

Christina and the Robin: A Decidedly Narrative Response to Rape

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The story I am about to tell had its beginning in my stunned astonishment following a conversation with a colleague of mine. One afternoon over coffee with our fellow therapists, my colleague chatted to us about her experience of going to a job interview at a well-established therapy agency. I am curious about human encounters in general, and particularly nosy about any and all conversations pertaining to the therapeutic enterprise. And this was a job interview, no less, imagine my intrigue to find out how other agencies go about interviewing prospective therapists. What could their fashioning of a job interview tell me of their vision of the venture of therapy? What could it tell me about what kind of person would make a good therapist? What could it tell me about the agency's imagination about the questions of what a good life is and who holds the keys to paradise in their minds? "WHAT DID THEY ASK YOU?" I asked my colleague, barely containing my suspense. "They asked me to take them through a 6-step intervention for panic," she shrugged. "What do you mean? Was that their first question out, and did they give you a mock client, or a description of a person of some kind?" I inquired, puzzled. "No, I asked them to give me a bit of context for the panic, but they said it wasn't necessary, 'just your 6-step intervention, please.' And once I was finished with that, they asked me for my 6-step intervention for depression. And so it went."

I had suddenly run out of questions. I was grateful for my colleagues for taking over the conversation, as I sat in silent disbelief. A little later, I drove home and tried to avoid thinking about what I had just heard. "Well, lucky it wasn't you in that interview, Sanni," I tried to console myself. "I wonder why it was exactly 6 steps and not 3 or 7 and three quarters?" But one question would not let me go: "What would you have said, Sanni?" The following story is my wordy response.

I cannot tell you my 6-step intervention to panic, even though for seven years now I have been in constant conversation with people experiencing all the different shades of panic. Precisely because of my many therapeutic conversations over the years with people with panic I can no longer consider it a faceless phenomenon, nor a simple medical disorder that exists outside of the context of its creation, and any attempts to formulate a rote treatment intervention on my part would therefore do nothing to enlighten you about my practice. Surely we may find more intelligent means to speak to my therapeutic practice that will sidestep a crude stereotyping of the venture of therapy with the clients to whom all of us undoubtedly are united in giving our highest care.

May I tell you about the last person that was referred to me because of panic instead? Her name is Christina, a woman in her mid-30s, has a degree in engineering, is quietly bright in her demeanor and has a subversive sense of humour. Christina has been working at a large engineering firm as one of only 2 women company-wide for the past 4 years. The past years 4

years have been charming for Christina, because her superiors at the engineering company have tacitly decided that the #Me Too Movement applies to Hollywood starlets only, and so she has been relentlessly harassed, pursued, smirked at in her presentations, condescended to and dismissed in meetings, blackmailed by superiors into sexual favours, and lastly, sexually assaulted by one of her managers.

Below is an excerpt of one of the sample resignation letters Christina and I worked on as part of our therapy to provide Christina the means to deliberation and clarity about the context of her panic attacks:

...I started my position here 3 years ago full of dedication and interest in the actual work itself and have seen all my projects through in accordance to my own high standards as well as your exclusively positive performance reviews. I have, in fact, enjoyed the work on my projects. However, if another qualified, competent, and conscientious engineer approached me now asking for my advice in taking over my position, I could not ethically or morally recommend that they apply for or accept a position here. I do not say so lightly:

The company culture is so poisonous to professionals, and in particular, to women professionals as well as others who do not fit the “outgoing salesman” personality that any enjoyment of the work itself is not worth their time or effort.

Over the course of the past 3 years, I have been chronically mistreated: interrupted in meetings, mocked in presentations, undermined in my professional conclusions, degraded in front of my peers, made to triple check math in response to questions by peers who simply don't like or lack the qualifications to understand the black-and-white numbers, made to endure the daily mansplaining of my own work by those who don't know what they speak of, relentlessly harassed, blackmailed and sexually assaulted. As you might imagine, these daily experiences of degradation, sexism, and vile lack of professionalism have had very serious effects on my life and my person, including the diagnosis of PTSD in response to the sexual assault that occurred.

Even though some things have gotten better since the dismissal of the individual who assaulted me, the company has done nothing to better the overall culture that would stop any of this from happening again.

In contrast, practices of mockery, intrusive interruption, and personal humiliation that are so commonplace here are not only NOT addressed or disciplined but condoned and rewarded by promotion. I and other professionals have been repeatedly told that we simply need to get better at selling our work. Unequivocally, I am a scientist, hired by you to do an exact calculation, and not a salesman. The shocking lack of consequences for public acts of disrespect as well as the ineffective and silent bystanding by those in positions of authority have gravely contributed to this culture of rampant male

entitlement that has put me personally in harm's way. So make no mistake, this is not a letter about assault; this is a letter about the daily company practices that are still ongoing and that gave rise to the conditions that led to my mistreatment, both in and outside of meetings.

In summary, if I may, Christina indeed experienced panic attacks at work. Do you concur with me that perhaps the context of her panic attacks ought to be considered in the design of a “treatment plan?”

At the outset of my work with Christina, I received a letter from her well-intentioned doctor. She stated in it that Christina needed to be treated for her experience of panic attacks at work and inquired whether or not I am qualified to treat the panic attacks. As this was a well-intentioned letter and an example of a commonplace practice of collaboration among professionals to better serve our clients, it pressed me to think further about the hidden assumptions of the venture of therapy. I wondered to what extent the expectation was that I, as “an expert” was to “treat” Christina out of her experience of “panic attacks” so that she could resume her position as a productive, self-assured worker she once was. I wondered to what extent I was expected to play my part in helping Christina “adjust” better to rape culture. I wondered what would happen to her panic attacks if Christina were not referred to therapy, but the men at her company were asked to participate in mandatory and intelligent gender equality and accountability training? And what is my responsibility to Christina if it is not the promotion and perpetuation of smooth adjustment to contexts of oppression and injustice?

I might also ask: Since Christina is but one example of my many, many conversations about panic attacks and the context of their creation in my therapy practice, how could I answer your question about a 6-step model? I might ask this question differently:

How do we as therapists grow regard for another person? (White and Epston, circa 1985)

How do we grow outrage at the contexts of disregard of the humanity of another person?

Or:

How do you grow an arsonist heart?

“why yes, I am the girl with the arsonist heart

all your fathers warned you about.” (Amanda Lovelace)

If respect, or regard, for our clients are neither personality traits, nor natural phenomena, but practices, how might I work with Christina in a manner that substantiates my regard for her person and her experiences?

An important detail to consider in my formulation of a “treatment plan” with Christina in particular was that the usual means for treatment plans in my work were not immediately available to me. This was due to the fact that Christina actually spoke very little in our conversations. I would come to know later that Christina had, in fact, quietly resolved to take her life due to her sense of hopelessness about the experiences of her life, her blaming of herself for

bringing them about, her shame for not being able to respond to these developments in a stronger manner, and the physical and emotional misery of the continued panic attacks. I did not know at the time of our first meetings that our work had some kind of ultimate deadline attached to it. All I knew when we first met was that she spoke very little and barely looked at me and answered questions in a low monotone fashion.

Usually, I construct therapeutic documents from my conversations with my clients that serve as reflecting surfaces, witnessing statements, veritable proofs of life and that which my clients are currently trying for, but with Christina, due to the ways her words had been stolen from her, it proved difficult to try to write a document back to her. I remember thinking after our first sessions, “Good gods, what have they done to her...” without knowing who the “they” were... I thought this because somehow, even in limited worded expressions, Christina had convincingly, without a shadow of a doubt, communicated to me that she was very bright and was following my questions with great intellectual curiosity and even suspense. I had concluded this because there were times when she straightened her back from slumping or broke her staring at the floor and looked up at me with a flash of intrigue in her eyes and, most beseechingly, there were times when she suddenly smiled, amused for but a moment. These times of breaks in her demeanor were all in response to words and questions and guesses and story snippets of mine in which I had attempted to be particularly smart or funny. I came to know in short order that my guesses had been on track and that Christina was indeed particularly curious and agile in her intelligence and that every smile was truly an insurrection! Christina told me, later, in one of those freer moments when her words were available to her, that “they” went about it all very “smartly,” that what she had suffered had been 4 years of undermining her every sense of worth and trust in herself up against the constant insinuation that there was something “wrong” with her, and that the liberties the “boys” took with her were of her making due to her “lack of confidence” to make them stop. Every smile of Christina’s in our beginning meetings was an insurrection against rape culture and violence and violations against her person, a mounting refusal to be silent, a question that was brewing in its subterfuge: who is culpable here?

In my thinking in these early meetings, I relied on some questions of David Epston’s to design my “treatment plan” with Christina:

- *How can we assist people to name their experience?*
- *How do we ask questions in such a way that words come alive for people?*
- *How can we ask questions in such a way that people make such vocabularies of experience their own? How do we allow people to decide what words resonate for them?*
- *What words are capturing of experience and, in particular, that experience that has not had words before? Experience that has not been rendered in to an event before?*
- *What do we do in therapy talk that generates the new rather than merely reiterating the old?*
- *Shouldn’t we take an interest in words that are alive with association?*
- *Shouldn’t we think about the poetics of language and concern ourselves how words feel to people?*

Consider the last question in this list: shouldn't we concern ourselves how words feel to people? It was clear in my conversations with Christina that some words raised her spirits and others did not: some words caused her to collapse and to slump over, and others clearly made her straighten her spine, raise her eyes to me, smile even, and respond. The transcript excerpt below tells the story of the visceral importance of the often-tacit practices of discerning the felt effects of stories and words in our conversations and looking together for ways to speak that do not replicate hurt nor insinuate fragility. This is a transcript from an early conversation with Christina in which I knew nothing about the context of her panic attacks yet that might illuminate our collaborative reach for Christina to name her experience in a way that would not leave her feeling slumped over. Please know that I do not side with the idea that people "have to talk about it" in order to have more say over their lives or to appease some collective culpability that requires people to "speak" in order to protect themselves or others. In fact, Christina and I never "spoke" about the details of her rape, although she later decided to write pieces of her experience to me that were holding her soul and her voice captive. That part of the therapy Christina and I undertook in writing only. But in the conversation below, I knew nothing of rape, or mistreatment and only had her silences, her words and the observable felt effects of my words on her to guide me.

C: (slumped over, low, not looking at me) I hate my work. (then: silence. Not elaborating)

S: You've said that a few times... I found it in my notes... You've said that almost every time we've met. You said last time that your sister said to you that "you don't have to put up with it." You know, I have been wondering what your sister meant by this.

C: (silence)

S: (after waiting a while): The first time we met you were telling me about the "long hours at work." Is this what you mean?

C: (silence)

S: I was wondering whether this company of yours subscribes to some sort of ethic that if you want to work here, we own all your time. I have heard this from other people sometimes, some lawyers, and some servers... That companies sometimes require people to be extensions of the business, and if people want to hold on to some time of their own, or some initiatives in life outside of work, they get fired in short order.... Is this what you mean by "long hours" – do they act like they own your time, hook line and sinker?

C: (smiling at the expression) A little.

S: Is this why you say you hate your work?

C: (slumping; silence)

S: Shall I think of other questions, and not bug you about work, because maybe work is just a cesspool in which all good ideas go to die, and you have had plenty of people like your sister giving you well-meaning and annoying advice about it?

C: (smiling at “cesspool.” Not answering)

S: Cesspool, huh? Shall I bug you about it?

C: I don’t know. I guess I should talk about it.

S: Should you? Who thinks that? You? Or your annoying sister?

C: (smiling at “annoying”) I think that.

S: So you have set yourself the task of “got to talk about work!” even though it inspires you like a dog inspires a rabbit?

C: looking right at me) Yes.

S: Shall I ask you a bunch of annoying questions about work then, until you are like, aaghh, can’t take this annoyance anymore?!

C: (humouring me) Yes.

S: Alright, tattadadaa: here’s the first one. This is super ingenious. Worked super hard on this one: Why do you hate work?

C: (not answering, but amused at my phrasing, and not slumping, but thinking)

S: (wanting to help) Maybe it’s easier than my dumbass question, to answer: why does your sister hate your work?

C: Well, she saw it.

S: Your sister saw you at work?

C: Kind of... she was here in the summer visiting my parents, and we were supposed to meet at this restaurant. I had a work meeting there and it was supposed to be over by then. She was going to just meet me there.

S: But when your sister arrived, the work meeting was still going?

C: Yeah.

S: So she hung out and waited for you and was watching a bit?

C: Yeah.

S: This is going to be your favourite question! Wait for this. I already know that your sister concluded that you shouldn't put up with shit that goes down at work. So I wonder, did your sister observe some of that shit at the restaurant that night?

C: Yeah (starting to slump).

S: (Hurrying) What the fuck did she see, Christina? Do you know, I have an older sister too, and she worked at a bar when we were both in University. I used to go and visit her at the bar after my late evening lectures. You know, I'd take out my books and notes and study at the bar, and she'd serve me lemon water, because I had no money. Anyway. My sister was super protective of me, and was watching my back really closely, and would shoo anyone away who approached me, especially the dudes. Well, not shoo, she would really tell them, "leave her alone" and my sister is pretty scary when she means it, you know. More like, "shut up, don't talk to her."

C: (smiling, looking at me attentively)

S: Anyway. Do my sister and your sister have something in common in what they were observing in their little sisters' lives?

C: Yeah.

S: What I mean is – I know a little bit about restaurants, and I know a little bit about dudes in restaurants, - am I on the right track here?

C: Yeah.

S: And then your sister was observing your colleagues behaving like dudes in restaurants sometimes do with women?

C: Yeah.

S: My sister was watching them look at me and approach me. Sometimes I would have little chats with some of them, and she would glare at me and the dudes from behind the bar. Was your sister glaring too?

C: I don't know. I'm not sure.

S: That thing she told you...that you don't have to put up with it...did she tell you that that same night?

C: Yeah.

S: Don't worry, I am not going to embarrass you by having to find the words for the indignities of these dudes...by how exactly they made fools of themselves that night...

C: (interrupting) It's not just my sister. Telling me that I don't have to put up with it.

S: Oh good, others have had eyes to see! Who were they?

C: Some of the bartenders.

S: Fuck, Christina, are you telling me that the dudes at your work behave so atrociously to you at restaurants that even bartenders are noticing and taking you aside to say, "You don't have to put up with it."

C: Yeah. One time, I was on my way to the bathroom, and I was cornered, and the bartender came to me afterwards and said, "Are you okay? Can I call you a cab?"

S: Fuck! And did he...call you a cab?

C: Yeah. He even sent someone to wait with me.

S: (Sarcastically) Nice. So it's so bad that you can't be left there to wait for a fucking cab by yourself? There's just open season on you, according to these dudes, who are your fucking colleagues?

C: Yeah!

S: I'm sorry Christina. And I'm pissed off!!!

C: It's not always that bad. But yeah, the meetings at the restaurant are the worst. It's like a game. They are all hitting on me, and making stupid jokes, well, not all of them, but some of them, and staring and following me around, wanting to talk to me. And if I'm not friendly, then it's worse, that I can't take a joke or whatever. Sometimes it's been really hard to get out and get home...

In the above conversation, Christina did find her words, and proceeded to tell me about the mistreatment in restaurants as well as at the office. When she left, I sat in my office deep in thought and re-reading the scarcity of notes I had taken of Christina's own descriptions of what was happening to her, and I thought, well, here we are. I can't write a therapeutic poem from

these expressions! These are expressions of something terribly wrong happening to someone, and she stands to conclude that somehow she is at fault. No, a poem will not do here. I need something else, something that illuminates the question: Is there something “wrong” with Christina, as “they” have said, or is there something “wrong” with something else? I need some means to take these happenings and re-politicize them, instead of medicalizing Christina’s panic attacks. In opposition to Christina’s doctor, I was clear that Christina’s panic attacks at work are not a problem, but an effect of male entitlement and mistreatment and, as I was going to find out later, rape. Furthermore, Christina’s panic attacks at work are not just not the problem, but in fact, a response to male aggression and rape culture. Her panic attacks signaled to me that Christina is entirely alive and shouting, “I cannot live like this.” Her panic attacks at work are not a problem, but only an encouraging sign of an alive moral character at work, and my job from here on out was to join her in these deliberations to find her other ways of insurrection that she has beyond a doubt, already been inventing and littering all over the place.

I found another quote by David Epston that reads: “The counter story selects out the words and meanings generated by its rival to sow suspicion or to frankly contest it. For example, you cannot be abjectly wrong and terribly wronged at the same time. To some extent or other, to be wronged absolves you of being wrong. One set of meanings has to submit to the other. Counter stories come in to being by way of rivalry, vying for the person to contest their loyalty to a damning problem story.” Here was the beginning of my task: to sow suspicion with the idea that Christina was somehow wrong and instead, find a way to contest, in a political realm, that which had been happening to her. If I was to have any hope of considering a counterstory in Christina’s life in the near future, I needed a way to convincingly contest the patriarchal story of men’s permission to treat women however they please and that anything men give themselves permission to say and do is probably the fault of the woman in the first place. The many stories of rape that I have heard over the years have charged the importance of the clarity in my heart: there is nothing women can do to protect themselves. We cannot be nice enough, respectable enough, fierce enough, confident enough, smart enough, aware-of-our-surroundings enough, versed-in-martial-arts-enough, sober enough, dressed-appropriately enough to override the fact that some men choose to give themselves permission to assault and rape. The painful examinations of “but-what-were-you-doing?”, “why-were-you-there?”, “why-didn’t-you-just ...?” serve to promote victim-blaming and respectability politics in which some people can take part in pretending that well-intentioned “tips and tricks” for women are the way out of rape culture.

Without standing strongly in the way of such stories, I could scarcely begin to interview Christina about the effects of this mistreatment, her responses to it, and what her responses would tell both of us about her moral considerations or her moral character. Born out of these considerations, below is what I wrote for Christina ahead of our next meeting. The smile that broke onto her face after I placed 10 versions of these “flyers” into her lap and she considered each of them silently, only encouraged me along: I told her that I would be more than happy to go post a selection of flyers in the men’s bathrooms at her company – she didn’t wish me to do so, but these flyers signified a turning point in Christina’s and my work and the trust between us, as judged by her ability to speak to me in more words at each of the subsequent meetings. What I

didn't yet know is that the political reorientation would cause a moral reorientation that helped to usher in a halt in Christina's plan to take her life.

Reminder

#MeToo – mandatory company-wide meeting taking place

Friday October 19 at noon

(Yes, over lunch-hour, asshole.

And yes, it will take as MANY HOURS as it will take for all of you to come clean.)

PS: Absence will be noted as aiding and abetting of the charming rape-culture at this fine company of yours

A Crash Course in Assault

- 1. Keep your hands to yourself, at all times. Unless she has given her unequivocal consent to being touched.**
- 2. Assume she DOES NOT WANT YOU, unless TOLD (in words!) otherwise (by her, not your buddies or your active imagination).**
- 3. Her appearance, clothes, body parts, or other references to sex (yes, jokes included) are off-limits in conversation. Don't tell me you have nothing else to contribute to conversation.**
- 4. If she is interested, she will express ENTHUSIASTIC CONSENT. Up until that moment, you've got nothing. (Refer to the above.)**
- 5. If she expresses enthusiastic consent, and later changes her mind (by stopping to participate, freezing, saying "no" or another equivalent – eg. "I should go" or "can we just talk...") – you have ONE WORD available to you and it is "Okay." You may add: "Can I call you a cab?"**
- 6. Pursuing her, cornering her, monopolizing her time, following her around, watching her, making suggestive overtures to her WITHOUT HER VERBAL ENTHUSIASTIC CONSENT amounts to STALKING!**
- 7. If you see a colleague, friend or stranger do any of the above, you have one option: INTERVENE.**
 - a. Say (to her, not to him) "Are you okay?" You may add: "Can I call you a cab?"**

b. Say (to him, not to her) “That’s not cool.” Watch that he stops.

8. If you follow the above steps, don’t expect a life-time achievement award. You’re not a hero. Yet. The above steps only slightly elevate you from the tank of bottom feeder creeps to the possibility of being a decent guy.

A short while after our conversation about the above flyers, Christina sent me an email requesting a meeting time. She also let me know that her doctor had written her a note for a 2-week leave from work due to concerns about her well-being and her experiences of the panic attacks. Christina let me know in the email that she had been working from home but had not been doing particularly well during this time of absence from work. The following is an abbreviated, but otherwise verbatim transcript from the conversation that took place when we met.

...

C: In THE first week, there was panic.

S: In the first week? Do you mean to say it changed after the first week?

C: (Nods. Not looking at me)

S: (Waiting for her to elaborate. Then:) What happened to the panic after the first week?

C: (Silence. Not looking at me)

S: Did it maybe lift off of you somehow, or did you duck out from underneath it somehow, or maybe it went elsewhere...

C: (After a while. quietly) I just stopped caring.

S: (Waiting for her to elaborate. Observing: C is looking on the floor, being currently crushed by something, but what?)

S: You stopped caring, hey. Do you mean caring about work?

C: (Nods. sinks lower.)

S: Do you mean that you stopped caring about what panic was talking to you about, all the pressures at work, you stopped caring about that?

C: (Shifting—I can see my guess is going the wrong way. After a long silence:) I just stopped caring about a lot of things. (She starts to cry silently.)

S: (Hesitating a long while, fighting with myself about I think I know what she's saying) A lot of things. Maybe caring about you?

- C: (Nods, barely audibly) Yes.
- S: (Deciding to be sturdy about this) Maybe caring about your life?
- C: Yes (barely audibly. Looking at the floor.)
- S: (After a brief pause, quietly:) Oh well, here I was, all dumb and curious to know how panic changed after the first week, and you are telling me, listen, it changed, because what came after scared the shit out of even panic?
- C: (Looks up, smiles at my choice of words, the smile gets right to my heart.) Yes. Things went really dark.
- S: So a darkness that scares the shit out of panic and sends it for a run – that is some scary darkness hey.
- C: (Smiles again.) Yes.
- S: Tell me, if you want, I am imagining you looking out the window and seeing darkness. When did it start to gather, what kind of darkness was this, was it all the time?
- C: (After a long pause). It wasn't there during the day. Well I don't know, I didn't look outside. I kept my head down and focused on work. It was any time I wasn't focused on work.
- S: I am imagining you at work, all focused on your report, and studious and conscientious. And then when 5 o'clock came around, you'd look up, surprised, and it has gotten dark outside.
- C: I don't stop work at 5 o'clock.
- S: (smiling). Right, sorry. 6PM? 7PM? 8PM? 9PM? Some other ungodly hour?
- C: Between 8 and 9.
- S: Huh, I didn't know that. Is that... is that a choice of yours, to choose the focus of work for long hours rather than have the darkness scare the crap out of you?
- C: I don't know. No. I have to finish things.
- S: I wonder what the sky is like outside the window while you're working away? Is it possible there is rain, or sunshine, or snow, or fog?
- C: No. I don't know. No.
- S: (After a long pause) What kind of weather do you like?

- C: (Looks up, surprised like WTF is wrong with you) What kind of weather do I like?
- S: Yeah, I'm trying to imagine, and I'm so slow, I don't even know, what kind of weather I might imagine. Like some people really like the light in the spring, or the moonlight, or when it rains you know, or sunshine.
- C: Sunshine.
- S: Sunshine? I wouldn't have predicted that! Like an all-out warm, sunny day, like a summer day?
- C: Yeah.
- S: This might be too hard to answer. I don't know. Can you tell me, when was the last time you spontaneously glanced out your window, at home or at work, and it was all-out sunny, like brilliantly sunny out there?
- C: In August.
- S: This past August?
- C: Yeah.
- S: And it was here in Calgary?
- C: Yeah.
- S: Did you get up at home and open the blinds, and here it was, all the sunshine flooding in?
- C: Yeah.
- S: What did that feel like?
- C: That things will get better.
- S: (Choking up) The sunshine said "things will get better, Christina?" What was your day like that day? What did you do? Did you work...or other things?
- C: Other things.
- S: (After a long silence) Christina was someone there with you that day?
- C: Yes. Andrew was with me... (tearful)
- S: Andrew. May I ask something about him?

C: Yeah.

S: Was Andrew in agreement with the sunshine that things will get better, Christina?

C: Yeah. he told me I don't have to put up with this.

S: He knew maybe a bit about work and what you were up against there, or did he mean something else?

C: No he knew a little. Not all of it. He saw. He was there.

S: He saw a bit about how they treated you, and was all like "I don't approve." And kept telling you "you don't have to put up with this either?" He cared about you?

C: Yeah.

(... chat about the story of Andrew. She was able to say more words during this story, and some life returned but she also cried, because at the end, Andrew left her. Then we were out of time for our session, but I was still a bit preoccupied exactly what I am sending her home to. For good reason, as I was to find out later. So I said to her:)

S: Christina, I want you to know that I promise. I'm here now. And I promise, I won't leave like Andrew, and just tell you you don't have to put up with this. I'm here now, and I swear, I'll do everything I can to figure this out with you. I won't leave you to it. We'll figure this out, we'll fucking make the sun shine! Will you let me try?

C: Yeah. (looking me straight in the eyes)

S: Alright, I'll take that. Man, what in the world am I going to write for next week? A story about the weather?

C: Laughing a little, but looking at me with interest

S: No, I'm kidding. But something about sunshine and promises, I bet. Is that okay? Is there anything you wouldn't want me to put in it, or do I have free reign?

C: Free rein. You do what you want anyway (said graciously as a poke at me, with a little smile)

S: I do, I do! Shit, I do, you caught me. Okay, I'll do what I do, and when can I show it to you. I mean when are we meeting again.... (taking out calendars and hashing it out in good way.).

Months later, Christina told me what this conversation had meant to her. She told me that during those two weeks on leave, she had quite seriously considered taking her life, and had in fact,

written a will to leave her belongings and savings to her beloved little brother. She told me that my words, the “promise” I had made to her had shaken her up, and that she had indeed resolved in that moment to give me a chance and to see whether another possibility might appear. She told me humorously that I seemed so “weird” and “resolved” and “full of hope” that at first, she only decided to give me some time so as not to “disappoint me.”

However, the time and trust Christina gave herself and me that day would soon change into conversations and experiences that would surprise us both. After the “moral reorientation” of our beginning sessions as to what was happening to Christina and who was wrong in that which was happening, we started our work on counter-storying. This counter-storying work took place in a new realm now: we were not just trying to tell Christina’s stories in ways that made her stronger, but I was resolved to raise Christina above the fray of what she had been up against, and find ways of speaking from a “new plane” of being a moral agent and a judge. I was determined to stand in the way of the years of patriarchal trespasses on her life and to find the means for her to cast a moral reading of the situations she had been in, and to see how she had responded and how she wished to respond now. It was my wish that all options remain open to Christina from her new vantage point of a judge of the actions, her own, as well as those of the “boys” at work (I continued to purposefully refer to them as “boys” which always made Christina smile.) I wished that this judge would remain unencumbered and unclouded by patriarchal fog stories about the trustworthiness of her judgments. In these beginning considerations, I asked one question over and over again, “Christina, what would do justice here?” We considered lawyers, resignation letters, notices of complaint. What was “justice-doing” here? What was the political action available to us? I didn’t know but most certainly I was not going to stand in line with all the people who had already told her what to do. In the chaos inflicted upon her, I believed that Christina knew more than she could say.

And indeed she did! Christina’s preferred political action in response to her mistreatment at her workplace was neither to resign as she had in fact earned her position and enjoyed her work, nor to put herself in the position of having to tell this story to her colleagues. Instead, Christina told me that she wished to find the means and words to speak, and speak back, in her ordinary everyday life, in meetings and in encounters with her colleagues. Christina’s chosen response was an alive, embodied insurrection against male violence, all cast in the arena of her work meetings. Christina told me that wanted to speak about the meetings at work in which she was dismissed, interrupted, harassed, or asked to convince the boys of her competence 10 times over for no other reason other than because she was a young woman. She devised a plan “to give 50% less fucks” about the game of misogynist dismissal, and, paradoxically, “care 100% more about my value and my competence.”

I will show these achievements in Christina’s life by way of the therapeutic poems I wrote for her shortly, but to highlight the change in Christina’s life, please read over the following brief transcript excerpt:

- C: Phew, I'm just glad today is over. We had a big meeting, the engineer from the head-office was there to for the final assessment of the project. I have been working late every night for the past week to prepare.
- S: Alright, from your demeanour, I'm guessing it went okay?
- C: (Smiles) Actually it did! I didn't know what to expect from him, but... he wasn't stupid.
- S: Wow, a bright one among the lot!
- C: (Smiles) Yeah, he came to introduce himself to me and talk to me before the meeting and he was actually interested in the project. I even showed him some of the numbers ahead of the time. And at the meeting, it was so funny, the one braggy guy kept talking, and even when it was my turn to present, he kept interrupting. But he didn't even make any sense. He was just doing his salesman thing. I didn't even bother trying to shut it down, but I watched the other guy, the head office dude. He was kind of looking around, you know, all confused, about why is he talking? I think for the first time someone saw it, the wild lack of facts and people just talking out of their ass. Like this guy didn't even work on the project, so why was he talking? So the dude was super serious and didn't join in, he seemed confused... And at one point he kind of looked at me.
- S: What kind of look was this?
- C: I don't know, he looked at me... like he raised his eyebrows.
- S: Like in a conspiratorial manner, like "are you seeing this too?"
- C: (Laughing) Yeah, like "what the fuck is going on here?"
- S: (Laughing) Alright he raises his eyebrows, like "Christina, you with the brain, can you explain this to me, like what the fuck?"
- C: Yeah!
- S: What did you do in response?
- C: I didn't say anything.
- S: Did you look away, like "I can't explain THIS."
- C: No, I looked back at him. Maybe... maybe I kind of... was like, yeah, that's right. That's what it's like.

- S: (Laughing)S so the dude is like “what the fuck” and you, in response are like, “uh. Yeah. BEHOLD the fuck.”
- C: (Laughing) Yes! That’s exactly what it was like! And then sometime after he was like, uh, can we get back to the numbers please. And I kind of snorted.
- S: What??? Like snorting in derision, in laughter?
- C: Yeah, the sarcastic kind.
- S: Man alive, BEHOLD the sarcasm!!! (Raising arms in triumph, Christina laughing)
- C: Yeah! It felt so good, and I just delivered my presentation. I was all calm about it, and the dude from the head office and I had a good conversation about my presentation. And no one interrupted anymore.
- S: Well would you look at that now. Maybe it’s the wrong question, but I am thinking about all the times you went back to your office and felt sick, and were panicking...what was it like to walk back to your office after THAT?
- C: I... I just felt good. For a minute I sat there and I replayed it all. But then I decided, I decided, that it was... that it was right.
- S: That it was right, like correct, like JUST...?
- C: Yeah!
- S: What is the feeling of justice being done, Christina? Consider your words because every woman I speak with here is going to want to know what you say!
- C: It’s... I don’t know. It’s calm. And you know what, I decided, I’ll give 50% less fucks about all of their stupidity from now on.
- S: (Laughing): So: what the fuck? And: behold the fuck. And then: And now, by the way, I give 50% less fucks about the stupidity of the boys.
- C: (Laughing) Exactly. Exactly.

Nussbaum (1997) writes, that in a counter story “we enter, I claim, the world of full human effort, that substance of life, within which alone, politics can speak with a full and fully human voice” (p. 72).

As Christina's life changed right before my very own eyes, something curious happened: the panic attacks disappeared. As she came to view her own responses to her mistreatment as substantial, especially as we traced the long history of her moral clarity and unique agency in advocating for how people ought to be treated, the option of taking her life also did not reoccur to her. Integral to these conversations about a counter-history to her supposed "lack of confidence" that, according to the patriarchal logic, had placed her in harm's way, were Christina's remembrances of her ingenious protections of her younger brother, as well as her recollections of her trustworthy and outspoken friendships with fellow students, most of whom were men, in University. In fact, one of her fellow students from her University days reached out to her in the midst of these counterstory developments to ask her, "Christina, I need your advice. I need to talk to my boss about something difficult. I don't know how to go about it. Would you talk to me and give me advice: I am asking you because you are the only person I know who knows how to do that." I nearly fell off my chair with the sentence "you are the only person I know who knows how to do that." As you might imagine, this sentence was repeated between Christina and me often as a spontaneous and remarkable counter-claim within the counterstory of Christina as a measured "strategist" with a proven talent for the "cool use of intellect when in great peril."

I will reprint two of the many therapeutic poems I wrote to Christina after these conversations. They are the first 2 in a series, entitled, First and Second lesson in fire. The achievements that these poems depict in Christina's life are what Christina called "justice" – the kind of justice that a moral agent brings about in her life on a seemingly ordinary Tuesday afternoon. Please do not read them lightly.

First lesson in fire

In the hallway
 Before my presentation
 He says
 "I like those jeans on you"
 I keep walking
 And put a hand in my pocket.

In the conference room
 Before my presentation
 He says
 "Just lighten up and smile"
 I focus
 And put a hand in my pocket.

In my presentation
 5 sentences into
 My analysis of the numbers
 He says

“Oh let me read those numbers for you”
 I decline
 And put a hand in my pocket.

After it’s all over
 And I’m taking a breather
 He says
 “good job you looked really cute today
 Come out for a drink will’ya”
 I smile
 And put a hand in my pocket:

“My pockets are full of matches
 You see
 And I’m a little busy
 Planning to set all of this on fire.”

Second Lesson In Fire (Or: How Do Revolutions Spark?)

How do revolutions spark?
 They spark in a heart in the womens’ bathroom in front of a mirror
 That is no longer a funhouse mirror
 But shows me
 Calm and clear

They spark
 In the discovery of an unexpected ally
 When he pokes his head in to say
 “They are real cowboys here
 -How do you stand it?”

They spark
 In raised eyebrows
 When I am interrupted again
 By the biggest blowhard of them all
 And the other engineer
 Grows confused at the wild lack of facts
 And makes eye contact with me across the table,
 And raises his eyebrows
 as if to say “WTF”
 And when I hold his gaze
 And shrug: “Yeah, behold the fuck.”

The sparks are not loud:
 They might be
 An askance look
 A blunt word
 An un-skirted walk
 An unprompted thought
 A snarky idea
 When I decide
 To give 50% less fucks
 Because I never agreed to be a casualty
 Of these manmade disasters.

And I realized they were noticed
 When my manager
 Asked: What happened to you?

Revolutions
 Spark
 Against a long history
 Of being pressed
 Out of
 My mirror image
 My allies
 My looks
 My words
 My thoughts
 Against the long history
 Of being pressed
 Into 10 museums of cowboy ideas
 For my mind
 I am re-minded:

Every fire
 Worth its mention
 Sparks with
 A human
 Who didn't just stand it
 But lit a fire
 Over History Repeating.

Christina's life was clearly on the move. I was left to celebrating more and more achievements and returns of her old strengths in her life and taking in these changes in a state of sheer joy.

Panic, without a single “intervention” devised to ease panic!, had receded, and instead, Christina’s words, laughter, sarcasm, and brightness filled our conversations. After a few meetings of conversing about visits with her family and her hopes for her two nieces, I started wondering whether it was time to space out the frequency of our meetings as Christina seemed to be thriving. I decided to check in with her about these considerations at our next meeting when I received an unexpected email from Christina herself the evening before our next appointment. She wrote:

“Sanni. There is something I need to talk to you about. I have wanted to bring it up the last two times, but I chickened out. Something is bothering me, something that happened, and I’m afraid that you’ll judge me. This is the reason I haven’t talked to you about it. It makes me think maybe everything we worked on is a lie. I’m so afraid of this. Please help me.”

I responded with words of reassurance to Christina, and was intrigued, to say the least, about this request. In preparing my thoughts for our conversation, I was aware that something had happened that had caused Christina to question the “rightness” of the story that we had been telling together, and that it pained her to think that whatever happened would after all serve as evidence against her. I was not altogether surprised at Christina’s email, as I have witnessed this before with many of my clients who tell a story of mistreatment or abuse or rape to me for the first time in their lives, experience some relief but then return to me urgently with spontaneous and insistent story snippets that have followed them ever since the telling. “But what about this part of the story? How does this fit?” they ask me, often in tears. Moral deliberations are no small achievement, and clients continue to test their judgments against memories of events, of who said what, and who did what, and in which sequence. These considerations and reconsiderations and unfolding reaches in light of their own knowledges, memories, and pronouncements of others, tell me about the significance and accomplishment of the venture of reaching for moral judgments, especially when such judgments are cast by women whose thoughts and experiences are still routinely called into question as to their trustworthiness.

Whatever had happened, I resolved, Christina and I would reach again for the means to tell the story and weigh it according to her own moral code. Hannah Arendt’s words are often on my mind in times like these: “The manifestation of the wind of thought is not knowledge. It is the ability to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly. And I hope that this ability to think will prevent catastrophes and moral collapses in those rare moments when the chips are down” (Arendt, 1971, p. 446). I resolved to believe in Christina’s ability to tell right from wrong, and beautiful from ugly, in response to something that had happened that was clearly significant to her story going forward.

Out of respect for the rare and intimate beauty of this story I would come to know in the meeting that followed, I will only trace it in its outline, and then provide the poem I wrote for Christina afterwards.

This was the story of an experience Christina shared with a colleague 3 months after she was raped. Her colleague, whom Christina was fond of, invited her to a good-bye party as he was leaving the company for a job overseas. Christina went to the party because of her fondness for

this colleague. After the party, he walked Christina home through a quiet early spring evening and she enjoyed his company. At her garden gate, Christina freely made a decision to invite him in and spend the night.

Christina was afraid that the story of this night would somehow, in my mind, constitute her as “a slut” after all, and then everything the boys at work had been saying would be true after all, and we had had no right to condemn them for their actions and trespasses against her. Christina was afraid that this story would tell us both that she was guilty of her rape after all.

Of course, Christina did not come up with these fears on her own. I need only to point to the long history of rape trials in which women’s consensual sexual experiences are admitted as part of the evidence of what happened on any given night. The patriarchal master narratives about women’s sexual experiences, the when’s, how’s, and who’s of them and in particular, whom we owe confessions of our sexual experiences to, and to what extent these experiences make us either credible or untrustworthy as people, point to the well-known history patriarchal hysteria about the control of women’s lives.

As the story about that night poured out of Christina at our next meeting, with few prompts from me save for soft “what happened next?” questions, and after she had told me what she had found herself saying “yes” to and why she had said “yes,” and what she had felt, I felt tearful at many turns. Here are some excerpts of the questions I found myself asking towards the end of the session.

- “Christina, is it possible that the trust you placed in him, the feeling you had for him that night was, in fact, a triumph of your spirit?”
- “What is the difference between this night and that other horrible night?”
- “Was this night, then, an affirmation of life and of feeling?”
- “Was this night also a living affirmation of the right, your right Christina, to say “yes” and “no” and the insistence that you know the difference?”
- “Was this night an insurrection too, Christina, but of the most surprising kind?”
- “Can it be an insurrection, or a magnificent reclamation, a kind of protest, if you will, when a woman decides freely to say yes to something?”
- “Does this mean that you had decided that both your no and your yes matter?”
- “Was it worth your while to say yes to this?”
- “Is this a night worth remembering?”
- “Why do you suppose that shame has been so hard at work trying to tell you something about that night?”
- “Where is shame now?”

These questions are born out of considerations about what exactly constitutes a “response to trauma.” For a long time now in narrative therapy all that we have had is the metaphor of protest to understand that which people do in response to trauma, but protest is but a small arena, a small imagination, of what can constitute a response. In my work, clients like Christina have taught me to go beyond the limitations of the metaphor of protest, which invokes a worded response or a confrontation of some kind that is always tied to that which happened and perhaps even the actors involved. Christina and I had also conversed in the arena of protest and considered her

responses in the arena of her workplace (i.e., looking men in the eyes, speaking her mind, refusing to check her work when the results did not please the men, blunt comments etc.). These efforts of restoring her responses back to her were of utmost importance. However, the metaphor of protest can constrain our imaginations of the ways that people are responding to trauma by fashioning their lives according to their own will, their longings, and their moral codes. These “fashionings” or designs of lives might not look anything like “protest.” They might look like a walk on a spring evening with a companion of one’s choosing. If I fail to see how my clients have gone on to fashion a life against that which happened, in moral objection to that which happened, in quiet but joyful triumph over that which happened, then I have failed my responsibilities as a witness.

After Christina and I parted that night, here is what I wrote for her about this experience and our conversation. Please do not read it lightly.

Feelings I Don’t Know the Names Of Or: After Rape

When you walked into the garden
 there was nobody left
 the silver of the moonlight was long gone
 not to speak of the gold of sun
 no squirrel rustled in the bushes
 no bird told another of its world
 no magpies argued
 no cat’s lament
 not even the rain would come

It was all a-hush
 And still
 In shades of black.

You stopped at the gate
 And your brown eyes over the garden were
 Warm.
 And for your stopping
 and the gold of your eyes
 I whispered
 “Do you want to come in?”
 And that was my first real sentence in months
 And my breath shook the earth.

I made you a separate bed
 With white linens
 And served you water

And you laid down and said “goodnight.”
 And for your lack of demand
 My breath shook the earth once more.

So I walked away and showered
 And dressed myself for bed
 And took my favourite book
 To my own white linens with me.
 And as I read
 Comforted by the familiar lines I knew so well
 I heard a sound.
 A red robin in my black still garden
 Perched and sang
 A song of early spring.
 I listened
 And my heart shook in disbelief.

And then, was it moments
 Or hours
 Or days
 After its song was finished
 I got up out of bed
 And my bare feet were warm on the wooden floor
 And I tip-toed to your bed and whispered
 “Will you hold me through this night?”

You held out your arms to me
 And I laid myself down with a sigh
 And just as I went to close my eyes
 To the sleepy beat of your heart

I saw
 That the moon had risen over my garden
 And bathed us all
 In gold and silver.

Epilogue

Shortly after this poem was written, Christina applied and was accepted for post-doctoral work at a prestigious University in another city. We negotiated and celebrated this development in her life over the course of a few sessions. But then came the day when she visited me at my office one last time before her move. After a conversation about her jitters, which she herself caved with cool ease by advising me on what exactly to tell the next woman I was to meet who was being mistreated at work both of us grew suddenly silent and awkward. Christina sighed and

packed her bags and then lingered uncharacteristically at the door. "I'll miss you." I said, choked up, a pathetic phrase in light of all that Christina and her life had come to mean to me. She didn't answer and looked away somewhere into the hallway, somewhere she was about to go. But she didn't take the step yet and lingered in the doorway still. I waited too. Then I said, with all the spirit I could muster through my choking back tears, "Alright. Get the fuck out of here and fly. I fucking hate goodbyes!" Christina looked back at me then, and smiled right at me as brilliantly as ever, and the smile went right to my heart. Before I had time to get choked up again, she was gone.

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