

Normalizing Survival

Synopsis:

A personal essay on a familial and a familiar horror experienced by women, and why sharing stories and tenderness for those who suffer are necessary acts of survival and justice. The essay covers a writer's experience of domestic abuse in a time of a global pandemic.

I lost my front teeth. There, I declared it. Pardon the audacity. I know women of my decade are supposed to step back with acceptance, fade away and blend into the shadows while younger girls, with cheeks like fresh tomatoes and eyes bright with so many things to look forward to, have their glorious time in the sun.

My teeth didn't fall off instantly, the way boxers who lose fights do. It happened slowly. Two years ago, for three days, I was repeatedly beaten with a tv antenna by my then husband. It happened in our home. He took sinister care to make sure the welts he made on my body didn't show. At one point, my stomach was kicked hard that my head hit the floor.

I let out a quiet cry but in my head I kept screaming, *S t o p!!!*

The aftermath was a slow-burn court battle, as justice has always been a cruelly long drawn out process for women in our country. Seeking justice has even gotten worse since the pandemic.

In the court hearings, I had to relive the horror over and over again. I had to face my abuser over and over again. That part fails to numb me despite the Zoloft and Revotril I took as part of my therapy.

The fear of being attacked again and the self-doubt — the self-doubt of whether I had any strength left to heal and recover kept hitting me even in random moments.

But back to my teeth. Two years later, their mobility got worse. It was time for the reckoning. I had to let go of them. My dentist was a kind woman who knew my story and mourned with me. She took care that the hollow ugly hole on my face would be filled again — so I could smile again.

When I walked away and returned two years later to a house suffused with deafening silence, I gave away all the objects that were a reminder of those days. And now, the two porcelain teeth that I see in the mirror whenever I smile are a reminder of what I lived through.

I've never been the loud type. I keep pretty much to myself. The pandemic lockdown also forced many of us to remain at home. My years of abuse were a time of silence and long chats with chosen sisters. The love and understanding of my women friends became my fuel to survive. I spent many nights and a lot of early mornings pouring my brokenness to them. Manila. New York. Kabul. East Timor. Baguio. We had a bond that breaks geography and time zones. Our difficult conversations that dug deep into my being is what kept me alive.

Normalize my survival.

That's advice I took from a soul sister and a mantra I now claim.

I am a mother with a special needs son. I am also a journalist.

My abuse is a real and an ordinary story of other women, too. Why should a woman continue to live in silence, fear and shame when you finally have the courage to walk away from his hatred, cruelty and rage? It's fine to talk about it, and to carefully choose the people you share your story with. And it's fine to make mistakes for when you realize some of those you share your experiences with don't always have good intentions.

You cannot separate the woman from the writer. The woman lives in the writer; the writer lives in the woman. The difficult narrative I share isn't anything new. I'm not a unique case. But the silence of so many other women who were not able to leave the violence, those who couldn't find justice due to their poverty forces me to write.

At the shelter that took me in when I walked away, I met mothers whose stories were far more heart-wrenching than mine. Adora, a gregarious kangkong vendor, lived with her common-law husband in a wooden cart with their two girls, aged two and six-years-old.

One time, returning home after picking bunches of kangkong to sell to a local market as she has always done, her six-year-old daughter complained of having difficulty peeing. The mother thought maybe she had UTI and tried to ask her partner what could be wrong with their child. But the bastard was too high on solvent and she couldn't get a decent answer from him. The child was crying and distraught. She couldn't sleep that night and was terrified to be with her father.

That's when Adora trembled and realized something bad happened. She took her daughters to the barangay hall and that's when she found out that her partner sexually violated her six-year-old

daughter. He had been doing it many times in their decrepit cart when Adora left the house to go to the swamp to harvest kangkong.

She didn't file a case but the traumatized child was taken to a shelter for abused girls and given care by a social worker. Adora had no choice but to continue living with her common-law husband in the cart, along with their two-year-old. But one day, after work, her toddler was crying and complained of having a hard time defecating. Adora saw that her young daughter's rear was bleeding. Alarmed, she took her to the barangay hall and after investigation, it was revealed that the child had also been raped by her husband. And so she left him and made her way to our city's women's shelter.

In this country, even if there are laws that try to protect abused women and children, our culture is still horribly backward. My own experience of filing a barangay report was deeply uncomfortable. As I went inside the barangay hall, a bunch of men — a mix of local officials and policemen, crowded around me when I said I was going to file for protection from my abuser.

When I said this, the room fell silent and they looked at me as if I was the one who committed the crime.

"Madam, what happened?" the officer on duty asked me in the vernacular. And then he retorted, "What did you do that pushed him to hit you?"

The heavy energy of the men, the smell of their sweat as they went near me, the intense look at my face, my body, it was all revolting. That feeling of being attacked, it was happening again here.

That officer didn't merit a response from me. Nor did the other men in the room. They didn't need to hear my story. I asked to see someone from the women's desk to file my report and I was led there by the officer, that sweaty smell on his uniform and skin emitting badly in the air.

But that's the state of abused women here. There is that unspoken, convoluted stigma that the woman was asking for it, that she deserved it. There is that terrible and stupid question: "What did you do for him to keep hitting you?"

Maybe you dressed provocatively? No, I just wear plain shirts and jeans. *Maybe you were laughing too hard with your male friends' jokes?* But it was really a funny joke! *Maybe you cursed back at him when he said you were shit?* Never, I was too afraid to fight back although I wished I did. *Maybe you forgot to cook rice?* But I was exhausted from work and needed to lie down for a moment to rest. *Maybe you deserved to be beaten?*

Shame grows in an abused woman's thoughts, as if she is to blame for her abuser's behavior. There is also the inability to tell your story, to speak. Instead, a woman tends to cover up out of fear and embarrassment. The distortion of reality — that one is not good enough, that the abuse is your fault, and you are not permitted to share your opinion and thoughts — just grows in you for years.

I didn't report the abuse until weeks later, because I had Covid-19 at the time of the incident. It was the first wave of the virus, though fortunately I didn't need to be hospitalized. I lost my sense of taste and smell, but not my sense of pain and grief. At its onset, getting the virus put a stigma on the stricken. The idea that it's the worst plague in history put some guilt and embarrassment as well to those who got the virus.

There is the tyranny of the so-called healthy and wealthy, those who look down on those of us who are assumed to have not taken care ourselves, that we did not put our masks on or sanitized enough. Or we couldn't afford the right protection gear. And for abused women living through the viral plague, a Covid infection was another source of shame.

Sickness and death in a time of a pandemic are not equalizers in this country. Yes, we are all mortal. But the rich dead are still valued more than the poor who died of Covid. There is dignity for the rich whose bones are evenly fired in a crematorium and their ashes kept in an expensive cremation jar, in a luxury columbarium somewhere.

The poor who died during the height of Covid didn't actually die from the disease, but many passed on from hunger and the dearth of access to basic social and health services.

Death loomed all over the world as the numbers increased every minute, every day. Health professionals, scientists, and everyone else on the frontline to ensure safety, rescue the hungry, and take care of the sick took the heaviest risk of getting the virus.

Millions lost their jobs, children got deprived of creating happy memories that would otherwise have been made in school with friends or outdoors with wide open spaces. It was each to his own as people stayed isolated in their homes or migrated to the small towns outside the city.

The unusual developments took time for leaders to act as the health crisis escalated. Everyone tried to make sense of what was happening. Was this a sign that the world was really ending? God's wrath finally made sure to cast death to this chaotic world?

Novelist Arundhati Roy described the pandemic as a portal. A portal of uncertainty and hope. The pandemic is also a portal to see a glimmer of light flickering through a tunnel.

She wrote, "Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it."

If there might be beauty amid the dystopia, the pandemic also allowed us to rethink the meaning of our lives. What does it take to survive and endure the seemingly unending catastrophe? The

pandemic forced us reimagine a better world where humanity is vibrant and kindness and gratitude are essential parts of building the new normal.

Humans are social beings after all; we needed to be a community to live through the dark times. Meal boxes were sent to feed frontliners, donations for food and essentials were distributed to communities, then soup kitchens were created, and community pantries helped sustain neighborhoods. People supported small businesses, too.

The main thoroughfares were unusually quiet during the lockdowns. Life just paused as only those with essential work were allowed to traverse the metro.

But in the quietude of the city, there were women and children being beaten up and abused. The limited means of communication and transport may have lowered the report of domestic violence cases, according to a Philippine Commission on Women (PCW) report.

Lack of access to services may have resulted in the lower number of reported cases of violence against women and children but it didn't mean the cases have gone down, according to the Philippine Commission on Women. The Philippine National Police may have reported less cases but meanwhile, pleas of help for protection increased at the women's desks in barangays.

The PCW said that the number of cases of violence against women and children increased during the pandemic. Sadly, however, while reports also went up, the report showed that only one in three women who have experienced violence will report what happened to them or their children.

The first year of the pandemic, from March 15 to November 13, there were 13,923 reported cases — 9,176 cases were violence against women and 4,747 cases involved violence against children.

Three years later, in my head, I can still hear my faint wail turning into a quiet scream as he continued to slap my face, strangle my neck, pull my hair, and punch me.

Stop, stop, stop, please! I was begging him to stop but my abuser mistook my pain as a gesture of me begging forgiveness and admitting guilt to some false accusation.

I didn't leave immediately because I was trying to figure out how to leave with my son who had special needs.

He left the house a few hours for an errand. I came out of the room where I was isolating myself due to Covid. I remember that gentle morning vividly, I went to the kitchen to wash dishes. My son was calling out to me from a distance. He was in a playful mood.

But when the abuser returned, he grabbed my neck from the back and started pointing a knife at me again. Then, the knife was pointed at my body, my neck, my face, and my eyes.

I called a friend for help and she said to walk away now. It's either I leave my son behind and get him afterwards or die and have my son lose his mother. I chose the first option, the only option I had in this situation.

To this day, I'm still getting over that terrible memory. Nights and mornings spent in solitude and isolation when I left were a test of my ability not to crack. Tears just well up in my eyes and my body just trembles even at the smallest sign of a trigger: knives in the kitchen (remembering he was pointing a knife on my face, my eyes, my body); my clothes, the empty space of my hiding place. Anything was a trigger.

You'd think that as a journalist, it would be easy to write this. But I thought hard about whether to break my silence or not. That's exactly what my abuser said in his court statement. He said that since I was a writer, I'm used to "conjuring lies" and I have "too much imagination." My abuser hinted that I was mentally imbalanced, that I'm crazy, that I'm not mentally stable. That I'm a terrible mother.

I walked away from him to finally put a stop to the violent outbursts that escalated through the years. I filed a case for my protection and to give my son a better future. I also thought of the many women who stay and continue to live with their abuser. I break my silence by writing my story, to give women the strength to realize that beatings, verbal abuse, being deprived of food, and being forced to have sex with your abuser are not okay.

My process for healing will take more time but I'm at the beginning of learning to forgive myself for enduring the pain and for the self-blame. I've also been praying hard for my abuser. May he find his peace and happiness just as I am slowly finding joy and gratitude in the everyday things.

My abuser did not destroy me. My spirit is still whole and soaring with the care and kindness women friends, my sisters, my family have given me. His numerous acts of cruelty and hatred were replaced by a hundredfold acts of love.

I can't be angry too long. The world has enough inhumanity to bear. Violence against women and children is still a dark reality. But I can tell my story, we can tell our story — we can chronicle our struggles and triumphs as survivors of our time. Years from now, other generations will know how we lived through these dark times.

Ars longa, vita brevis. Life is short, art is long.

Our stories, especially the difficult ones, will outlive us. Be not afraid to share your story.

That is what normalizing our traumas mean. From pain and shame, we can create and record our memories, to share our inner life as well.

Keep writing the unsaid. Write for the grieving others, the women and children who suffer. For women who have gone through violence, we can no longer just gaze at things from afar.

There is a beautiful Buddhist word, *bodichitta*, meaning a "noble or awakened heart." We can be moved from our own pain to show this tenderness to others. For in this tenderness, we also heal ourselves.