

SHAME AND SILENCE

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Walking down the hill with my mom—my mom in real flesh, rather than a grainy Skype call—early that morning, I could not have been more grateful. I had been living in Italy for almost ten months when my family finally came to visit. The sun was now shining well over the Tuscan hills, the humidity intensifying, the birds chirping, insects humming. My sister was already at the bottom of the hill, running at a full sprint, flailing her arms to avoid the aggressive swarms of mosquitoes that encompassed her. Her shrieks echoed up to my mother and me, then faded. Now, it was only the sound of our feet crunching on the dirt.

Here, finally alone with my mom, the woman I trusted most in the world, I felt safe enough to share. Multiple times, I opened and closed my mouth, struggling to force the words out. Hesitantly, with a quiet and wavering voice, I said, “mom?”

I was thirteen when *it* happened. He was my best friend and my first boyfriend, my only boyfriend. We were relaxing on his bed, languidly watching TV, when he leaned in and started to kiss me. Abruptly, he climbed on top of me and began to grind his torso. Out of shock, I pushed his face away and turned my head to the side.

“What are you doing?” he asked, frustrated. Taken aback by his anger, I no longer felt relaxed, safe. He felt no longer like a friend, but rather like a lustful animal. I was afraid of what he would do if I said “no.” His annoyance and his expectation for me to give way made my reluctance seem wrong, unusual; if I said no, he would think me a prude. Unwillingly, I continued through the motions that he wanted, but in my head I was in panic, my gut screaming for me to stop. However, I lay there as it progressed, feeling strained while my body was touched by a man I no longer trusted, straining in ways that it had never known before. There was no spark, no pleasure.

When my mom picked me up that afternoon, I was flushed with relief; I had longed for her like a child getting picked up from daycare. Driving home in the car, I felt as if something was stolen from me. My innocence, my childhood. I was

so young, still secretly obsessed with playing Pokemon and watching the Disney Channel. A deep shame mustered inside me. I was dirty; I was a slut. My mind imprisoned me. I was isolated by thoughts of guilt, trauma, disgust.

Even though it was against my will, I felt as if I had committed a crime. There was also a sense of hurt and betrayal; the fun and lightness of our relationship were gone. He sexualized me, objectified me, crossed an unthinkable line.

I did not dare tell anyone. It was my fault, too, that I could not bring myself to stop. I was silenced by shame.

In her essay “No Name Woman,” Maxine Hong Kingston’s mother bluntly tells her a family secret: her father had a sister who committed suicide. But she is treated as if she had never been born, unremembered.

A man, someone she probably knew and worked with, most likely raped and impregnated her, there in the rural Chinese village where they lived, long after the husband of Kingston’s unknown aunt had left for America in 1924, to send money home (383). For committing adultery, for having sex outside her marriage, the village raided her family home, and she was disowned by her own family, who chose social status and pride over love and forgiveness. No Name Woman gave birth alone, and—left with nowhere to go—killed herself and her baby, giving up the lives that her village wouldn’t allow both to live.

This brings to light the double standard that men hold over women. Although, as Kingston speculates, No Name Woman was a victim of rape, she was the one to suffer the consequences, rather than the man who raped her. A man chose her to be “his secret evil,” and she could not disobey (386). Like me, she was forced to lie there, to take it. No one in the village questioned who the man was, and No Name Woman kept his name anonymous, out of fear. She was raped, brutalized by that rape, yet she went through an entire pregnancy without anyone saying a word.

By her culture, No Name Woman was conditioned to stay quiet and submissive. Even as her belly grew round and swollen, her family said nothing, signifying that her situation was common enough not to receive direct recognition or support.

Even in the modern, seemingly progressive culture in which I have grown up, this submission and silence still influence women. I was raised to believe that I had to be silent, similar to how No Name Woman was brought up in early twen-

tieth-century China. If this had not been true, if silence hadn't been expected, I would have firmly and unquestionably said "no" to the sex that I didn't want.

But No Name Woman, without words, broke the silence. When she drowned herself and her child in the family well, she poisoned the water, leaving a permanent black mark behind. She refused to let her family reduce her to nothing so easily, and she left the frightening message, "I will *not* be forgotten." All these events tell readers that enforced silence has consequences; to avoid the horrors that Kingston takes such care to describe, we have to choose words—and the possibility that they can alter the power of the unsaid.

Halted on that serene hill, I told my mom everything.

Four years it took me to fully understand what had happened, how obscenely wrong it was for him to take advantage of me. Four years it took me to learn that I was the victim of sexual assault and abuse. Four years it took me to learn that I had a right to share.

"I'm so sorry," I said, a tear falling down my cheek, blotting the rocky pathway.

"You don't have to apologize." My mom pulled me in and wrapped her arms around me, gently rubbing my back. I sobbed, unleashing years of suppressed anguish. It was so freeing to finally put words to what happened, a burden relieved from me.

"Shh, it's all right. You're not alone." And Kingston reminds us that, sometimes, others who have been wronged need us to speak for them, to speak with them. That way, the silence won't win. It will be broken by sound.

WORKS CITED

Kingston, Maxine Hong. "No Name Woman." *The Best American Essays of the Century*. Ed. by Joyce Carol Oates and Robert Atwan. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.