



THE SILENCE: THE LEGACY OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

I never got any help, any kind of therapy. I never told anyone.

By Junot Díaz



00:04 / 37:41

Audio: Listen to this story. To hear more feature stories, download the Audm app for your iPhone.

X—

Last week I returned to Amherst. It's been years since I was there, the time we met. I was hoping that you'd show up again; I even looked for you, but you didn't appear. I remember you proudly repped N.Y.C. during the few minutes we spoke, so I suspect you'd moved back or maybe you were busy or you didn't know I was in town. I have a distinct memory of you in the signing line, saying nothing to anyone, intense. I assumed you were going to ask me to read a manuscript or help you find an agent, but instead you asked me about the sexual abuse alluded to in my books. You asked, quietly, if it had happened to me.

You caught me completely by surprise.

I wish I had told you the truth then, but I was too scared in those days to say anything. Too scared, too committed to my mask. I responded with some evasive bullshit. And that was it. I signed your books. You thought I was going to say something, and when I didn't you looked disappointed. But more than that you looked abandoned. I could have said anything but instead I turned to the next person in line and smiled. Out of the corner of my eye I watched you pick up your backpack, slowly put away your books, and leave. When the signing was over I couldn't get the fuck away from Amherst, from you and your question, fast enough. I ran the way I've always run. Like death itself was chasing me. For a couple of days afterward I fretted; I worried that I'd given myself

away. But then the old oblivion reflex took over. I pushed it all down. Buried it all. Like always.

But I never really did forget. Not our exchange or your disappointment. How you walked out of the auditorium with your shoulders hunched.

I know this is years too late, but I'm sorry I didn't answer you. I'm sorry I didn't tell you the truth. I'm sorry for you, and I'm sorry for me. We both could have used that truth, I'm thinking. It could have saved me (and maybe you) from so much. But I was afraid. I'm still afraid—my fear like continents and the ocean between—but I'm going to speak anyway, because, as Audre Lorde has taught us, my silence will not protect me.

X—

Yes, it happened to me.

I was raped when I was eight years old. By a grownup that I truly trusted.

After he raped me, he told me I had to return the next day or I would be “in trouble.”

And because I was terrified, and confused, I went back the next day and was raped again.

I never told anyone what happened, but today I'm telling you.

And anyone else who cares to listen.

That violación. Not enough pages in the world to describe what it did to me. The whole planet could be my inkstand and it still wouldn't be enough. That shit cracked the planet of me in half, threw me completely out of orbit, into the lightless regions of space where life is not possible. I can say, truly, que casi me destruyó. Not only the rapes but all the sequelae: the agony, the bitterness, the self-recrimination, the asco, the desperate need to keep it hidden and silent. It fucked up my childhood. It fucked up my adolescence. It fucked up my whole life. More than being Dominican, more than being an immigrant, more, even, than being of African descent, my rape defined me. I spent more energy running from it than I did living. I was confused about why I didn't fight, why I had an erection while I was being raped, what I did to deserve

it. And always I was afraid—afraid that the rape had “ruined” me; afraid that I would be “found out”; afraid afraid afraid. “Real” Dominican men, after all, aren’t raped. And if I wasn’t a “real” Dominican man I wasn’t anything. The rape excluded me from manhood, from love, from everything.

The kid before—hard to remember. Trauma is a time traveller, an ouroboros that reaches back and devours everything that came before. Only fragments remain. I remember loving codes and Encyclopedia Brown and pastelones and walking long distances in an effort to learn what lay beyond my N.J. neighborhood. At night I had the most vivid dreams, often about “Star Wars” and about my life back in the Dominican Republic, in Azua, my very own Tatooine. Was just getting to know this new English-speaking me, was just becoming his friend—and then he was gone.

No more spaceship dreams, no more Azua, no more me. Only an abiding sense of wrongness and the unbearable recollection of being violently penetrated.

By the time I was eleven, I was suffering from both depression and uncontrollable rage. By thirteen, I stopped being able to look at myself in the mirror—and the few times I accidentally glimpsed my reflection I’d recoil like I’d got hit in the face by a jellyfish stinger. (What did I see? I saw the crime, my grisly debasement, and if anyone looked at me too long I would run or I would fight.)

By fourteen, I was holding one of my father’s pistols to my head. (He’d been gone a few years, but he’d generously left some of his firearms behind.) I had trouble at home. I had trouble at school. I had mood swings like you wouldn’t believe. Since I’d never told anyone what had happened my family assumed that was just who I was—un maldito loco. And while other kids were exploring crushes and first love I was dealing with intrusive memories of my rape that were so excruciating I had to slam my head against a wall.

Of course, I never got any kind of help, any kind of therapy. Like I said, I never told anyone. In a family as big as mine—five kids—it was easy to get lost, even when you were going under. I remember my mother telling me, after one of my depressions, that I should pray. I didn’t even bother to laugh.

When I wasn't completely out of it I read everything I could lay my hands on, played Dungeons & Dragons for days on end. I tried to forget, but you never forget. Night was the worst—that's when the dreams would come. Nightmares where I got raped by my siblings, by my father, by my teachers, by strangers, by kids who I wanted to be friends with. Often the dreams were so upsetting that I would bite my tongue, and the next morning I'd spit out blood into the bathroom sink.

And in no time at all I was failing everything. Quizzes, quarters, and then entire classes. First I got booted out of my high school's gifted-and-talented program, then out of the honors track. I sat in class and either dozed or read Stephen King books. Eventually I stopped showing up altogether. School friends drifted away; home friends couldn't wrap their heads around it.

Senior year, while everyone was getting their college acceptances, I went another way: I tried to kill myself. What happened was that in the middle of a deep depression I suddenly became infatuated with this cute-ass girl I knew at school. For a few weeks my gloom lifted, and I became utterly convinced that if this girl went out with me, if she fucked me, I'd be cured of all that ailed me. No more bad memories. I'd been watching "Excalibur" on heavy rotation, so I was all about miraculous regeneration. When I finally got up the nerve to ask her out and she said nope, it felt as though the world had finally closed the door on me.

The next day I swallowed all these leftover drugs from my brother's cancer treatment, three bottles' worth.

Didn't work.

You know why I didn't try again the next day?

Because my one and only college acceptance arrived in the mail. I had assumed I wasn't going anywhere, had completely forgotten that I had any schools left to hear from. But as I read that letter it felt as if the door of the world had cracked open again, ever so slightly.

I didn't tell anyone I tried to kill myself. Something else I buried deep.

often tell people that college saved me. Which in part is true. Rutgers, only an hour from my home by bus, was so far from my old life and so alive with possibility that for the first time in the longest I felt something approaching safety, something approximating hope. And, whether it was that distance or my bottomless self-loathing or some desperate post-suicide urge to live, that first year I remade myself completely. By junior year, I doubt anyone from my high school would have recognized me. I became a runner, a weight lifter, an activist, had girlfriends, was “popular.” At Rutgers I buried not only the rape but the boy who had been raped—and threw into the pit my family, my suffering, my depression, my suicide attempt for good measure. Everything I’d been before Rutgers I locked behind an adamantine mask of normalcy.

And, let me tell you, once that mask was on no power on earth could have torn it off me.

The mask was strong.

But as any Freudian will tell you trauma is stronger than any mask; it can’t be buried and it can’t be killed. It’s the revenant that won’t stop, the ghost that’s always coming for you. The nightmares, the intrusions, the hiding, the doubts, the confusion, the self-blame, the suicidal ideation—they didn’t go away just because I buried my neighborhood, my family, my face. The nightmares, the intrusions, the hiding, the doubts, the confusion, the self-blame, the suicidal ideation—they followed. All through college. All through graduate school. All through my professional life. All through my intimate life. (Leaked into my writing, too, but you’d be amazed how easy it is to rewrite the truth away.)

Didn’t matter how far I ran or what I achieved or who I was with—they followed.

Do you remember how during our chat at Amherst I talked about intimacy? I think I said that intimacy is our only home. Super ironic that I write and talk about intimacy all day long; it’s something I’ve always dreamed of and never had much luck achieving. After all, it’s hard to have love when you absolutely refuse to show yourself, when you’re locked behind a mask.

I remember when I got my first girlfriend, in college. I thought that was it—I was saved. Everything I’d been would officially be erased, all my awful dreams would

disappear. But that's not the way the world works. Me and this girl were into each other something serious, were in our narrow college beds all the time—but you know what? We never had sex. Not once. I couldn't. Every time we would get close to fucking the intrusions would cut right through me, stomach-turning memories of my violation. Of course, I didn't tell her. I just said that I wanted to wait. She didn't believe my excuses, asked me what was wrong, but I never said anything. I kept the Silence. After a year, we broke up.

I thought maybe with another girl it would be easier, but it wasn't. I tried and I tried and I tried. Took me until I was a junior before I finally lost my virginity. I saw her first in a creative-writing class. She was an ex-hippie ex-hardcore sweetie who wrote beautifully and had a tattoo on her head and the first time we got in bed she didn't even ask if I was a virgin; she just pulled off her dress and it happened. I almost threw a party.

But I should have known it wasn't going to be that easy. Me and J— dated for two years, but I was always acting, always hiding. The mask was strong.

I'm sure she sensed I was all sorts of messed up, but I'm guessing she chalked it up to typical ghetto craziness. She loved the shit out of me. Brought me home to her family, and they loved me, too. It was the first truly healthy family I'd been exposed to. Which you would think would have been a good thing.

Wrong. The longer we were together, the more her family loved me, the more unbearable it all got. There was only so much closeness a person like me could endure before I needed to fly the fuck away. I had long bouts of depression, drank more than I'd ever drunk, especially during the holidays, when they were all at their happiest. One day, for no reason at all, I found myself saying, We have to break up. There was absolutely no precipitating anything. I had just reached my limit. I remember crying my eyes out the night before (in those days I never cried). I didn't want to break up with her. I didn't want to. But I couldn't stand to be loved. To be seen.

Why? she asked. Why?

And I really had no answer.

fter that it was C—, who did a ton of community work in the D.R. And then B—, the **A** Seventh-Day Adventist from St. Thomas. Neither relationship worked. But I kept going.

And that's how it went for a while, from college to grad school to Brooklyn. I would meet intimidatingly smart sisters, would date them in the hope that they could heal me, and then the fear would start to climb in me, the fear of discovery, and the mask would feel as if it were cracking and the impulse to escape, to hide, would grow until finally I'd hit a Rubicon—I'd either drive the novia away or I would run. I started sleeping around, too. The regular relationship drug wasn't enough. I needed stronger hits to keep the wound inside from rising up and devouring me. The Negro who couldn't sleep with anyone became the Negro who would sleep with everyone.

I was hiding, I was drinking, I was at the gym; I was running around with other women. I was creating model homes, and then, just as soon as they were up, abandoning them. Classic trauma psychology: approach and retreat, approach and retreat. And hurting other people in the process. My depressions would settle over me for months, and in that darkness the suicidal impulse would sprout pale and deadly. I had friends with guns; I asked them never to bring them over for any reason. Sometimes they listened, sometimes they didn't.

Somehow I was still writing—about a young Dominican man who, unlike me, had been only a little molested. Someone who couldn't stay in any relationship because he was too much of a player. Crafting my perfect cover story, in effect. And since us Afro-Latinx brothers are viewed by society as always already sexual perils, very few people ever noticed what was written between the lines in my fiction—that Afro-Latinx brothers are often sexually *imperilled*.

Right before I left graduate school and moved to Brooklyn I published my first story, about a Dominican boy who goes to see another boy, whose face has been eaten off, and on the way he gets sexually assaulted. (Seriously.) And then in one of those insane twists of fortune I hit the literary lottery. From that one story I got an agent, I got a book deal, I appeared in *The New Yorker*, I published my first book, "Drown," which sold nothing but got me more press than any young writer should ever have. Anyone else would have ridden that good-luck wave straight into the sunset, but that wasn't how it played out. I clearly wanted to be known, on some level, had been

dying for a chance at a real face, but when that moment finally arrived I couldn't do it; I clamped the mask down hard. After "Drown," I could have stayed in N.Y.C., but I fled to Syracuse instead, where the snow never stops and the isolation was a maw. I stopped writing altogether.

Entire literary careers could have fit into the years I didn't write. In the meantime I met S—. If Black Is Beautiful had a spokesperson it would have been her; S—, who would have thrown away a thousand years of family to make it work. Didn't matter; we never were able to have sex. The intrusions always hit where it would hurt the worst. Never knew who I could have sex with and who I couldn't until I tried. S— found someone else, ended up marrying him. I moved on to other women. The years passed. I never took off the mask; I never got help.

And for a while the center held. For a while.

No one can hide forever. Eventually what used to hold back the truth doesn't work anymore. You run out of escapes, you run out of exits, you run out of gambits, you run out of luck. Eventually the past finds you.

What happened was that I met someone: Y—. In the novel I published eleven years after "Drown," I gave my narrator, Yunior, a love supreme named Lola, because in real life I had a love supreme named Y—. She was the femme-matador of my dreams. A state-school girl raised in Washington Heights who worked her ass off, who never ran from a fight, and who could have danced Ochún out the fucking room.

We clicked like crazy. Like our ancestors were rooting for us. I was the Dominican nerdo she'd always dreamed about. She actually said this. She didn't have a clue. I fell into her family, and she fell into mine. And her mother—Dios mío, how the señora loved me. I was the son she never had. And before you could say "Run" I had created another one of my romance stories, but this one was more elaborate and more insane than any I'd ever spun. We bought an apartment together in Harlem. We got engaged in Tokyo. We talked about having children together. Even the writing started coming again. Negroes I'd never met before were proud of our relationship and told us so. Two "successful" Dominicans from the hood who loved each other? As rare and as precious as ciguapas.

Of course, there were signs of trouble. I spent at least six months out of the year depressed and/or high or drunk. We could have sex but not often—the intrusions often jumped in, a hellish cock-blocking ménage à trois.

Sex or no sex, I “loved” her more than I had ever loved anyone. I even told her, in an unguarded moment, that something had happened in my past.

Something bad.

And because I “loved” her more than I had ever loved anyone, and because I had revealed to her what I revealed about my past, I cheated on her more than I had ever cheated on anyone.

I cheated on her como un maldito perro.

I knew plenty of men who lived double lives. Shit, my father had lived one, to my family’s everlasting regret. And here I was playing out the patrimonial destiny. I had a double life like I was in a comic book.

Y— got as much of the real me as I was capable of showing. She lived with my depression and my no-writing fury and with the rare moments of levity, of clarity. The other women saw primarily my mask, right before I ghosted them.

The mask was strong.

But no mask is that strong. No one’s G that perfect. No one’s love that dumb. One day Y— didn’t like an answer I’d given her about where I’d been. I’m sure she’d been having doubts for a while—especially after one woman showed up at a reading of mine and burst into tears when I said hi. Y— decided to go snooping through my e-mails, and since I wasn’t big on passwords or putting old e-mails in the trash it took her less than five minutes to find what she was looking for.

A heartbreak can take out a world. I know hers did. Took out her world and mine.

Another woman might have shot me dead on principle, but Y— simply printed out all the e-mails between me and all my other girls, all my bullshit seduction attempts, all

the photos, had the evidence of my betrayals bound, and when I came home from one of my trips handed them to me.

When I realized what she'd given me I blacked out.

Which is what tends to happen when the world ends.

A few months later, I won the Pulitzer Prize for a novel narrated by a Dominican brother who loses the Dominican woman of his dreams because he can't stop cheating on her. When I found out I'd won the prize my first thought wasn't "I'm made" but "Maybe now she'll stay with me."

She didn't. A few months later Y— got her head together and kicked me out of her life completely. She kept the apartment, the ring, her family, our friends. I got Boston. We never saw each other again.

When I was a kid, I heard that dinosaurs were so big that even if they received a killing blow it would take a while for their nervous systems to figure it out. That was me. After I lost Y— I moved to Cambridge full time, and for the next year or so I tried to "walk it off." For a little while I seriously thought I was going to be fine. The mask had exploded into fragments, but I kept trying to wear the pieces as if nothing had happened. It would have been comedic if it hadn't been so tragic. I tried to use sex to fill the hole I'd just blown through my heart, but it didn't work. Didn't stop me from trying.

I lost weeks, I lost months, I lost years (two). And then one day I woke up and literally couldn't move from bed. An archipelago of grief was on me, a wine-dark sea of pain. In a drunken fit I tried to jump from my friend's rooftop apartment in the D.R. He grabbed me before I could get my foot on a nearby stool and didn't let go until I stopped shaking.

In the treatment world, they say that often you have to hit rock bottom before you finally seek help. It doesn't always work that way, but that sure is how it was for me. I had to lose almost everything and then some. And then some. Before I finally put out my hand.

I was fortunate. I had friends around me ready to step in. I had good university insurance. I stumbled upon a great therapist. She had dealt with people like me before, and she dedicated herself to my healing. It took years—hard, backbreaking years—but she picked up what there was of me. I don't think she'd ever met anyone more disinclined to therapy. I fought it every step of the way. But I kept coming, and she never gave up. After long struggle and many setbacks, my therapist slowly got me to put aside my mask. Not forever, but long enough for me to breathe, to live. And when I was finally ready to return to that place where I was unmade she stood by my side, she held my hand, and never let go.

I'd always assumed that if I ever returned to that place, that island where I'd been shipwrecked, I would never escape; I'd be dragged down and destroyed. And yet, irony of ironies, what awaited me on that island was not my destruction but nearly the opposite: my salvation.

During that time I wrote very little. Mostly I underlined passages in my favorite books. This line in particular I circled at least a dozen times: "Then darkness took me, and I strayed out of thought and time, and I wandered far on roads that I will not tell."

And then there was this section from my own novel:

Before all hope died I used to have
this stupid dream that shit could
be saved, that we would be in bed
together like the old times, with
the fan on, the smoke from our
weed drifting above us, and I'd
finally try to say words that could
have saved us.

But before I can shape the vowels I
wake up. My face is wet, and that's
how you know it's never going to
come true.

Never, ever.

It's been almost a decade since the Fall. I am not who I once was. I'm neither the brother who can't touch a girl nor the asshole who sleeps around. I'm in therapy twice a week. I don't drink (except in Japan, where I let myself have a beer). I don't hurt people with my lies or my choices, and wherever I can I make amends; I take responsibility. I've come to learn that repair is never-ceasing.

I'm even in a relationship, and she knows everything about my past. I told her about what happened to me.

I've told her, and I've told my friends. Even the toughest of my boys. I told them all, fuck the consequences.

Something I never thought possible.

So much has changed. But some things haven't. There are still times when the depression hammers down and months vanish out from under me, when the suicidal ideation returns. The writing hasn't come back, not really. But there are good stretches, and they are starting to outnumber the bad. Every year, I feel less like the dead, more a part of the living. The intrusions are fewer now, and when they come they don't throw me completely. I still have those horrible dreams every now and then, and they are still foul as fuck, but at least I have resources to deal with them.

And yet—

And yet despite all my healing I still feel that something important, something vital, has eluded me. The impulse to hide, to hold myself apart from my colleagues, from my fellow-writers, from my students, from the circle of life has remained uncannily strong. During the public talks I've given at universities and conferences, I've sometimes commented on the intergenerational harm that systemic sexual violence has inflicted on African diasporic communities, on my community. But have I ever actually come out and said that I was the victim of sexual violence? I've said elusive things here and there but nothing actionable, no definitive statements.

Over the last weeks, that gnawing sense of something undone has only grown, along with the old fear—the fear that someone might find out I'd been raped as a child. It's no coincidence that I recently began a tour for a children's book I've published and suddenly I'm surrounded by kids all the time and I've had to discuss my childhood

more than I ever have in my life. I've found myself telling lies, talking about a kid that never was. He never checks the locks on the bedroom doors four times a night, doesn't bite clean through his tongue. The cover stories are returning. There are even mornings when my face feels stiff.

And then at one of my events, another signing line—this one at the Brattle Theatre, in Cambridge—a young woman walked up and started to thank me for my novel, for one of its protagonists, Beli. Beli, the tough-love Dominican mother who suffered catastrophic sexual abuse throughout her life.

I had a life a lot like Beli's, the young woman said, and then, without warning, she choked into tears. She wanted to say more to me, but before she could she was overwhelmed and fled. I could have tried to stop her. I could have called after her me too me too. I could have said the words: I was also raped.

But I didn't have the courage. I turned to the next person in line and smiled.

And you know what? It felt good to be behind the mask. It felt like home.

I think about you, X—. I think about that woman from the Brattle. I think about silence; I think about shame, I think about loneliness. I think about the hurt I caused. I think of all the years and all the life I lost to the hiding and to the fear and to the pain. The mask got more of me than I ever did. But mostly I think about what it felt like to say the words—to my therapist, all those years ago; to tell my partner, my friends, that I'd been raped. And what it feels like to say the words here, where the whole world—and maybe you—might hear.

Toni Morrison wrote, "Anything dead coming back to life hurts." In Spanish we say that when a child is born it is given the light. And that's what it feels like to say the words, X—. Like I'm being given a second chance at the light.

Last night I had another dream. It wasn't a bad one. I was young. Just a boy. No one had hurt me yet. A plane was dropping flyers announcing an upcoming Jack Veneno match, and all of us kids in Villa Juana were racing about in great excitement, gathering the flyers in our arms.

I barely remember that boy anymore, but for a brief moment I am him again, and he is me. ♦

This article appears in the print edition of the April 16, 2018, issue, with the headline “The Silence.”

Junot Díaz was named one of The New Yorker’s “20 Under 40” in 1999 and has regularly contributed both fiction and nonfiction since 1995. [Read more »](#)

Video

Malcolm Gladwell on School Shooters and Police Bias

David Remnick speaks with Gladwell about using theory to understand complex phenomena, and how that understanding can change.

CONDÉ NAST

© 2018 Condé Nast. All rights reserved. Use of this site constitutes acceptance of our user agreement (effective 1/2/2016) and privacy policy (effective 1/2/2016). Your California privacy rights. The material on this site may not be reproduced, distributed, transmitted, cached or otherwise used, except with prior written permission of Condé Nast. The New Yorker may earn a portion of sales from products and services that are purchased through links on our site as part of our affiliate partnerships with retailers.