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A Series of Rooms

I took someone to court once. I won. Maybe it was due to the “power suit” I was wearing. I would like to think that it made a difference. It was my mom’s. I did not cry when the judge proclaimed that he was guilty. I felt the most culpable for smiling in a room that almost smelt like despondency. I felt like I was in a movie, completely dissociated from my physical body, observing the room as if from a third person point of view. Paper cup tainted water and hissing air conditioner. It was all too real for me. I have been known to make light of serious situations; for example, I laughed when his lawyer walked into the courtroom, wearing the customary gown paired with Adidas sneakers. I was not surprised that the only person who would defend him would be so unprofessional.

Our lawyers agreed on 6 months of probation. As the gavel was about to be raised, someone rushed into the room with a file in their hands and passed it to the judge; it was my victim's impact statement. I had to write it a few months before, discussing the psychological and physical damage that arose from this whole situation. On the last page, there was a section stating that you could optionally write a poem or a song to best describe your feelings. I decided against singing “I Am A Victim” in D minor. I wrote a poem. The judge read the poem and then made him read it to his parents. I heard his mom whisper harshly, “you f***** idiot”. I appreciated that. His probation was tripled because I wrote sentences that rhymed. I took it as a boost to my ego that I had written such a *nice* poem. The victory was insignificant; the whole situation was only the 5th worst thing that happened to me.

I have been in a lot of rooms, some willingly, others not. I was in the courtroom when I was 15 years old. It was the first good room that came out of any of the unwilling ones, but it felt like a waste. It was two years after the number one bad thing that has happened to me.

Why do I rank these horrible events? I unconsciously began doing so after there became enough to count. I only allow myself to acknowledge the top 3; it's more manageable that way. I started seeing a trauma therapist five years after it happened. She told me that my capacity for trauma was too big. She told me that I am able to tolerate too much. It was very hard for something to penetrate the threshold of what I could handle. That was until July 17th of 2022.

I received the phone call at 11:22pm. Barely awake, I grabbed the phone with the familiar default ringtone from under my pillow and answered. "Hey, how are you?". He called me from his younger brother's phone: my highschool ex-boyfriend. I have since changed my ringtone and cringe at the sound of it emanating from other's pockets. I hung up after those four simple words and robotically turned on every light. It was the darkest light-filled enclosure. I sat on my bed paralyzed. The concept of time dissipated behind my glossy eyes, like a swimming pool filled with ghostly carcasses of what I had tried so hard to bury beneath accomplishments. My mom says that I have not been the same since that phone call. The next day she called a lawyer.

I went through a breakup in my second year of college. Well, it was multiple breakups with the same person. I found out that he cheated on me on the same day that the restraining order was sent out to the man that created an unwilling room. It was a blessing in disguise. I felt slightly relieved that my attention would be diverted briefly. Both situations hurt less due to the

presence of the other. He made me cry. I sat in my bed with teenage girl tears streaming down my rarely un-makeuped cheeks. I sat in the homely darkness of glimmering fairy lights, analyzing my brittle bitten fingernails with traces of Essie's Bubble Bath Pink. A smile graced my dampened face; I was finally able to feel something. I was crying over a boy instead of a pedophile. The canyoning goosebumps were those of sadness rather than fear. Isn't that lovely? His friends congratulated me on how *well* I was handling the breakup. They later labeled me crazy for remaining upset about it. If only they knew. I was not able to fully accept the break up because I was focused on finding out if a child predator accepted what he did to me. Maybe that's why I got back together with my ex.

Since escaping that unwilling room, the trauma never let me go. Walking anywhere is terrifying. I always think I recognize people, and it is even more terrifying when I am not sure if I do. I tried to change my appearance. I wanted to camouflage myself with my surroundings and to obscure the burden of wearing the appearance of a broken thirteen-year-old girl. I vowed that my favourite outfit, the one that was astonishingly not torn apart, would never see the light of day again. I vowed that neither would my blonde hair.

PTSD and the burden of time go hand in hand. You are constantly trying to escape the past while simultaneously dodging the present and dreading the future. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is a psychological disorder that can develop in people who have experienced traumatic events. I have been diagnosed with CPTSD. The C stands for complex. Lovely. I have been dyeing my hair a different colour every couple of months for a few years now. The first time I dyed my hair was shortly after I escaped that unwilling room. It was done by my best friend at

the time, who later tried to seduce my boyfriend at the time, and three other guys, while we were all drunk in a bathtub at her house. I had been blonde my whole life. We used a \$13 L'Oréal box dye in the shade "Deep Mahogany Brown". I looked at myself in the mirror after rinsing the dye out, which looked like a mishap at Charlie's Chocolate Factory, and did not recognize myself.

Now, I don't know if that was because of the Fireball mixed with Coca-Cola and mood stabilizers or the genuine shock of the big change, but for the first time since the 8th grade, I didn't look in the mirror and see the broken girl whose appearance I had grown far too familiar with.

That feeling of newness was spellbinding. It was an addiction. My distinguishable long blonde hair that I loved had become a burden. For 4 years, as soon as I would become acquainted with the woman in the mirror, or as soon as I would hear my name called in the street, I would get rid of her. Part of it was hiding from the world and part of it was hiding from myself. It was a perpetual cycle of fulfilling that need for change and then returning to the lack of progress and same-ness of it all. I think that it would be categorized as chronic shock. The disorder is described by psychologists as being "the result of an experience of real or threatened force accompanied by an internalization of worthlessness and is experienced by the victim as feelings of intense shame or even as a distortion of reality" (Palmer 1991).

But I still inhabited a vessel that has been the star of 6 formal police investigations, whether my hair was "Atomic Turquoise" or "Dublin Copper".

Neitzsche discusses a notion called the “eternal recurrence”. It emphasizes the idea that time is a flat circle and history and events just repeat on an infinite loop. That whole idea seems terrifying in theory, but I think that that’s just exactly what Post Traumatic Stress Disorder encapsulates. You are stuck in a fathomless cycle of the same event(s) happening over and over, even if they’re not physically happening at that moment. There’s the flashbacks and there’s the nightmares that are all too interchangeable. But there is also the presence of the traumatic situation in every regular one.

There are fragments of the past in every present interaction, and in every future aspiration. Not only is all of existence an eternal loop, there are also cycles within the repeating instances of being. It is the annular inception. Jeffrey Epstein’s victims describe the notion of time in the context of what happened to them as being a time warp. “It’s a past, present, and future topic” (Giuffre 1). It is inescapable.

I guess that’s why I always changed my hair colour.

The pain started shortly after the event. I assumed I was just in shock or stressed, until it never stopped. I was 17 years old when I was diagnosed. I had suffered in silence until then.

My mom and I sat in a cold doctor’s office awaiting an answer that I had so desperately been searching for to validate my pain.

“You have endometriosis”, the doctor announced to me.

“What do we do about it?” my mom asked.

“Painkillers, birth control, and prayer”.

Prayer was beyond saving me. The silence was unbearable. I think we were both trying to make sense of what we had just heard. My dry mouth tried to produce a response, but all of my questions had already been answered. The doctor left the bland room with the flickering pale blue ceiling light panels. I knew that I had to tell my mother what happened to me. She held my hand, after asking me, and told me that she already knew. Tears welled up in the shimmery corners of her inner eyes and a small smile graced her face.

“Thank you for telling me”.

That moment, that diagnosis, solidified my eternal recurrence. My 13 year old body could not handle what happened to me, and the physical scars would be there in every interaction and every future moment for the rest of my life. I would not be able to get rid of it, no matter how much I remade and concealed myself.

Life is just a series of rooms, but a part of me would always remain in that unwilling one.

So I dyed my hair back blonde that same week. I reached for my favourite skirt that I had tucked away in the back of my closet for years. My friends have made comments to me about how frequently I wear that skirt since I started college. I loved that skirt, it was my favourite, it still is.

I started a course of ketamine treatment in March of 2023. The doctor said I was the youngest patient and first non-veteran he had had the pleasure of meeting with for the purpose of mending trauma. The coolness of what I had previously known as an illicit party drug coursing through my veins was terrifying. It was the first time I had been given a substance in that means since. At least I signed off on this one.

“How long until I start to feel it?” I asked.

“Just close your eyes and enjoy it”, The nurse replied.

As my pre-made playlist of comforting Taylor Swift songs orchestrated in my ears, I watched as my mother’s eyes multiplied.

I started crying, and not simply due to the light sensitivity inhibited by the drug. A rarity for me. My mother grabbed my hand to comfort me and then immediately released it and apologized. She knows not to touch me without asking my permission. She is the only one who has ever respected that boundary. The tears were not bitter.

“It’s the first time my brain has ever been silent”.

There I sit, needle in arm, blonde hair tied back in a pink silk scrunchy, with my favourite checkered red-blue-black-green-yellow skirt neatly folded in my school bag. Not much has changed after all. Besides everything, that is. I have not yet escaped the eternal loop, but I am healing it.

I was in an unwilling room, needle in arm, waiting to die. Now I am in a willing room, needle in arm, learning how to live again.

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