

Musing Of A Martyr.

There are two sides to every story. Two faces to every image. Two eyes, two ears, two legs, two hands, two, two, two. Every essential thing comes in twos.

So it didn't come as a surprise when I realised it took two experiences to fully understand and truly feel an emotion. So far, I had been fortunate enough to live through the meaning of some of these emotions. Today, I want to share them with you.

AWARENESS

It wasn't when I looked at myself in the mirror, or tried to look at people with my eyes instead of my neck that I was aware of myself. It wasn't when I was called small and tiny compared to my mates that I saw. Not when I would be called several names in praise of my hard work and zealotry. Not when I would be called unattractive compared to my siblings who didn't have to shoulder several adult responsibilities at their ages.

I truly became aware of myself in university. Over there, I wasn't the hardworking first daughter who made life easier for a young mother. I wasn't a co-ordinated elder sibling who made sure the house felt as warm as it has always been: with or without mommy.

I was my name, the twinkle in my eye, my skin colour, my voice, my personality and my mannerisms. I was what people saw me to be physically and with time, how they knew me to behave.

This was exhilarating because for the first time in my life, I was able to define myself. I realised who I was by proving it with my actions every single day. I didn't have to hide, work to conceal certain parts of myself or a past I had shared because it simply didn't matter anymore.

All anyone cared about was the young girl in front of them, with an excellent smile and an inviting voice. That's all that mattered.

This taught me to reject definitions made by the people who'd known me since I was born. I started watching my actions closely and finding appropriate words to describe myself. I decided who I was, who I could be and who I presently am. No one else.

They say the two most important days in your life are the day you're born and the day you discover your why.

The day I became fully aware, I was born again.

LONELINESS

Growing up, I never really realised how isolated I was. Sure, I had 2 younger siblings which would turn into 6 in the following years. I was always surrounded by children both at home, in my neighbourhood and in school. It would take me years to realise that the relationship I had with my siblings and my yet-to-be step siblings couldn't be termed as friendship.

As the first child and daughter, I was a secondary parent in their eyes. While they engaged with each other as equals and playmates, they revered me. Although I never flexed my seniority with commands, they followed my instructions diligently. It didn't help that I was incredibly smart for my age and was being constantly sharpened by conflict and pain.

I had to act and assume the role of responsibility that I barely understood. Even after the divorce and vanishing of the four step-siblings, it continued. I was a loner amongst my own.

Now a teenager, going to university only widened the gap and defined the lines between what I thought companionship was and what I was experiencing at home.

I enjoyed companionship in school, I never lacked a shoulder to dance with or an extra pair of legs to walk with. But at home, things remained obscure. Yes we played and joked but as the years went by it became clearer and clearer to me that I was really lonely.

No matter how many 25 minute conversations we would all have in the sitting room debating the recent telenovela episode or reality TV show, no matter how many things I would try to share with them, it all remained the same. When we all returned to our rooms, I knew I was alone.

When my younger sister and her older brother would talk about silly nothings and bond over the most mundane things I realised that I didn't enjoy that loyalty or depth of relationship with any of them.

This is what the weight of imposed responsibility had stolen from me. It had stolen a childhood I would never get back, siblings that I can't connect to on a deeper level. A life I'd never had.

The second time I truly felt this was years later now in my early twenties. The past few days had been quite weird and rough. 14 days earlier, I still had a job or two actually. I thought I had shared a redeeming experience with my mother which would allow us to mend whatever was left of our relationship. I was wrong.

You see, on this particular day, I was awake and about to go shower when she barged into the room confrontationally as she had done many times before. My younger sister whom I'd normally sleep with had since stopped sharing a bed with me for a few days by then. That was the least in a series of oddities that had been going on.

Everyone had been avoiding me and alienating me. When I asked my brother about what was going on, he walked out on me. I charged it to the game and the fact that I had always been the martyr.

"Why did you take my money?" she asked. I told her that I didn't take any money. She yelled accusing me of dishonesty and warned me to confess because apparently everyone already knew that I did take the money. At this point, I couldn't contain myself. I put on my clothes and bolted out the door by 6:00 am on a chilly Sunday morning.

As I walked towards the bridge, a million thoughts flooded my mind. I thought of who to call. Like many things my stolen childhood had condemned me to, I couldn't tell my friends any of this. I never told any of the friends I had my true story. I was always isolated.

But it was bearable because when I was far from home, I was myself. But university was over and from everything I had been experiencing, this was the worst.

I settled on my aunt/godmother who I had called a day before but had never returned my call, very unlike her. Thank fully she picked up although I knew she'd be busy prepping her 7 kids for morning mass.

On that bridge that fateful day, something was taken from me. I ended that call looking over the several zinc roofs, feeling the cold wind in my face. I felt so small. So humbled. So grateful that my aunt actually picked up when I had no one.

But that day, I realised one thing for sure. I hadn't been lonely all these years. I had been alone.

PAIN

Now there were several moments when I experienced pain. I had gone out on more than a few dates with him. No matter how badly each of them ended, no matter how hard I cried, how beat up I was, how inflicted I felt, I always managed to see him again. It was what they call nowadays: a love-hate relationship. According to the Gen Z dictionary, it is toxic.

Sooner than later this weird tango that I engaged in with Pain would evolve into something more difficult but understandable. A situationship.

Several things happened over the years as I got to know him. Most of our earliest dates would revolve around me taking home a bruise as a symbol of how bad the entire date had gone. At first it was bruises from my mother, bruises from my teachers, falling from a Ferris wheel and once a tree branch tearing my eyelid in a freak accident.

But then they got worse, they got deeper as time went on. For one, the bruises from my mother no longer symbolised my wrongdoings but instead were a form of spiteful aggression. When she was exhausted and tired of fighting with daddy, she would take all that frustration out on me for the slightest thing. That was the worst thing about meeting Pain at that stage. The dynamics were different. Now I could feel why I had the bruise.

And it got worse.

Soon I stopped having physical bruises. As I entered into a deeper tango with him, all his marks became internal. These were bloodier than the former and it would take years, sometimes a lifetime to heal from the after effects. My earliest experience of this was..... there are too many to recount. He definitely hit the ground running.

From walking in the hospital that day, where I saw my father so thin and frail. He still had that excellent smile. The one so many people still rightfully admire me for. I knew before I reached his bed stand that he wasn't going to make it and so when I got there I began to cry heavily. You see the worst thing about my novel situationship with Pain at the time was my level of discernment. For a 13 year old, I sure could smell a rat from a mile away.

Several other very difficult instances came. I have completely erased them from my mind and vowed never to speak of them again so I cannot share.

All I can say is that after my father died, every other thing I felt prior to then was child's play compared to what came next.

While I was on the bridge that day, I don't remember when I started crying or when I started wailing pleading my innocence. Luckily for me, my aunt believed me and told me everything. I went numb when I learnt that they had allegedly found the missing \$100 note in my purple suitcase. What I found even more shocking was that they had invited a distant uncle of ours to come beat me up. What sent me over the edge was the fact that they had been coordinating this plan for a week! The rails on that bridge nearly didn't hold me. All those years of me reading into the hate that came as bruises, the loneliness that was camouflaged in a 30 minute sitting room small talk was real after all.

My world went spiralling. Something died inside of me that day as I hung up to an aunt who promised me asylum at her house. Just the night before, I had woken up in the middle of the night alone in the room with a wild fear that someone was going to harm me. This fear wasn't a result of a nightmare as I don't remember having any. I was just very scared. I told my aunt about this before she helped me connect the dots.

I had been betrayed by the ones I thought I could trust. I had been sold out in the place I called home. Like Joseph, like Jesus, I felt the bitter tinge of betrayal.

Discernment can be a blessing and a curse. As I cried on that bridge that day, I bared all the bruises I had gotten from all my dates with Pain. This one was the biggest and he knew it. He knew he went into overkill and so he left me alone from then on. Or maybe he still throws rocks at my window from time to time but even he has to be creative in planning a date that would top the last one.

LOVE

Such an alien word. I struggled to understand what love was. I thought I loved my siblings and my mother. I thought love was doing whatever someone said to please them. I thought love was putting their feelings ahead of mine. I thought it was presenting myself as a foot mat, hiding my desires and aspirations so that those of my mother would take precedence.

I never realised how wrong I was until I experienced a different kind of love.

I met her in my first year of secondary school. She didn't call me small or weird. She recognized that I loved to read, that I like pink and would point out things in myself that I never had the time to reflect on.

I loved her. I adored her companionship, her concern, her pure heart. She was so stable, so perfect. Almost like the girl I could have been. This love expanded when I told her the truth of the chaos that was happening back at my house. I was scared to but she had bared into me so deeply with her kindness that I had nowhere to hide.

She didn't turn away when she learned the reason behind the darkness in my eyes. Instead she brought her parents and siblings into my little life. Her dad would give her extra lunch money for me because

she had told him I never brought anything for lunch. They weren't incredibly rich but they were stable, kind and had a solid set of values. The type of white picket fence nuclear families you'd read about or watch on TV.

I remember when they offered to come over to my house over the weekend. I was so excited and nervous I could have collapsed. I admired them so much and I am still thankful for their acceptance and kindness.

When my dad was in the hospital, I wasn't scared to tell her. She knew how rarely I saw him and how rare it was for him to come to my mother's house. Her mom happened to be a nurse in the hospital and she told her about it. One day after school, her mom was in the car with her dad who always picked her up. I was happy to see her again and she brought up my dad and said she had seen him. I almost cried and she promised to take care of him.

That was the last time I was ever vulnerable with anyone. She was my first love.

I did feel love in my friends from university but nothing compared. Now I have a clearer understanding of the type of love that can ground me. It has to be safe, I have to feel secure enough to be vulnerable. It has to be true, a love fueled only by kindness. It has to be unconditional and accepting.

Finally, it has to be like her's.

And Now?

I'm on a different journey. I no longer try to understand the reason behind these emotions. I'm no longer chasing the wind. Discernment has afforded me the shield of sometimes accurately predicting what type of emotion a person or experience would bring to me.

I'm on my way home. A home that would be mine. Where I wouldn't have to depend on or trust anyone else with my survival, my purpose, my safety or my life. A home where I would feel safe enough to feel the pangs of sadness and the bitterness of pain. A home where I can cry, where I can laugh, where I can be who I could be, who I am. A home where I can build a life that makes that sad little girl smile.

A home where the little girl can find solace.

A home where she can return and reclaim the childhood that was stolen from her.