

Rally Cry

By: Adrienne LaValley

I immediately shied away from the reporter, not wanting to pick at a scab I wasn't sure had even healed yet. If it ever could. Especially since only a few months prior, I'd taken a knife and pried open that wound I'd so carefully sealed up with cement some years ago. I thought cement was permanent, but apparently when other people start chipping away at theirs, telling the world what happened... it might as well be paper mâché. Things started bumping in the night under the cement. Things start chanting from the darkness that they were tired of being ignored. Finally. Nothing likes being ignored.

I was perfectly fine in early October. I was licking the wounds of my dad dying, going through his writings and piecing together projects I thought could help other people deal with their depression, so they wouldn't suffer the way he did. So it wasn't all for nothing. I was healing. Ever so slowly. Ever so carefully. I still cringed every time someone talked about their father. Oh you have a dad? Oh, that's nice. I still stared at his picture in my own little world, racing through the subway tunnels waiting to be spit out into the cattle herd roaming the flat iron. But I was ok.

Breathing and all. Then one fall morning I woke up to read that several women had accused Harvey Weinstein of assaulting them, manipulating them and threatening to destroy their careers if they told anyone. Gentlemanly stuff. I was perfectly fine. And then I wasn't. I could see the words in the article right in front of me, but I was having an out of body experience. Like I was reading my own life. A nightmare case of déjà vu.

I carefully folded the paper and set it on the floor. I didn't need to read any more. I knew exactly what happened in those hotel rooms, those... auditions. I knew in every cell of my body. I knew precisely what he said and how he said it and how their brains betrayed them while their guts screamed desperately to make it stop. And suddenly, as if by magic the air escaped the room, the lights went dim and I was all alone in my dark place again. Standing in front of James Toback at the Wales Hotel. Standing in the most degrading moment of my life. I was right back there, isolated in that dark room while guests milled around the hotel, unaware of the crazy man on the third floor. Unaware there was a twenty three year old girl on the other side of the wall, screaming in her head for someone, anyone to knock on the door. Unaware that while they sipped their expensive wine an award winning director was upstairs boring a hole into another human being. Like he'd devour her if given the chance and kill her if she told anyone.

And I was totally fucked up again. Just like that. Just as easy as a light flicking off, my brain whisked me away to the place I swore I'd never return to. The place I worked so diligently to forget. Stupid brain. What's it good for anyway if it can't even keep painful secrets buried? I gracefully made my way onto the floor where it felt safe and I heard a voice. "Rage, sweet heart. I'm here for unrequited rage." Oh. Ok.

Then I called my best friend from the floor and asked how I should "Do tomorrow." "Uh. You should see if anyone else is talking about him. Right now. I'll stay on the line." Ok. I could hear my heartbeat in my ears as I strapped on my headlamp and inched into the rabbit hole. It didn't take any time at all though. There she was. She'd posted her story not an hour before that. And when I read her account, I knew he had to be stopped. Because I knew in my bones there were more. A lot more. It was the pattern of a predator. So I reached out to her. "Hi, my name is Adrienne. About 10 years ago I met James Toback. In the same hotel. At the same restaurant. He said the exact same things to me. He did the exact same things to me. Can we talk?"

Eight minutes later, she reached back. And in that exact moment, reading her response, life as I knew it ended. Onto the next. "There are six of us right now. With identical stories. We think there are a lot more. He has to go down, Adrienne. This has to stop". Five days later there were thirty eight of us.

Did my family know before that? Nope. I called them crying from my bedroom floor to explain what may or may not happen Sunday morning in the news and why I hadn't told them before. I told them everything. Did my dad ever know? No. The look of utter heartbreak on his face still replays in my mind. Even though it never happened. Did I have to sit my husband down and explain what actually happened when I met James Toback? I did. He threw a chair across the room and threatened to drive up and down Manhattan with a baseball bat until he found him. And I fantasized he would. Sweet, sweet revenge. But 6am came on Sunday October 22nd and I survived. I got on the motorcycle, relinquished my cell phone to my husband's pocket for my sanity's safe keeping and spent the day upstate with the wind in my hair and the birds in my ear. By 6pm my name was in bold print in every major news circuit in the country. Spelling out in humiliating detail exactly what happened to me. And now I couldn't look back if I wanted to.

I got endless thank you letters. Some from complete strangers. Passionate messages from men and women telling me they never had the courage to come forward or deal with what happened to them until we did. They told me how brave I was. They told me we did the right thing. They told me I defined courage. And they told me what a slut I

was. They told me how I deserved it. They even insisted that I knew what I was getting myself into by being in the entertainment business. That I shouldn't have been surprised by what happened. Whole social media walls dedicated to affirming the fact that all thirty eight of us got what we deserved. That we were in it for the money. That we were vultures. Even though not a single one of us sued him. Then the floodgates opened and the number grew to nearly four hundred women. Toback himself called us all pathetic lying "C words, rhymes with punts". All four hundred of us. That's a lot of lying C words, rhymes with punts. Have I ever felt more ashamed? Absolutely not. Have I ever felt prouder? Absolutely not.

So back to the question the reporter asked and I never wanted to answer. How is life after the MeToo movement? Pretty much the same. Except now instead of pretending my encounter with a predator didn't shape who I became in my thirties, I constantly think about who I'd be if we never met. Who I'd be today if I saw him for the lunatic he was on 86th street that night. How much more successful I'd be if I'd just spoken up right then. How much prouder I'd be if I knew I helped stop a monster in his tracks. How much better I could sleep at night knowing I'd done something when it mattered. I'm pretty much the same. Except now when I stand on a street corner in Manhattan I fantasize about how good it would feel to assault his face. And smile in my mug shot. I didn't wear braces for nothing. I'm pretty much the same. Except now when I stand behind a man in a black button down and black jeans, with a black fedora something inside of me I never knew even existed fantasizes about pushing him into traffic. Yikes. I'm pretty much the same, you could say. Except that I don't trust anyone of authority to do anything about a rich white guy manipulating four hundred women. Not anything that matters. Not really.

Because he's still out there. Sure he's a pariah in the film world, but he's still out there. He still owns expensive apartments and expensive cars and I still struggle to pay my rent. Four hundred women coming forward and telling their humiliating accounts wasn't enough to do anything. Four hundred women telling the world what happened to them behind closed doors wasn't enough for a single charge to be drawn. Not one. Four hundred women told special victim units in New York and Los Angeles that a predator lured them in, fucked with their heads, stole anything innocent they had left and moved on with his life. Laughing maniacally down Madison Avenue. Four hundred women told the most humiliating thing that ever happened to them and not a single thing will be done about it. One journalist even said: "What else do you want? He'll never work in film again. Isn't that enough?"

Is it? Is it enough that he won't make another sub par film but I walk around with enough rage to think about pushing someone into traffic? I'm a vegetarian who hugs strangers. On the street. I walk around wondering who I'd be today if I'd just been brave enough to say something then, while he walks around smirking about getting away with fucking up hundreds of women. Forever changing how they feel about themselves, how they handle men, how they handle stress, what they're willing to say yes to. What they're willing to say no to. Out of fear. And rage. And shame.

A few of these four hundred women were allegedly raped. In their teens. And the majority of us were threatened to be beaten or killed if we told anyone. Can anything be done about that? Nope. It can't. It was too long ago. The rest of us were merely assaulted. In some cases it wasn't even considered a real crime. Not a real crime that was definitely too long ago anyway. Time was not on our side. It's a funny thing though... time. People say it's the world's greatest healer. But they don't often talk about how it's also a vehicle for festering. For rehashing over and over events that made you who you are. For planning exactly what you'd do if you saw him in public again. If you saw him sizing up a young woman on the street, orchestrating exactly how he'd get her. Time just sealed it up. It didn't really heal anything. It was always there. Waiting for someone else to start chipping away at their cement so it could finally scream... this happened.

I sat at a table with twelve of those women one night in November. We all agreed we were thrilled and totally horrified to have met one another. The group of friends we never wanted to have. Some of us had already moved on with our lives, knowing we'd done what we could. Making peace with what happened. Some of us were still stuck right there in that moment. In that hotel room. At that restaurant. Stuck in the moment we let a monster into our heads. Some stopped acting the minute it happened, leaving their dreams in that hotel room. Some of us are stronger for it. Some of us spent the next ten or twenty years allowing men to walk all over us. Telling ourselves we deserved whatever we got. And whatever we didn't. Some of us dominated the world. Some of us numbed it out.

So we're all pretty much the same, I guess. And totally different. And messed up about it. And proud. And ashamed. And empowered. And totally disgusted by the justice system and humanity in general. And moved beyond belief. We're all pretty much the same, you could say. Just except that one little thing that happened some years ago when we weren't strong enough to stop it. That thing they said we lied about anyway. That one little thing that we rallied about. And then got quiet again. Just that one little thing. That wasn't really a crime anyway.