A star is born
It is late afternoon, the sun is setting across the city.

The nightmare I had last night was too much to handle. Seeing my uncle again brought me back to those dark days that I never want to experience again. Why do I feel this way about other men? Why do you I feel this way? I am so tired.

His phone rings, it is his childhood friend, Adithi.

Hello?

Harsh! You need to check your Instagram! There is a talent show coming up next month! You should perform! With your voice, you can totally win it!
I really don't know... I have never performed in front of people. I have only sung in front of you!

I don't care! Meet me at the park tomorrow. We need to discuss a game plan!

The phone clicks off.

But... I don't want to

When he gets home, he goes to his room & lays down on his bed. He thinks about the talent show and gets his phone.

Calling all talent! Talent Show coming to a town near you! If interested in performing, please send us a direct message! We will send you the time and place for the auditions!
Auditions? Oh, man....

In the middle of the night, he suddenly wakes up, crying. He has another nightmare. For a while, he sits on his bed, thinking about his life and how he feels so unhappy. He gets his phone, goes onto the poster about the talent show again...

It is now or never. I can’t believe I’m going to do this...

Hi, my name is Harsh and I want to audition for the talent show.
It is a rainy afternoon. Harsh is walking to the park to meet with Adithi.

Hello, buddy! Did you sign up for the auditions for the talent show?

Yes...I almost didn’t want to do it. But last night, I changed my mind.

Suddenly, Adithi’s face is full of concern.

Harsh, are you okay? Your face looks so tired! Are you worried about the audition?

Yes...but also... do you want to go get some coffee?

Sure. You are scaring me a little.
Remember, when we were both young, and I used to cry randomly for no reason? I need to tell you why and how it relates to this talent show...

I was sexually abused by my uncle when I was five and it didn’t stop until I was twelve...and you know how I’m gay. I can’t help thinking that is how I became gay. Last night, I had a nightmare about my uncle and couldn’t sleep. I feel so frustrated and dirty. This is why I decided to sign up for the talent show. I want to write a song about my pain and suffering and sing it at the talent show.

I think it is a wonderful plan...This is a great first step. Why don’t we also find someone you can talk to? About all of this? Help you take this journey without any falls.

Like a counsellor? Will that be okay? I don’t think I need that sort of help.
It's just talking. What is the worst that can happen?

Okay, alright.

As they walk around the park, Harsh's phone suddenly pings. It is a direct message from one of the producers of the talent show.

Hello! Thank you for expressing interest in performing for the talent show! Auditions will take place at 10AM at the Orchid Hotel.

Harsh shows Adithi the message.

Go and show them your beautiful talent!

They both laugh and continue to walk around the park until the afternoon.
It is 10AM the next day. Harsh arrives at the Orchid Hotel, holding his guitar. He nervously waits outside. After a while, his number is called. He walks into the room. He stands in front of a long table with two people sitting behind it.

Hello! I am one of the producers of the talent show. My colleague here, is another producer for the show. Please tell us your name and what you will be doing. Then, proceed.

Hello, my name is Harsh. I am 17 years old. I will be singing to you “Yellow” by Coldplay, with my guitar.
Harsh begins to sing the song, he sounds nervous at first, but he slowly gets comfortable singing the song.

The producers start to smile, move their heads to the song. Once Harsh is finished, the producers turn to talk. They talk for a little bit and turn to Harsh.

We would like to congratulate you and say that we are happy to give you a spot to perform in the talent show!

We will send you the details for the rehearsal of the talent show which will happen a couple of days before the big day. Since the show is a month from now, please use this time to practice and perfect your talent. We want every contestant to do well and show their best.

Wow! Thank you so much!
Harsh leaves the room with a big smile on his face. He immediately calls Adithi to tell her the news.

Hello, Harsh?!
Tell me what happened?

I got into the talent show!

Adithi screams in joy.

Now, it's time for you to write this song and practice!

Yes!
Throughout the month, Harsh writes his song and practices singing. During this time he also goes to a counsellor regularly to talk about his abuse and how he can work through his nightmares.

From time to time, Adithi comes over to his home to listen to the song. She gives him feedback on certain lyrics here and there and sometimes, gives feedback on the melody. Throughout all of this, the nightmares Harsh experienced start fading away. He starts to sleep well and starts to be happy.

It is two weeks before the talent show. Harsh is feeling a little uneasy, but super motivated. He sits in front of desk, with his guitar in this arms. He sings a verse of the song.

Nothing is going to hold me down,
I am free...I am free
from the darkness.
Today, it is the rehearsal of the talent show. The talents show will take place in the Orchid Hotel in one of their banquet halls. A stage is set up in the front. Speakers are placed on both sides. People are decorating the room with flowers and are setting up the lights. The producers are busy telling people what to do.

It is Harsh's turn. He sings a different song for the rehearsal since he wants his original song to debut on the day of the show.

Sounds really good! Harsh! You sound a little nervous in the beginning, but overall, great! You will do well!

Harsh is all smiles.
Harsh goes on the stage. He takes a deep breath and he sees Adithi in the front with a big smile on her face. He begins to sing and plays his guitar.

The cages of my fear held me in
So far from my happiness, so far away
I was tied down from the control, the control of my own thoughts
I drifted, drifted into nothingness

I took the little seed of my strength
To lift me up out of the darkness
Nothing is going to hold me down, I am free, free from the darkness
I rise out of the cage, with my wings helping me
To realize that I am stronger than I thought I was

I am flying, flying, flying
Nothing is going to hold me down
I am flying, flying, flying
My wings are my happiness and love
Happiness and love for myself

I descend into the greatness
I can finally walk in freedom
Freedom to love who I am
I am great
I am me
When Harsh finishes singing, the audience stands up in applause. Adithi screams out Harsh's name. Harsh bows and walks off the stage. He goes back to the room he was waiting in before.

I can't believe I did that! I am so relieved and so proud of myself!

After an hour, the talent show is finished. The producers call all the contestants on stage.

All contestants please get on stage!

All of you were so amazing! This is the best talent show yet!

The audience applauds.
I know all of you are waiting for the results!

The producer opens up the envelope. He announces the results of the runner-up, third place winner and second place winner. Harsh’s heart feels like it’s going to burst.

And now, the first place winner! This person wowed the judges with his beautiful lyrics and heartfelt singing voice. The first place winner is... Harsh!!!

Harsh is stunned. He walks up to the front of the stage. The audience applauds him. He receives the trophy. Adithi runs up to the stage and gives him a hug.
A couple of months after winning first place, Harsh continued to keep on writing songs and singing with his guitar. Since he overcame his fear of performing for people, he decided to create a YouTube account and record himself singing his original songs and cover songs. Through this platform, he spreads awareness of mental health and child abuse. He helps people use music to help them cope and get through their days of sadness and give them strength.
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Movements and causes are best given birth to by those whose lives stand to change as a result of their wins. Gen Y is dear to us at Swasti Health Catalyst because this initiative is the brain child of the grassroots LGBTQ+ communities, whose journeys we have had the privilege to be part of and support. This comic book is just one of the many ways in which these communities are speaking to the world at large about their lived experiences and stating their right to be seen and accepted for who they are, in all their diversity. Thanks are due. The comic book idea originated from a dream of a resource center for adolescents at risk, especially the gender non-conforming. Amber Jean Coyne and Dr. Angela Chaudhuri helped shaped the idea of GenY initiative and the series of comic books. Our team led by Bhavani Kumaran and consisting of Shrirupa Sengupta, Priya Pillai, Nandini Murali and Natalie Macasa facilitated the storytelling sessions with the community members. Special thanks to Priya Babu, a transwoman leader, who inspired the youth to participate and be part of this movement. We look up to her for her leadership and consistent support.

At Swasti Health Catalyst, we stand firmly as allies of the community. A special gratitude to the Canada Fund For Local Initiatives for funding support to Gen Y.
The story begins with a teenager named Harsh. He is 17 years old and identifies as a gay man. From the ages of five to twelve years old, his uncle sexually abused him. He has never told anyone about the abuse. Because of the abuse, he blames himself for being gay. Harsh has a talent for writing music and singing. One day, on Instagram, he comes across a poster for a talent show. And then his life is no longer the same...

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