

Chains Don't Rattle Themselves

*(an excerpt from a memoir in progress by Dathonie Pinto,
written with Herstory Writers Workshop in Westbury)*

I settle on to the wooden bench from the kitchen table that's wedged into the front door entry to keep it closed. My daughter, careless and free, a big floppy hat on her head, she makes everything simple and good. I thought about being Amy, and for a split second I wished again I was 4 or 8. But that was just a split second and a silly thought. She was calling me and I did not answer her. Numb, feeling nothing. I could hear her pretty little feet upstairs in her room. I could hear her dragging something about, probably her toys. Stair to stair, I could hear her coming toward me.

"Mommy your clowns are broken, aren't you mad?" she asked. "Did Daddy break your stuff again, Mommy? Daddy's packing, he's sad and crying. Mommy, let's play tea party..."

As she set the tea cups around my head, I closed my eyes for a second just wanting to relax, but as I inhaled the tranquility of her blissful innocence I could feel the tickle of tiny nose hairs crowding together with their own intentions. And then, I fell soundly asleep.

Chaos. Chaos and yelling. Yelling and chaos. One by one, he threw the clowns against the wall crushing their skulls. A big red nose rolled toward my toe and I looked down and picked it up. I could put the pieces back together, if I could find them...

But I do not move. I am quiet. He has everyone's attention now. The children are watching. They stopped playing and from everywhere they came to see their dad's irrational fit of rage.

"Are you going to answer me now?" he says, "or should I break them all?" His nose flared, his cheeks fire red, his hair standing straight on his head. He looks like the devil. Stop!

"Daddy! Don't break Mommy's clown!" David yelled.

"You are a coward," my oldest son Prince said, the skinniest, the oldest and the biggest mouth, he lunged toward him but Angelo stepped between them.

“Didn’t you hear Mommy? She said go upstairs.”

Face to face, their shoulders touching, their breath hitting space, making uneasy noises against the silence. No one is moving. Time’s standing still. Angelo hit his shoulder against his brother’s with a gentle harshness. I could see the shadow of his lashes larger than life, his hair in an uncombed pony tail—people often mistook him for a girl.

So, he put the biggest clown down, the one with the colorful umbrella and balloons, and faces me: “Do you want to tell me who touched my keys? One of those kids touched them, and I am going to tear up this house until I find them or one of you find them... So, you are just going to stand there and say nothing?!”

“So sick of this routine,” I said, “I asked you to leave, I don’t want you here.” I tried to be quiet.

I could not be still like my grandmother told me. I did not want to be quiet. She said, “One link of chain cannot rattle by itself.” And, she was right—I was ready to rattle with him.

As I turned to face him, he reached down to the table and grabbed the plastic pitcher of fruit punch, throwing it up into my nostrils, choking me, and in my eyes, blinding me. I slipped in the liquid, lunging toward him, and then he threw him. He was leaning on his half-open umbrella, harmless and happy, my round-bellied clown with a big bouquet of balloons in one hand, wearing blue and white polka dotted pants, tattered yellow suspenders, and a sad painted face. He watched me from the oversized mantle for years. Sometimes I swear he winked at me as I passed by. I could not save a clown. I loved clowns and wanted to be one—I guess, I already was.

He hurled him at the window, shattering the glass. I covered my face as particles of broken glass went everywhere. I grabbed his arm and the links of chain rattled and rattled and rattled as they so often did in this life that was my current living hell.

At night, I slept by putting the two tall stools together in the middle of the living room in fear the mice would get on me. If they crawled on me I was certain I would die. Prince, his skinny self, with no fear of anything, filled me in about mice: “Mommy, mice can climb. They can climb

stools and even walls, I've seen them climb on curtains and jump. What makes you think our mice don't climb?"

Angelo and Prince looked at each other and burst into hysterical laughter. I laughed, too, feeling slightly better for the moment, using laughter as a cure for my current situation.

Everyone was asleep, I thought, but I could hear voices. At first, I listened, uncertain if the chatter was chatter or something else. I kicked off my shoes and slid my hand between the doors to move the bench that was my bed before all the mice stuff started to happen, and I struggled to push the bench which was my lock on the door; it seemed like an eternity trying to fit my wrist between the space, it would not budge.

Time stopped. It stopped for me, and life took such a nasty turn playing tricks on me.

They were in the hallway upstairs. I ran and I could see a different view, and was not surprised to see Angelo in a choke hold. His dad pinned him against the wall and I started to swing and curse and try to separate them somehow, but this was beyond my control, I could not pull them apart, and then Prince woke up.

"Get off him! Get off him! Get off him!" Prince yelled, "Mommy get out of the way," he looked at me and said, "Mommy, I'm sick of this!"

As he walked away, I called him back. I struggled and it got worse. Can anything be worse than this? I don't know...

Prince came back with a knife and everyone stopped. Like "Simon says...", suspended in mid-air, my mouth still open, my fist clenched, my brows wrinkled in anguish. Slow motion, I saw it all in slow motion and although my recollection is filthy and flawed, his dad lunged toward him and there was blood and somehow I got the knife and I told my boys, "Leave! And leave fast! Just go to Queens, to your grandmother's house... Go! For the love of God, run!"

Angelo hung his head low and walked away into the night.

Prince, motionless, would not leave. I pushed him toward the open door. My mouth still open, “Run!” I said, “Just run!”

Two police officers, hands on their guns, said “Stop!” So, Prince stopped and put his hands in the air. Those flashing lights came for him as his dad had promised moments before, assuring us that the police would believe his story. He reminded him, as he pointed to his skin, that he was white, and my son, our son, was black, and they’d believe him because of that. And that he would be arrested tonight and that he would teach us all a lesson by telling his story.

I don’t know how my mother got there, or who called her; perhaps, I did. She stood in front of me with her white uniform on, shaking her head. Now three cop cars, six officers, I think. We were the typical spectacle. Ashamed, I looked away. My son’s friends gathered, but could not come near him. A fat officer with the belly of a six-month pregnant woman guarded me and would not listen, telling me to shut up and just be quiet or, he assured me, I would be arrested next. In a stoic calm fashion, he said leaning into me, “Make this easy or make this hard, don’t matter to me. It’s just more overtime.”

“Please, be quiet,” my mother said, “...please, you are making this worse.”

Was she insane? Could anything be worse than this?

“Fuck you!” I said to the police, and for a moment our eyes locked and David’s whimper distracted his disdain for me. So, he swung his belly into me and my body fell on to the broken brick staircase.

They cuffed Prince outside, hands behind his back.

“Mommy...” David sobbed, “...is Prince going to jail? Oh, no! Please! Please! Why are you letting them take him?! Oh, my God, Mommy...”

David sobbed and sobbed and sobbed so loudly I no longer heard him through my rage. I did something to the cop that I do not remember. Clenching my eyes closed, feeling like all of the life had left my body dizzy, nauseated, I wanted to vomit and regurgitate this day. *Jesus, Mary*

and Joseph save me from me. Dear Lord, make this the worst dream I've ever had. Wake me from my slumber, pretty please. I believe in miracles.

The haunting horror of my child cuffed, his head low, his forehead resting on the police car door. I called out to him, but he did not answer me or look my way. Humiliated. People watching. He wanted the cops to take him away.

“Put me in the car,” he mumbled, broken into pieces.

It seems like their dad said: I am a bad luck charm. If there was a picture of what death looked like, it was Prince's face with an expression of no expression, glassy eyes staring at his feet refusing to even look up. And later that night, this little boy would be shackled to men.

My grandmother, my biggest fan, said, “A pregnant woman has one foot in the grave and one on land.” She sat me down and told me to grow up, to be serious, and to stop eating tuna out of cans. She told me to take this serious and to stop laughing at her words, but as she stared into my eyes, her lips curled up and she started laughing, too. She may have been the most brilliant woman I have ever known. I remember reading that women in labor leave their bodies, travel to the stars to collect the souls of their babies and return to this world together. And when I returned from the stars, I had a son. We nicknamed him Prince: Rafael Mauricio Pinto, my first-born son.

In the beginning, God created Heaven and Earth, and, indeed, so did I today.

From what I can recollect, his head was so big—the biggest part of his body—which is what caused them to cut me to help things out. Determined to have him as naturally as my body would allow, 12 hours in, I pushed one final time, and screamed him to life.

And then, he finally cried, which seemed like an eternity of time, but when he did, it was as if Mary put her palm lovingly on my forehead and whispered to me something sweet, and the weight of her hand pushed me to my pillow. Then, all of me surrendered to the moment of death and life as life—just as my grandmother explained it—happened to me, just like she told it. My eyes closed themselves as I struggled to be a part of this moment. The doctor whispered, “Wonderful job,” and I fell soundly asleep.

And I will tell you this, I never met love face-to-face before this, not ever, until that day, November 29, 1981. From the stars, the Angels descended from this place we call heaven, to be by my side delivering to this world a healthy baby boy, so tiny you could see through his fingers, breath taking—in the beginning almost incubator-worthy, but we were lucky and I got to hold him in my arms for hours, and I checked and counted his toes and fingers.

I dressed him and undressed, and wrapped him and unwrapped him. I put him on the middle of the pillow and watched the rhythm of his chest rise and fall, and when his next breath took unusually long I pressed the panic button for the nurse, but this little guy was just trying to yawn. His eyes sealed tightly, he opened them for a second—I think I glimpsed my soul.

As my grandmother said, “One link of chain cannot rattle by itself,” and, it didn’t. I could hear them coming, the prisoners escorted out like animals. Their chains rattled as the men’s feet dragged about. They made noises that would haunt my slumber for the rest of my life—they still wake me.

My son led the pack, the smallest and youngest. Sized like classroom order, dressed in orange, but cuffed and shackled. He was shackled. His feet moved slowly. This boy was shackled. He was shackled to grown men, with officers poised with their hands on their guns, ready for any one of them to make a wrong move, confident that these prisoners deserved this serving of shame and humiliation.

His head low, as it had been the night before, his chin almost touching his neck, not looking up. I could not see his face still, and I needed to. As he sat with his back facing us, I think, I could not see him at all and was not sure he saw us either. My concern was that he thought he was alone, but he was not.

He, who was once in the palms of my hands, was now state property.