

CONFESSION

Roselle Pineda

“he said, I’ve gotten tough ‘cause my tone was curt. . .”

It was probably the hardest memory that I had to push out of my mind.

Expression was never my problem before, you know. I was always articulate with words. I was always articulate with gestures. I always knew how to deliver and make the people around me listen to my beliefs, my convictions, my thoughts and my emotions. Expression was never a problem before until I choked because it was probably the hardest memory that I had to push out of my mind.

When I was a kid, I always won contests in delivery, declamation and speech competitions. I was told I could be an actress or a lawyer or something that will involve me spending time rambling, blabbering and gambling with words because I was so good at it. As a kid, I had no fears of the stage. I was a pyramid or a grand structure in front of my audience, making them hear each sentence that I pronounce, making them feel each word that was spoken by my mouth. I was an actress with an unchallenged confidence on stage. I was a natural deliverer of rhetoric with an unchallenged charisma until the music stopped in the middle of my lines. Until the spotlight died on me.

There were times when my words were taken up against me. Like I was a walking, talking bomb, out to say something so uncool, or so out of school. They hold my power of expression

like it was a curse bent and sent to rest on my chest like my existence was an accident and a nuance to this arrangement. For countless of days and years I was seen as a threat to something larger than I was. Like I was bent on flexing and lifting my chest to crush some authority.

I was always sure. I was always tough. I was always curt and charismatic at the same time, always ready to offer crescent lips, always ready to extend a hand. I was always certain about my powers to narrate, even if my statements were out to prick some ego of someone somewhere. I knew how, what and when to say things, but it was probably the hardest statement that I had to push out of my throat.

I used to be good with words, but for some reason, a rush of painful memories turned my words into a blunder of disrupted images when that moment came. It was like being transported into a black stage, my breath curled up inside me like I was going to cough, or cry, or laugh painfully. Suddenly, I clogged up and did not know what to say. The words that I used to know turned into fragments of shapes and sounds. The words that I used to paint transformed into pieces of tesseraes on the ground. I never knew how to compose visual mosaics with those grounded stones, suddenly, I did not know how to look at them in that moment of dark silence. I did not know how to decode the fragments of tesseraed memories on the ground.

I used to be good with sight, but somehow, hurtful words took my eyes away from my own face and suddenly, I could not decipher the colors that I once saw as beautiful creations amidst transformations and constant contrasts of light and shadows. I used to be a good restorer of stories and legends, and could act them out, but somehow, melancholic moments and saddened gestures turned my own movements into a chaos of emotions and constant self-punishment. Suddenly, I could only suffer at

the sight of my hands. I could no longer use them to make other people laugh. I could no longer use them to make myself smile, because from my hands, I have sinned, or so I thought I have.

I used to be good with sight, I used to be good with words, but it was probably the hardest image that I had to re-create in my mind and speak of it.

“writing our history now on the bedroom wall. . .”

It was a day of commemorating the dead. A humid day when souls — found, lost and roaming — arise and enter the realm of the living through our solemn prayers and burning candles, in the hope that we may restore whatever memory was left in the minds of the breathing, of the dead, the unforgotten and the lost ones.

That hot afternoon and the burning incense on my grand father’s metal urn found us — me, my two brothers, my grandmother and my mother in a heated discussion about love, support, family, sibling rivalries and insecurities. Seems common for a family to talk about these things, the only difference was, it was the day when I confessed to my mother an incident that happened several years ago. An incident that changed and scarred my life forever. An incident that kept me from growing tired and at the same time, the incident that kept my pain burning for years, and probably for the rest of my life. It was the day when I found myself confessing to my mother a sexual assault that happened to me a few years ago.

I was always certain of what, where, and how to say things before, but for some reason, that day kept me floating in the ripples of uncertainty.

“In a man’s world, I am a woman by birth and after 19 times around I have found that they will stop at nothing once they know what you are worth. . .”

I was nineteen years old, then, a stocky, dark, short, torn-jeans infested tomboy who wore her hair at waist length without neither combing nor shampooing it. I went to the university in my pajamas, cared less and less about how I looked or how I smelled, while I proved more and more that being dirty and ugly brought harm more than an existence in oblivion. I walked around with rings of unattended baby powder on my neck, and hoped that this neglect would give me a "fly on the wall" status in this strange world. To my surprise, my apathy towards the herd and the images that it upheld only induced more nuances in my character so that even after a year or two in college, nobody could reach talking to me but they came to recognize my body, my face, and my hair. I became a challenge to society.

Then it happened. It was the turn of the year half a decade ago when I found myself in the middle of the night with five male acquaintances only to be taken into a ground of filth. Only to be pushed with my gums against the wall as I felt their violent organ prick each and every crevice of my body.

I was unsuspecting. I thought my own masculinity would make me invincible from these circumstances. I thought my unkempt looks and uninviting smell would somehow exclude me from being in a situation like this, but I guess I was no exception to the rule despite the rings of dirt on my neck, the pimples on my cheeks, nor the head lice on my head.,

They came like friends, they devoured and climaxed like beasts, and they left like innocent children as if nothing ever happened. After the incident, they still laughed in the corner store. Still munched chocolate candies while they puffed cheap cigarettes and let the smoke screen each and every woman in their periphery. While I, the ugly, masculine, posing challenge, tiptoed from post to post, or ran like a cat from tree to tree just to avoid their gazes.

It was rape.

And even now, as I write that four-letter word down, I curl up like a worm suddenly snatched from the comforts of its leaf. Until now I crumble at the sound of the word because flashes of violent images in my head almost immediately follow. I would always use euphemisms like sexual violation or sexual assault to soften the pain that kept on ripping at my chest whenever I recall even a fragment of that day. But the pain was not soft, nor worthy at euphemism. The memory was violent and the incident was brutal.

I felt hands, many hands ground me to the mattress as if they were pegs to hold the wind battered tent into its place. They were swinging and clinging hands telling me to behave with every beating and punches on the wall. I countered with my own surges of violence. I kicked, swung my head from side to side, and punched with the reach of my pegged arms in silence. I was an uncontrollable wind struggling to break free from their hands. Soon, the strength of my body succumbed to their combined forces, as I realized two hands, two feet, and the rage in the cauldron of my chest could never match ten muscular hands, ten muscular legs, and five beast-like desires in the cauldron of their pelvis. I was finally pegged and held down in subordination. I closed my eyes and thought of mind strategies and mind games from which I could not feel victimized in any of this.

I will not be a victim, I said to myself as I felt a number of mouths and hands cup my breasts like marshmallows, as if they were inanimate objects separated from my being. *I would not play the part of the victim*, I repeated to myself as I felt a number of hard spears ripped through the sore wound in between my legs alternately. Everything passed in a blur. Fragmented time and space. Contracted reality and violent sleep, as if I was falling while being battered, punched and crunched along the way down.

My mind was in denial as my body suffered with physical brutality. I could not decipher one movement from another. I could not decode one body part from another. I did not know who was who. I could not recognize which was which.

I turned to my mind to give me strength as I slowly felt my body give up on my struggle to be free. I closed my eyes once more and repeated the words, *I will not be a victim, I will not be a victim, I will not be a victim, I am not a victim*, as if I was mumbling a prayer. But even in that last strand of empowerment, never did I suspect that the hardest blows were yet to come.

I closed my eyes to veer away from the reality of violence that my body was experiencing, only to hear even graver piercings marked by violent words and nasty laughter characterized by each of their low voices and cracked throats. Then, for the first time, I could not rely on my logic. I could not think of any reason for what happened. My mind used to have answers for every thing, even as lame as it may seem sometimes, but for the first time, I felt my mind as defeated as my body.

I went home and searched for the door of my private room immediately. I entered the room and went straight to my bed. I passed the light switch on my way but did not bother to turn it on. I laid my battered back on the coarse sheet of my bed, but at that moment, I could not feel anything but the soreness of the cursed wound in between my legs, and the anger boiling in my chest. I stared for the longest time at the ceiling even though I could not see anything. I did not cry, for, at that moment I knew, I could cry more without any tears. My systems, suddenly shut down like a computer, from the world around me. Even if there were much celebration, much laughter and much talking outside my room, I could not hear anything.

It was the turn of the year, and I spent it alone, in hate and silence.

A few months later, I hopped on an airplane to seek solace in a strange land. I bombarded my planner with things to do while I was there — walking leisurely in the tresses of Central Park, visiting museums, buying music and books by day, while dancing and watching theater productions and other musicals in Broadway by night. I thought that a taste of this capitalist consumerist haven, art, food and music will help me recover, but I was proven wrong once more. Without support from any familiar face or place, I felt even more alone in the struggle. With no one to point a finger at, I started to blame myself for what happened to me. I blamed myself for being too close, too strong, too dirty, too masculine, too confident, too unsuspecting, too happy, and for being a challenge to my oppressors. I was a feminist even back then, and I could not understand why it had to happen to me despite the knowledge that I keep.

Even more depressed than the first time I set foot in that strange land, I went home to my country after six months, still defeated by my inner pains.

“I played the powerless in too many dark scenes and I was blessed with a birth and a death and I guess I just want some say in between. . .”

It was like this for a while. I was uncontrollably depressed, pained and scarred. I was uncontrollably irritable, angry and at the same time, scared. I kept everything to myself because I didn't want to hurt anybody, especially my mother because of my fate. I did not want her to grieve for me the way she has always grieved for my brothers and me whenever we make a wrong turn. My mother has always feared too much, grieved too much for us than for anything else, and I did not want to stab her even more by showing my grief. So, I kept silent.

I was silent, alone and feeling more victimized than ever, and in all of these depressions and desperation, I never found

the courage to say anything to a single soul. One day, I woke up and saw my eyeballs sunken into the hollows of my skull. I traced the lines of blackness around them. I took a small step away from the mirror and saw a ragged, tired, beaten, ugly and empty reflection of what used to be a confident, daring and mostly happy woman. Then I realized, I grew older in the past year than in the nineteen years that I spent existing and living day by day.

This was when I decided to recover.

I was not all victim, I said to myself, even though I do not deny the harm that circumstances brought me. I was made to bleed, scalp, heal and maybe bleed again, but this cycle compelled me to heal. Even if a part of my hand was amputated or the wound between my legs was violated, I still have my gut, my chest and my face to call my own. I was still whole and even if I was made to bend and curl and fit into a hole, I am still untarnished and mended because I have beauty in my soul. There were things that were taken away and no one and nothing can bring that back. But I was left with a choice to harness new strengths and new beauties within that I still haven't seen. It was time to allow these strengths to seep through the surface and rewrite the story from within. I was left with the choice to be strong, and I grabbed it. I held my newly found power by rooting my strength in the story that I had to tell. Like the confident narrator that I once was, I started to empower myself by transforming my negative and painful experiences into something that will help, heal and build my own inner strengths and others as well. I empowered myself by helping others. Together with other women who underwent the same turmoil that though, I slowly restored what I thought I lost before — my pride, dignity, strength, inner peace and every thing in between. By helping others, I healed myself and in fact, grew into a stronger and more peaceful person.

“Stories are medicines. . .” — Clarissa Pinkola Estes, excerpt from ‘Women Who Run with Wolves’

I told my story to strangers, gender benders, friends, lovers and to almost every one. I told my story on a mat, on a sofa, in a beach, in a car, in a classroom, and almost every where, but there was one venue that was untouched. There was one person who had yet to hear my story—my mother.

All this time, I had healed through my own transformations, efforts and self-preservation, but when it was time to tell the story to my own mother, the memories and pain came in a precipitance of battered images and scratched wailing once again. But the pain was not rooted in the story anymore but in the process of telling the story to the one, who constantly suffers for the grievances of others. More than anything, the pain that I felt came from the idea that I will once more hurt the soul of my mother. The pain of seeing my mother shed tears once more for her prodigal daughter. It’s ironic that all the while, I have been telling stories to keep my pain from piling up, and this time, the story telling becomes the culprit.

“Stories are medicines,” but it was probably the hardest story to tell.

I was a natural narrator but I choked that humid, hot afternoon of commemorating the dead. It was then when I realized that I had spent almost all my life hurting, because all my life I know I have been hurting my mother in innumerable ways. I hurt her for my stubbornness, for not being the ideal daughter that she could have, for loving another woman, and most of the time I hurt her for just being me. That hot afternoon was a time to hurt her again, and it was probably the hardest confession that I had to pull out from my heart.

I finally told her the story.

After a brief silence while her heart tried to listen to every word I had to say, her cries almost immediately flooded the room even before I finished my confession. Her shoulders were uncontrollably shaking from sobbing and my two brothers had to hold her just to calm her down. I was frozen. I was dumbfounded, and once more, the pain came rushing in like a flash flood killing each and every nerve in my body and leaving only puncturing currents of agony and weaknesses brought about by her suffering vision. A rush of pain even greater than the ache I felt when I was sexually violated. For a moment, I had to look away, or blur my eyes with the accumulation of my own tears in them just to hide her wailing expression from me. I had to seek the comfort of my own shoulders just to lessen the hurt that each shriek and sob from her made me feel.

I finally told her the story.

It was an ambivalent feeling of relief and grief that, on the one hand, I had closed a chapter in my book of painful secrets. I had crossed the boundary and told my mother about the most painful experience of my life, and on the other, I had opened a door to a new chapter in my life. A chapter that characterizes my inevitable relationship with my mother. A chapter that for the longest time, I had denied and dismissed in the name of ideological difference. A chapter that I have no idea where, when and how it will be completed.

*“don’t you understand in the day to day, in a face to face
I have to act just strong as I can just to preserve a place
where I can be who I am, talk to me now. . .”*

Now, I live my life without the burden that I carried in my chest for a long time. I still cringe. I still cry. Most of the time I still find myself struggling with words every time I tell my story. Most of the time I am still face down when stampede comes.

Most of the time I tremble in fear every time I am left alone in the dark. Even as I write this now, I still find it hard to re-tell and remember what happened half a decade ago. Even as I sit here in front of my computer, typing words on my modern paper, I feel and see tears clouding my vision. But this time, I know the pain will not linger. I have chosen for my wounds to heal by transforming its pain to something that will stimulate me to do better and be a stronger person inside and out. What happened may have scarred me forever but I chose to live with that scar as a part of my wholeness. I chose not to indulge in the ugliness of the scar but to get used to its touch, its texture, and maybe even see the beauty of its healing process instead of lingering on the pain of the wound.

As for my mother, I now live my life with the knowledge that she knows. I am keener to every sign and symbol, or anything that will tell me something about what we have now. I am begging for signs, gestures and words that will tell me that I am not floating anymore with the idea that she might be suffering still from this knowledge.

I saw my mother again a week after I told her my story. She smiled at me and held my hand. When she squeezed them in the lightest but most affectionate way, I knew the new chapter that I started a week before that had already began to write itself. The new chapter that I opened a week before she held my hand, already began to come into view.

“and when I’m approached in a dark alley I don’t lift my skirt. In this city self-preservation is a full-time occupation I’m determined to survive on these shores I don’t avert my eyes anymore talk to me now. . . ”—excerpts from Ani DiFranco’s *“Talk to me Now”*.