

Trauma Is Our Country

Beverly Tan Murray

There's a place in Miami where the bay meets the ocean, and adjacent to that spot, a grassy embankment lined with bushes and shrubs. I knew that spot well, was there every morning at precisely 6:12 a.m., sprinting around the bend, zig-zagging past the homeless man with the Mickey Mouse shirt, the inanimate bulldozers and tractors, the construction workers lined up at the food truck for breakfast. To anyone else, Brickell Avenue was a swath of ongoing construction, a place to be avoided unless you had business dealings. I had none. I went there for the turtles.

I'd discovered the turtle colony by accident during a morning run. I learned about how exacting they were; how, if I arrived too early, they'd still be asleep in their nests, too late, and they'd already be churning through those dark waters, deep diving, hunting for prey. 6:12 a.m. was the magic number. I'd arrive just in time to see them amble onto the banks, settle onto the smooth rocks, wrinkled necks high and lifted toward the sun's warmth. I'd squat and look at them for a while, these ancient creatures with their glossy shells. They reminded me of the pet turtles I used to keep as a child in Singapore. When the sun rose and it got too hot, they'd launch themselves headfirst into the water with a satisfying pop, one by one, until there were none left.

I ran a lot that year, more than usual. It was the natural outcome of living with my boyfriend at the time; an ill-fated exercise punctuated with tears (mine) and long, brooding silences (his). Running was what kept me sane, the ritual of lacing my sneakers, sweeping my hair into a ponytail, putting one foot in front of the other until I felt no pain and everything was drowned out by the sound of my own heavy breathing. On these runs, I saw a different Miami. Quiet, unadorned. Soon, the traffic sounds would come, reggaeton blasting from cars, businesspeople talking loudly on their cell phones, but that hour belonged to the humming crickets, the wild green parrots, the warm, sweet Caribbean air I sucked in

until I felt like my lungs could burst. Everything was falling apart in my relationship. We'd been together for almost two years, and each month that ticked by brought with it a sense of slow suffocation, of walls closing in. All signs pointed to a final, possibly explosive, breakup. But running made me feel powerful and competent. It reminded me of a simple, unassailable logic: that I was free to roam, that my feet would take me places.

The morning after I'd discovered an email to my boyfriend from a girl he used to date (two cryptic words, "thank you," sent the morning after he was supposed to have been out with his guy friends; an instant bobsled into my accusing him of cheating, and him calling me "a real cunt when I wanted to be"), I headed out to the bay again. Nothing was helping this time – not the music blaring through my headphones, not the staccato rhythm of my own footsteps – so I slowed to a walk. It was the rare kind of morning where a gray fog blanketed the city, the kind you see in San Francisco cityscapes, with the Golden Gate Bridge in the foreground. I was grateful for it. I wanted to hide my face, puffy from crying. I didn't want to see anyone. After the last turtle dove into the bay, I started walking back, this time with an escape plan.

I'd find an apartment, a studio on Miami Beach, maybe one of those Art Deco fixer-uppers so rent would be cheaper. I'd move my stuff out in phases; first clothes, then larger items so he couldn't destroy anything. I'd sleep on a borrowed air mattress for the first few nights (the bed was his), make do with plastic utensils (kitchenware also his), but at least I'd never have to live with someone who thought of empathy as a quaint concept, who took real pleasure in small, private humiliations. By the time I passed the Lebanese grocery store which sold creamy labneh and fresh green olives, I was practically beaming. This was the most self-assured I'd felt in years. I was 24. If I couldn't find love in a relationship,

I could at least seek comfort in solitude.

I didn't see the man standing in front of the parked truck. I didn't know what he was doing before he lunged toward me, arm reaching out, and then his hand was on me, grabbing, pulling at my crotch. What I remember: the whites of his eyes, the bright red stripes on his shirt, how my labia bruised immediately and stayed that way for days after. In shock, I slapped his hand away. I raised my other one to punch him. I swung, and missed. I screamed fuck you, fuck you, fuck *you*. What I can't remember to this day: what his face looked like, the make or model of his truck, whether I cried immediately after or in the days following. What I would love to forget, but can't: his raspy laugh, followed by his own hand, cupped in mockery over his own crotch. He spat vehemently, never once breaking eye-contact with me. I looked around desperately for help, but the streets were deserted. When the man took another step toward me, I pivoted and sprinted away, heart pounding.

Minutes later, after I'd burst through the front door and into the bedroom to tell my boyfriend, he made me repeat the story several times, point by point, as if a court reporter was present and I was under oath.

"So he grabbed you."

"Yes."

"Just your pussy?"

"What do you mean 'just'?"

"Did he do anything else?"

"No! I told you! He grabbed me. He might still be out there; he was right by the Lebanese place!"

"Was there anyone else around?"

"No!"

"Why are you shouting?"

"Why are you so fucking calm?"

He rubbed his eyes sleepily. Then he reached into his nightstand, found a stray cigarette, lit it, and leaned back, sighing. "What do you want, huh? You want me to go out there? Hunt that guy down? Grab the machete from the backyard, hack him into pieces? He could have a gun on him, he could be a psychopath. Besides, you're okay. It's not a big deal." He looked out the window and frowned. "Honestly, Bev. You're like a kid sometimes."

The credo of my family is to move forward, no matter the cost. It's wisdom forged by multiple generations of poverty, immigration, and exile. After telling myself that my womenfolk had survived much worse, I gathered up the courage to venture back out to the street again. I needed affirmation that I was fine, that I wasn't a victim. That I was worthy of my family name.

The man was gone, so I did as my mother would: I put on a stoic face. I tried to forget how he made me feel like low-hanging fruit, fit to be plucked and discarded with impunity, a mere collection of body parts. I stopped running and stashed my sneakers under the bed. I stayed. Not for too much longer, just enough to experience all the

different shades of degradation that were possible from a man who swore he loved me. In the aftermath of my assault, I convinced myself that my only available options were to stay in an unhappy relationship, or face the uncertain, predatory streets. Why take risks? He was a sure thing. Who knew what fresh horrors lay in wait each morning, the kind that would make one grateful for a warm body, any body?

I was good at keeping secrets, even from myself.

When I was twelve, I discovered that my mother was good at keeping secrets too. We were all living in Singapore then – Mom, Dad, and me. A small family in a large brick house with four dogs and a pond full of koi fish where I'd lose myself for hours. My parents fought often back then, loud, messy fights that ricocheted through the hallways, bounced off the framed portraits of Ye Ye and Nai Nai in their Mao suits, and ended with slammed doors and threats of divorce. Hours later, after Dad had retreated to his study to read a book in stony silence, I'd sit at the kitchen table with Mom. She'd tell me about their fights, which usually revolved around money, infidelity, Mom's family, or a combination of all three.

The way Dad saw it, Mom's sister was a thorn in their marriage. He was convinced that his sister-in-law was actively driving a wedge between them, a conclusion borne from once seeing my aunt shake her head at the mention of his name, the head shake that would later cost my Mom her relationship with her sister. In Dad's mind, they were all co-conspirators, guilty by association, and so that was that. He laid down a bright line rule that no one was to visit Aunt Chen. Mom seldom challenged this edict publicly, but quietly rebelled against it by visiting her sister in secret. She'd sneak me along sometimes, and in those clandestine visits, I'd watch their relaxed banter, the easy laughs, and marvel at this new, unrecognizable side of my mother.

It was entirely by accident that I learned about the other sibling, an uncle whom I'd never met, and whom Mom never spoke of. But for the fact that he was sitting three tables away at dinner with a woman, presumably his wife, his very existence would have eluded me. There was no mistaking their relationship. He had my mother's eyes, deep-set and thickly-lashed, and when he lifted his chin to hear the waiter better, I saw Uncle Richard's square jaw duplicated in his, the tanned, olive skin of Aunt Chen.

When I looked over at Mom, she had gone pale, and was twisting her napkin into a tight vise.

"Don't look at Chou Jiu Jiu," she said, using the Chinese words for "Bad Uncle."

I was bewildered. "Why not? Are you going say hi?"

"No. Don't look."

"Why?"

"Don't ask why. Finish your food and we'll go."

She kept her head down for the rest of the meal, and I knew enough not to keep prodding. When we paid the

check and got up to leave, Mom made swiftly for the exit. I turned to see if he'd noticed us. He was still bent over his plate, animated with conversation, carving his steak as if in deep deliberation.

On the drive home, she turned the radio off and exhaled slowly.

"That man in there was your uncle," she said.

"I know, Ma. You told me in the restaurant."

"He's not a good man. That's the reason why you don't see him much. He's... he's very sick in the head."

I nodded wordlessly, then turned up the A/C. She turned it back down. It was muggy and stifling hot in the car, but there were goosebumps prickling her arms. When she spoke again, her voice was low and shaky.

"When I was young," she began, "I got home from ballet practice one day. I went into my room to change out of my clothes. Then I saw him out from of the corner of my eye. He was hiding and looking at me change."

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Up until that moment, my mother had assiduously avoided any topic involving sex. We never talked about boys, and when we watched TV, she'd fast-forward through the love scenes. Sex was something fraught and sinful. I didn't know what else was coming, so I stayed silent, dug my fingernails into my arms, wanting to know more, wanting her to stop talking, wanting to live in a parallel universe where that uncle never existed.

She took a deep breath. "He also touched me. Down there." She gestured between her legs. I couldn't look her in the eye – exactly what does one do when her mother unfurls a new and terrible truth? – so I stared out the window instead.

"Did you tell Grandmother and Grandfather?" I asked. She nodded.

"What did they do?"

It took some time before I realized that she was crying, quiet sniffles at first, then an ugly, strangled sound that terrified me. I'd seen my mother cry before, but never like this. This was a different pain that came from deep within, where it festered and ate away at her, and was now, finally

bubbling up from under years of fear and shame and silence.

"Ma. What did they do?" I wanted to hear her say that Grandfather caned him until he bled from his welts, that Grandmother refused to speak to him, that they banished him from their house to keep Mom safe. I needed to know that someone protected her. This would be the only way the story would make sense. I wasn't prepared for the truth: that when she told them, they didn't believe her. That they accused her of outright lying. And that to her knowledge, they never mentioned a word of this to her brother, choosing instead turn a blind eye while the abuse continued, unabated, for several years.

"You must never let anybody touch you," she said suddenly. "If anyone touches you, you have to come to me, okay? You have to come straight to me."

I promised her I would. I'd heard several different iterations of this while growing up, and now it pained me to understand its genesis: if no one was going to protect her, she could at least try to protect her own daughter. (Ten years later, I didn't tell her about my assault. Daughters, too, try to protect mothers.) In that vulnerable moment, she seemed at once young and impossibly old; it was hard to know who was doing the talking. The woman with kind eyes who insisted on good posture and straight A's, who snuck an occasional cigarette and cracked dirty jokes with Aunt Chen, or the scared, small child with an invisible wound who grew up in a world where boys did bad things with no consequences.

"Ma?"

"Yes?"

"What about Daddy?"

"What about him?"

"Does he know?"

"Yes," she said, after a beat. "But he doesn't like talking about it."

When we turned onto Chancery Lane and began the slow, winding path to our house, I told Mom that I was sorry. Sorry couldn't begin to encompass everything I was feeling at that moment, that I longed to take her pain away, that this was the most honest conversation we'd ever had, that I was deeply touched to have her entrust me with her secret. At the same time, a new weight had been passed on to me, and I found myself struggling beneath its heft. We walked through the front door. I stayed close to her for comfort. Dad looked up from his papers.

"Where'd you go for dinner?" he asked.

"Nearby," she said.

I looked over at Mom. Her face was already dry and impassive, like nothing had happened.

The thing my Mom loved telling me about her own mother was that she dreamed of becoming a surgeon. If WWII hadn't derailed her education, 外婆 would have attended a prestigious university and risen through the ranks of the medical profession; she was that smart. This

was how the portrait of my grandmother slowly came into focus, a woman defined less by who she was, but the person she desperately wanted to be. A portrait in negative. Blank canvas where there should have been brushstrokes.

The things I remember about her are simpler: how she wore her long hair scraped back and coiled into a tight bun, the plump contours of her cheeks, her colorful sarong kebayas. Her house on Berrima Road with the brilliant pink bougainvilleas, her orange rattan furniture, the cold stone floors that felt good on my bare feet. Her laugh. How'd she'd shampoo my hair while singing Malay lullabies, then pluck me from the bathtub, wrinkled and sudsy. She was besotted with me, her first grandchild, and I with her. She died when I was three, which makes these memories even more remarkable. I have no explanation for them, other than something a psychologist friend once said, that loving someone deeply makes a permanent imprint. I guard these details with the possessiveness of a homesteader. I have no other choice. My grandfather burned most of her photographs after she died.

It took WWII to put her in the path of a man like him. For months, 外婆 waited anxiously for news that the Japanese threat in the Malayan peninsula had been neutralized. That day never came. Mere days after the Japanese stormed Singapore's shores, Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival signed the papers that would surrender the country, her people, and my grandmother to Japan's brutal regime. 外婆, a seventeen year old orphan, understood what was at stake. She sheared her hair off, disguised herself in men's clothes, and went into hiding. She'd heard the countless stories of women and children meeting their gruesome deaths at a bayonet's end, and so, with what would be her life's eternal regret, walked out of the classroom forever. In the dark days of the occupation, an errant whisper, a stray gesture, the wrong look, these were enough to provoke unimaginable brutality from the Japanese soldiers. A female doctor was not only a pipe dream; it was tantamount to suicide.

Her aunt was adamant that for safety, a woman needed to find a good man, marry him, and start a family immediately. The matchmaker her aunt hired found a suitor almost twenty years my grandmother's senior, who cursed flamboyantly in Hokkien and had a cough like a rusty car engine. But times were hard, and with food rations and bombs raining down weekly, what was there to lose?

A lot, as it turns out. 外婆 found out soon after their wedding that my grandfather was a secret bigamist. He'd lived in Xiamen, China before emigrating to Singapore, and had a wife and daughter whom he'd left behind. Still, this betrayal paled in comparison to the bigger lie – that she'd be safer at home with him than out on the streets.

He beat her. He beat her regularly, with impunity, and for the slightest infractions. He beat her after they had their first child, beat her through the births of all four children, beat her when they were poor and living in a tiny flat above his

tire shop, beat her when they were richer, and had moved to a bungalow house in the hills. By the time my mother was old enough, she understood that sunglasses were meant to hide bruises, and that when terrifying noises came through the walls, it was a signal for everyone to scatter and hide. Occasionally, my grandfather would emerge from the room with blood-streaked welts on his face.

"Your grandmother had these long nails," Mom said, "sometimes, she'd get sick of all the beatings and scratch him."

(She's told me this story several times, and every time she gets to the part about the nails, she smiles. I do as well. We find comfort by imagining each welt as a rebellion, an uprising.)

My mother doesn't talk about that house, where muffled slaps and punches were the soundtrack of her childhood, where every week, the center of her tiny universe imploded with rage and sorrow. She's never once spoken about how the ongoing brutality affected her relationship with her father, with men, but she doesn't need to. I'm her daughter. I know just how much her childhood corroded her, how it taught her to accept indifference and cruelty as she got older. I also know that 外婆 was the love of her life, and that when she began wasting away from cervical cancer, something cracked in my mother, a faultline, a tectonic shift. Earth-shattering and permanent.

When it became clear that 外婆's cancer was terminal and all treatment options had been exhausted, the oncologist sent her home to be among family. The siblings took turns with feeding, washing, and doling out pain medication. My grandfather never lifted a finger. It happened to be my Mom's turn on the day that my grandmother died. She decided to take a shower, and in doing so, missed the exact moment of passing. Mom emerged to find me clambering over her lifeless body, shaking her repeatedly, wanting her to get up and play with me. She tells this story with the irredeemable guilt of someone who couldn't make it to the dock on time to wave goodbye as the ship pulled away. Some days, I think this a tragedy, and my heart aches for both women. Other times, I'm filled with something approaching optimism. Maybe it wasn't so bad. Maybe, as my grandmother faded in and out of consciousness, she was able to catch glimpses of her granddaughter, no longer a newborn; now three, active and strong-willed. Maybe her last moments were filled with hope for a life with smoother edges, softer voices, and kinder men who would use their hands to heal, not break.

Some nights, she comes to me in my dreams, and we talk. 外婆 wants to know about how life is, how the writing is going, whether my husband and I have adjusted to life in our new city, Austin. "It's whacky, but good-whacky," I tell her. I try to fill in as many details as possible, like my favorite taco joint with the owner's dachshund curled up on the patio deck, or how winter gives way to spring so quickly

that fields of bluebonnets spring up overnight. I tell her about my coworker who sings in a Willie Nelson cover band, how he taught all five of his grandchildren to harmonize to “Half a Man.” I share with her that I struggle with my writing, and how the words don’t come on some days, but I’m digging in and ploughing through it.

“Is your husband well?” she asks, and I’m happy to say that he is. Against all odds, in a remarkable stroke of luck, I found a kind man with the gentlest of souls. Ten years in, we still couldn’t imagine waking up next to anyone else. “And your morning runs?”

I don’t answer that.

“You shouldn’t give up,” she insists, “you’re happiest when you write, but also when you run.”

She’s right, but I tell her that I can’t. I tell her that I’m afraid of the long shadows, of hearing footsteps behind me, of the feeling that someone’s watching. That the thought of running, which used to be my meditation, now makes me clench my fists involuntarily. That the man who assaulted me still walks free, as have countless other men who have done worse and risen to power, untouched by justice.

She pulls me close. “You’re alive,” she says, “you can still make your world as big as you want. Don’t let them stop you.”

In the classical Chinese saga, *Journey to the West*, the Monkey King causes havoc by stealing the Forbidden Peaches of Immortality, disrespecting the Jade Emperor’s commands, and brawling with heavenly deities. Exasperated, the Jade Emperor appeals to Buddha, who makes a crafty bet with the Monkey King: if he can escape from the Buddha’s palm, he will have earned his freedom. The Monkey King smugly accepts, and immediately flies as far he can, past mountain ranges and shimmering oceans, until he reaches five giant pillars and bare, open sky. Upon his return, the Monkey King proudly informs Buddha that not only has he won the bet; he has accomplished the impossible by journeying to the ends of the earth. Buddha laughs at his arrogance. He opens his giant hand, and the Monkey King is stunned. He realizes that what he mistook for pillars were actually Buddha’s fingers. All this time, the Buddha held him in his infinite grasp.

Me, my mother, and my grandmother: I can’t help but think that we’re trapped in a similar landscape. We’ve traveled thousands of miles from our ancestral home, placed entire continents between ourselves and our pain. But trauma is too expansive, worse yet, insidious; shifting suddenly from benign to sinister, from bucolic to swirling blackness. It wasn’t until I recently startled at a man saying “hello” on the street that I understood trauma’s true power, the ability to transcend borders, time zones, generations. This self-contained ecosystem was the desert that starved my grandmother; the

voracious jungle choking my mother with its thick vines. The women in my family, practical as always, instinctively refused to dwell on the pain, preferring instead to bury it deep among the bones and dirt. But you can’t outrun trauma. We’ve roamed its killing fields from morning until night, hiked every nook and cranny of that blighted land. We’ve tried tunneling under, flying across. We’ve tried scaling its walls, to no avail. Trauma is our country, its borders, nonexistent.

Is it possible, then, for one’s world to metastasize and expand in untold horrific ways, while also collapsing inward? I suspect so. My mother and grandmother lived their lives hemmed in by fear; its boundaries reinforced by the cruelty of men. They learned to make themselves as small as possible, to render themselves invisible so that one more day might pass without heart-stopping violence. What was it like to pray for one’s own erasure as a means of survival? How could their lives have been different, given an alternate set of circumstances – my grandmother, a doctor; my mother, protected? How constricted had my own world become, its circumference measured by mere footsteps, real or imagined? In my dreams, I look to 外婆 for answers, but she has none. The past is past, the past is still with me. Either way, when I wake up in the morning, she is gone, and I am still here.

The streets in my new neighborhood are lovely and paved with ancient live oaks. In the mornings, sparrows and grackles flutter and trill, fat yellow squirrels chase each other across fences and power lines. Where the roads converge and dip low into the valley, cedar elms sway and creeks swell with spring rains, kingfishers and minnows dart playfully among smooth river rocks. This daily unfolding is at once mundane and remarkable; modest, yet fearsome in its beauty. As the sun rises through my bedroom window, something catches in my throat. I remember what it feels like to share in this daily awakening with the outside, to silently honor the trees who have rooted in this land for hundreds of years. I remember the initial struggle uphill, the leaves and gravel crunching underfoot, the euphoria of flying, of becoming pure kinetic energy. I am twenty four again, staring breathlessly at the turtles, mapping out my place in the world. I am five, with the sun in my face, feet in cool water as the koi fish nibble at my toes. Today, I am thirty-nine, and I’m not thinking of the stories inside me. I long to be outside, where there’s a pulse, a quickening, possibilities. I pull my sneakers out from under the bed, lace them on tight. I take a deep breath, smooth my hair back into a tight ponytail. I think of my *grandmother*.

I open the door. I run.