

Girls Don't Cry

I was three. My petit body curled up with my head buried in my knees as I watched the monochronic monster in front of me spread his body. The rhythm of his equilateral-shaped head synched with the monotonic texture of the clock on the wall, the moment I spit out the words,

“Mother, I don't want to play...”

A click of tongue accompanied with a familiar shadow of half of an IKEA clothes rail, along with wrinkled hands and her distinctly visible venous index finger filled with masculinity converted to the trademark of my childhood.

My pores swelled and my pupils dilated with terror as I hugged myself even closer. An “ow” with a swift nip seared my inner thigh into deformity followed by a cacophonous scream, a toss on the bed, a flick on the head, a whip on the knees, and a single drop of unadulterated fear.

“What do I say about crying?” She glared ferociously as her demanding palm snatched and grasped my cheek with all her filthy power, “You comprehend why you are wrong now, don't you?”

“I don't really understand what I did wrong...” I murmured soundlessly.

An explicit slap occurred next, in such a smooth manner as if it was almost scripted. As if it was all a part of the printed notes in the soprano line from a Beethoven's numbered symphony or some abstruse smudged-with-ink words from another stanza of Dickinson's soulless bird.

But to me, it was just another typical Wednesday morning with an ungainly piano, an uneasy metronome, and an unlovable mother.

I grew up in a family where my parents strived to force their kids to thrive. A family where my grandparents deceased early, a family where my parents dropped out of schools at the earliest age to earn money for survival, a family where they would debate, kick, and slam doors at each other at 3 in the morning reverberantly about their financial accountabilities, and a family who mask their feelings by smoking, drinking, yelling, and shattering plates without shedding a single tear at the dinner table. I was two and a half when I first heard the phrase, “girls don’t cry” followed by an undoubtedly self-answered question of “it doesn’t solve anything”. Naturally, at the age of 10, I’ve transformed into the master of silent crying. With the daily inner monologue of *why I can’t have a normal life* followed by the automatic answer of *I don’t want to live like this*, with drops of remorse rolling down my swollen cheeks, index fingers flippantly rubbing my eyelids with the dread of being blind, and palm carefully covered my lips to avoid making a single sound, completed the first chord of my aria --- to escape.

To some extent, school was just a hobby. A dispensable one crowded with phony tiny humans and pretentious pedagogues who grumbled about other artificial and grand creatures’ deep pockets. Keeping everything to myself turned into an innate instinct, but the act often arrives with the labels of “pompous”, “unapproachable”, and “scary”. Like one hollow institute, the people in it were undeniably indispensable that coexist with betrayal and pleasantries. At last, I threw myself into the study of English as it metamorphosed into the bass line of my escape. The day when I returned home with a first 97 on my final exam, joy filled my eyes without sprinkling down. No wonder they dwindled my power.

Years passed as I continued to compose the tenor and the alto line of my solo, I acquired the knowledge of concealing lucid emotions. I opened myself up, little by little, as I spot those fellow actors that were just like me. There were only a limited number of them out there, sincere and understanding, diligent and

philosophical. They were all listeners, like me, who occasionally, but always never weep in front of others.

Back home, things appeared to be faintly better with less shouting and screaming and slapping and bewailing. Instead, they've all transformed into...verbally audible words. In some way, those words were worse as they eventually turned into one enormous nest that incorporated harmless gossip, sardonic judgment, mischievous pranks, and inside jokes. My parents eventually tolerated the presence of each other in the same room and occasionally, shared a laugh.

Something has changed.

Maybe it was because of their round-the-clock partying and drinking, maybe it was because of the consistent growth of my age, or maybe it was because the countdown of my escape had eventually begun.

That summer before the finale of my escape was in one way or another, uncanny. Celebrated my birthday at the beach house, ate my surprisingly delicious cuisine while I yodeled in the kitchen, watched me learn how to ride a horse with pitfalls of sand splashed like a water painting against my bottom, decorated another mansion with ridiculously overpriced art, and covertly assessing and chuckling at the Airbnb information lady.

"Mike," Mother murmured in dialect while giggling with Father, "Look at that lady, she's such a nutjob!"

That summer, I witnessed the gathering of my parents. With occasional batter of minute comments back and forth, that was the first time in a long time, my family, was happy.

The day of notating the last measure of the soprano line of my aria finally arrived. I talked to my brother on the phone for the first time in 6 years about leaving for boarding school.

“Finally, freedom, huh?” That was the first thing he said. I could already picture the smirk on his face.

At the airport, Mother and Father stood at the back of the line, glaring at my face while making witty comments at each other.

“Take care.” Father said while he dragged me in front of the currency exchange table, “I knew I’ve been a father who had not always been there for you. For that, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” I said with tears filling up my eyes, “You are here now.”

Like Mother, my father wasn't one who talk much or was good at expressing feelings. I forgave him.

He patted me on the shoulders and returned me to Mother. She dragged me to the exact same spot while she spoke the words with her usual fickle tone, “Don't you dare forget to call me every day when you get there.”

“I will.” I nodded, willingly compelled myself to blink and erase my trace of tears, “Don’t miss me and you know I won’t cry.”

“That’s right.” She said affirmatively with pride, “Girls don’t cry, this is your power.”

“I know, Mother.”

I dragged my five gigantic suitcases across the line as I prepared to board. The tears in my eyes finally plummet down and fell on my mask as I wiped them away aggressively right after I walked away from both of them. For the first time in a long time, I was sobbing. In front of others. I wouldn’t dare to make a sound and ensured no one around me noticed, but my tears seemed to have a mind of their own, continued to make poor decisions. I decided to turn around for the one last time, just for one last revenge of those sleep-deprived nights, just for one last payback of those piano days.

As I turned around, I witnessed Mother wailing on my father's shoulders as he waved with a smile on his face. At that moment, I wasn't sure what I was feeling but I was well aware of the fact that it was the first time in seventeen years of my existence...

my mother cried.

"I love you."

She mouthed softly as I dragged my every step across the airport carpet.

That was the first time those 8 letters surfaced in my toneless life.

Yet somehow in my heart,

I always knew.