down and put her hands to her face.

“Well, funny, huh?” he said.

“I don’t understand,” she said.

He finished his beer, leaving the empty bottle on the dining table, then rose to get another. He stood behind the kitchen island, behind Kalpana. She could hear him guzzling the beer.

“I don’t understand. Why would she say such things?” she said.

“You tell me, she’s your niece.” He hesitated. “Who else got her email?”

That was the question Kalpana was asking herself. She hadn’t thought that she was the only one who received the email. If Hemant had received the email, then obviously Jyoti’s parents must know. And other family, too. Jyoti had purposely hid the names of the email recipients. She picked up her phone again and read the email more slowly this time. Her throat tightened. Jyoti was claiming that she had been molested by Hemant during a visit when she was a young teen; Kalpana was away at work. Jyoti claimed that her memories were repressed and that she had used alcohol and drugs to numb her pain. Then, when she entered rehab for alcohol and drug addiction a few years ago, the repressed memories surfaced. Her counselors had encouraged her to tell her family what had happened.

“Maybe it was someone else?” she said. “Someone who visited us then? One of our friends?” she said.

“You believe this actually happened?” Hemant slammed his empty beer bottle against the countertop, spilling some of its contents.

Kalpana clutched her phone. She received a text from her eldest son asking where she was. She grabbed her handbag and went to the garage. The time that she was going to have to herself that afternoon had vanished into thin air.

The next morning brought the first frost of the season. Kalpana covered her eyes from the window’s harsh glare. When she tried to clear her throat, she felt like she had swallowed shards of glass. Her forehead felt hot to the touch. As she entered the kitchen, she was surprised to see the boys already eating and Hemant making lunches, as if Jyoti’s email had never existed. “You were tossing and turning all night,” he said. “I thought I’d let you sleep in.” Under the circumstances, his kindness disoriented her.

After Hemant hustled the boys into the car, Kalpana heard the loud hum of the automatic garage door. An unsettling quiet descended on the house. Neither her body nor her mind felt like hers. It was as if Jyoti’s words had gotten inside her and changed her very DNA. The circumstances surrounding Jyoti’s recovered memories were unsettling. Jyoti said that she had been reading a novel in rehab about a boy and his sister who had been molested by the same man. The boy described feeling like a hunted animal trying to flee a predator, but feeling helpless, frozen, unable to move. This graphic passage in the novel triggered her repressed memories. How did Jyoti know that those memories were indeed hers? Maybe she was just very impressionable.

She thought of what Jyoti had said about Hemant, how he had touched her inappropriately, given her alcohol, and treated her as a woman, not as the girl that she had been. What hurt Kalpana the most was Jyoti’s insinuation that if she had not been left alone with Hemant, her life might have turned out differently. Jyoti wrote about the aftermath of her recovered memories, about how she became paranoid about her personal safety; that she could not stop feeling like a hunted animal. Could a person really forget an event so traumatic? How could she come back to visit them and act as if nothing had happened? Why didn’t she tell her own mother? Wouldn’t there have been physical signs of the molestation? And Hemant, wouldn’t he have been doing strange things all along, like luring young girls on the internet? Why hadn’t anyone said anything about him before? Or at the very least, wouldn’t he have an addiction to child pornography? Isn’t that

what those kinds of people did?

She found herself in their spare bedroom which doubled as an office. They had bought a new computer just days before, but Hemant had not found the time to set up a separate login for her. "Just use my login," he'd told her. Now here she was using her rudimentary computer skills for internet sleuthing. She was sure her sons could do a better job, but she couldn't allow them to find out about this episode in their parents' lives.

She looked through his browser history first. She often looked through her own history when she had forgotten to bookmark an interesting website. There was nothing strange about his history, just frequent visits to photography and camera retailers, a few visits to a cricket website, and some specialty IPA beer companies. The same kinds of websites populated his bookmarks. In addition, there were some medical and pharmaceutical sites. Of course that made sense since Hemant was in pharmaceutical sales. There was nothing strange at all. She felt guilt creeping up on her; she was shivering. It must be the fever. She logged out of the computer and returned to bed.

She woke with a start thinking that she was late for work, then looked at her phone and realized that it was still the same day, but almost five-thirty, time to pick up her sons from soccer practice. She texted Hemant before she left asking him to pick up pizza on his way home and thought of how neat and orderly her life would be if she didn't have to work full time. After their first child was born, Hemant had stated that they would need to remain a two-income household. "We live in the Bay Area, we pay extra for the good weather," he'd joked. "Or we could move to Canada. My family there say that it's a good life. Not so much struggle. You could stay at home full time," he added. "But you don't like the cold."

After Rahul's birth, Kalpana had lobbied hard to work part-time, but when Hemant made a budget on her reduced salary, he said that they'd have no money to send their boys to a good college. Besides, she'd have all the time in the world once they were both in college. He seemed to take pleasure in reminding her how soon that would be. She chided herself for thinking the worst of him then; he was just trying to put a positive spin on her dilemma, reminding her that the juggling of children and work would eventually come to a conclusion. Her colleague at the bank, Tonya, convinced her husband that they could have the best of both worlds if she could work part-time. She later told Kalpana that now she had the workload of a

stay-at-home mom and a full-time employee. Her husband expected home cooked meals and his laundry put away while her boss thought he did her a favor by letting her squeeze a full-time workload into thirty hours. “I’d keep working full time if I were you,” she told Kalpana.

She saw Amit and Rahul standing at the curb in front of the school gym and felt relieved that they were both at the same school now, one a sixth grader, the other in eighth, so she didn’t have to juggle two pick-up locations. They tumbled into the car after their backpacks and soccer gear as if a mighty wind were pushing them inside. Amit yelled, “God, Mom! Can’t you turn that music off? We could hear it a mile away.” She had been playing her favorite Hindi film music playlist and hadn’t realized how loud the volume had gotten. She wanted to drown out the anxiety that was riddling her body along with the cold she had come down with.

“Thank god it’s off now,” said Amit.

“Yeah, thank god!” mimicked his older brother.

When Hemant didn’t respond to her text about the pizza, she decided she was too tired to make another stop; she would order delivery. When they arrived home, she could smell the pizza as soon as she opened the door; he had done his duty. The short drive to school had exhausted her reserves. She decided to change into her nightgown and robe. When she returned to the kitchen, she saw Hemant and the boys reclining on the mattress in the family room, eating pizza, watching a show on the National Geographic Channel.

A leopard, hidden in the tall grass was stalking a gazelle. The gazelle moved its nose up when the wind changed directions. It detected the scent of the predator and was about to run when it locked eyes with the leopard. For a split-second, the gazelle froze, but suddenly it bolted across the plain. It could not outrun the leopard. The boys cheered as the leopard overtook the gazelle and tore into its neck as it wrestled it to the ground. Kalpana looked away. The room was dark save for the light from the TV—white, pale yellow, then orange interrupted by flashes of darkness. Hemant had put a white, melamine plate and paper napkin on the kitchen table for her alongside the few remaining slices of pizza. He was absorbed by the show just as much as his sons were; just a father spending time with his boys. How could the loving father of her children also be a child molester doing evil things to little girls? How could she reconcile the two? How could he?

Two days had passed since Kalpana and Hemant had received the email. Though she was feeling a little better, she decided to stay at home one more day. The scene of Hemant with their sons last night eating pizza, resuming their normal lives in spite of the email was enough to convince Kalpana that she must contact Radha and find out more. She picked up her phone to call her cousin-sister, then put the phone down again. She had to wait for her hands to stop trembling. Clearing her throat, she took a deep breath. Radha answered on the first ring; maybe this was a good sign.

"Kalpana," Radha said. "I was hoping you would call."

At the sound of her cousin's voice, Kalpana could feel herself tearing up. But she didn't want pity, she wanted answers, if there were any to be had.

"Radha, I wanted you to know that both Hemant and I received Jyoti's email and . . . we were shocked, to say the least, at her . . . accusations. I just don't know what to say except that you know us. I never left Jyoti alone. You know Hemant. He is incapable of such . . . such awful things."

"I know, I know how you feel. We thought the same things at first when Jyoti told us, but then, the things she said. What she went through. You know she had repressed these memories. Her therapist says Jyoti's addictions, her depression, these are all consistent with this kind of trauma," Radha said.

"I don't doubt that the trauma happened, but it's not Hemant. It's not my husband." She started to cry. "It's not the father of my children," Kalpana said.

"There, there, beti," Radha said in a soothing voice. "This has come as a shock to all of us and I cannot imagine what you must be going through. We've all been talking about how to support Jyoti, but now we have to talk about how to support you with this knowledge."

Kalpana's head was reeling. "Who else knows about this?"

"Why, the entire family. Jyoti did not want anyone else to go through what she went through, so she and her therapist thought it best to send the information to everyone," Radha said.

Everyone knew. Her entire family thought that Hemant was a child molester. "Surely she didn't send the email to Ma and Daddy?"

Radha was silent for a moment before she spoke. "No, they didn't receive the email. We thought it best that you tell them about Hemant yourself."

So there had been strategizing about her situation. "And you didn't even have the decency to call to tell me. I had to come begging to you," Kalpana said, crying again.

“Your marriage must be suffering from this shock. You just need time to understand what has happened,” Radha said.

Kalpana sat up straight in her dining chair and said, “My marriage is none of your business.”

The wedding invitation was partially obscured behind a soccer ball magnet and another magnet, in the shape of a house that read *The Shah Team —Your Hometown Realtors* on the refrigerator. Harish Shah, their realtor friend, whose magnet adorned their refrigerator, was the father of the bride. The wedding would be the first family outing since the email a month ago. After Kalpana’s conversation with Radha, she told Hemant that they needed to be proactive about the situation and send their own email response before Jyoti’s words poisoned everyone against them. Kalpana’s email did not deny Jyoti’s trauma, but she countered with the theory that it must have been someone else, because at no time were Hemant and Jyoti ever alone. She wished Jyoti well on her path to healing and signed both their names. He softened toward her then, even offering to buy her a new salwar kameez for the wedding.

Rahul looked at his mother while they were getting in the car and screwed up his face. “Why do you have all that stuff on your face?” he said. Being a middle-schooler hadn’t increased his maturity yet.

“It’s called makeup, silly,” she said, looking at herself in the visor mirror while applying more lipstick. She glimpsed his face in the mirror and stuck her tongue out at him.

“That’s gross, Mom,” he said. “But why are you putting it on today?”

Hemant answered for her: “Your mother wants to look pretty for the wedding. You boys will be lucky to find a wife as beautiful as your mother someday.” He reached his hand over and squeezed Kalpana’s thigh.

There were over 300 guests at the wedding, all of them talking during the lengthy ceremony that no one understood except the pundit. Kalpana smiled, watching the guests roaming in and out of the ceremony, nudging Hemant saying that it was just like their wedding in India twenty years earlier. The few American guests appeared uncomfortable in their seats as they looked around and saw the Indian guests wandering and talking during the ceremony. Chaos is normal, she wanted to tell them, this is the Indian way. Kalpana thought it interesting that the wedding did have a few nods to Western customs such as the father-daughter dance. As Kalpana watched Harish and his daughter on the dance floor, she thought the song sounded

like something that Frank Sinatra would sing, but she couldn't be certain. She swayed to the music and looked for Amit and Rahul in the crowd. She spotted them with Hemant across the dance floor, acting silly, mimicking kissing someone by putting their arms around their own shoulders and moving their heads from side to side in a suggestive way. She laughed and felt relieved knowing that they were still boys, more silly than serious for the time being.

Being around people who didn't know their personal business and having the dreaded email behind them made Kalpana feel like her life was on its way back to normal. She wanted to tell Hemant how she felt and looked again for him next to the boys, but couldn't find him. The music changed to something with a fast tempo, a song that the boys seemed to know. They jumped onto the dance floor, needing no partners and started jumping up and down. The disco ball started rotating and the swirling lights caught the facets of the ball's mirrors throwing white, yellow, red, and green shards of lights onto the dancers' faces.

Kalpana's eyes were drawn to a far corner of the dance floor. There she saw Hemant sipping a drink, staring intently at something, but she couldn't make out what he could be looking at. Following his sightline, she found the object of his gaze. The girl stood off to the side of the dance floor. She was holding her mother's hand. She couldn't have been more than ten or eleven. She wore a sweet fuchsia and gold raw silk salwar kameez and had her long black hair tied up in a high ponytail. Her sheer crepe silk chuni with sparkling gold fringe matched her outfit. One end kept falling off her shoulder while she swayed to the music. To keep the chuni from falling off entirely, she finally wrapped it around her neck loosely, like a scarf. Such a sweet young girl, Kalpana thought, and she smiled at her efforts to be a proper little lady. A few years after Rahul was born, she and Hemant tried for another child, hoping it would be a girl. When she lost the baby at three months, they decided that they were happy with their family just the way it was. After the miscarriage, Kalpana's mother repeated her belief about how troublesome girls were and that she was lucky to have two healthy sons.

The girl's eyes wandered around the crowd, then rested on Hemant. At first she smiled shyly at him, then slowly the corners of her mouth dropped like a curtain. She stepped backward, her hands grasping blindly at her mother's sari. But she continued staring at Hemant, seemingly unable to look away. Something instinctive in her had taken over. For a moment, Kalpana thought she recognized the look in the girl's eyes as that of a

hunted animal. Taking a long, leisurely sip of his drink, Hemant slowly chewed the ice left at the bottom of his glass, but he never broke his gaze from the girl even as she suddenly turned and hid her head in the folds of her mother's sari.