

Recognize My Falling

Alongside Niagara Falls runs a wooden boardwalk. As I wander down the weaving path, it's as though the water walks beside me. I am stunned by its sheer size and depth, how the rivers converge at the lips of the enormous horseshoe-shaped canyon and plummet into the pandemonium of a big bowl of mist and rapids. The low steady rumble of the water reverberates out of the bowl, calling me downward.

I notice a sign for a boat tour, *Maid of the Mist*, and seize the chance to experience the falls intimately. Before climbing aboard the vessel, I am outfitted in a pair of flip flops and a bright blue plastic poncho. Packed onto the deck of a large white boat trimmed in emerald green, I steady myself as the engine groans to life lurching me out into the commotion of the current. Slowly, the boat makes its way up river as I watch the water barrel pass, insistent and endlessly flowing. I wrap my hands around the cool, slippery railing in nervous anticipation. Next to me stands my husband Jeff, who tentatively places his hand next to mine.

Back home, we live in a three hundred and fifty foot square apartment sparsely decorated with hand-me downs from relatives and newly purchased wedding gifts. Sitting in the corner of our living/dining room is a giant, navy blue bean bag, a wedding gift of my own making. One evening, after college classes and part-time work, we settled into my oversized gift to watch a movie. My head rested on Jeff's shoulder. My arm draped across his chest. My hand caressing the hairs on his arm, playing with his fingers. I nuzzled his stubbly neck, absorbing the comforting sweet, salty smell of him. In return, he kissed me, and in the fooling around that followed, I heard him inhale deeply, his cheek up against mine, his lips pressed into my ear.

That sound, his breathing, traveled at light speed to the darkest hollows of my soul, to corners I didn't know existed, and unleashed a spillway to a deluge of forgotten and fragmented sufferings: feeling small, bodies on top of mine, terror in my throat, panting in my ear. Abruptly, my body froze. My fists curled into balls of rubber band muscles. My spine constricted into a rigid cord. My stomach clenched as I took in a quick breath of air to hold on to tightly. While my body systematically closed down, my mind became glaringly awake. My eyes burst open, moving up and down, side to side, scanning the room frantically. My heart thumped in my chest like an alarm, but my body refused to move.

Days later, I stood before Jeff, shoulders pulled inward, eyes on the ground, trying to explain why I weep when he touches me, why I panic when he leaves the apartment, why I spend hours in front of the TV instead of talking to him, why I'm not the same person I was

when we married. The words awkwardly yet forcefully tumbled out of the cavern of my mouth, spreading out all over the floor. I tried to gather them up, restrain myself, build a dam.

I whispered, humiliated.

"I'm not okay...

The night on the bean bag...

...something inside of me.

It's so big...

I feel so big."

Unsettled, he studied me. The brow on his forehead narrowed with confusion. His eyes blinked in rapid succession as they fought to look away while he fought to look at me. His mouth seemed to stand at attention, waiting for instructions while his brain scrambled for something to say.

"I know", he said, then he filled the silence with words. Reassurances and it's okays. But how could he know? How could anyone understand the vastness of this shame and pain? Who can understand what is unspeakable? We traveled to Niagara as an escape.

As the falls draw near, the sound of the water crescendos into a deep and thunderous pounding which echoes inside my chest and ears. Mist swirls off the one hundred and sixty seven foot waterfall like a torrential rainstorm. Water seeps through the collar of my shirt, rises up the length of my sleeves. I pull the plastic hoodie of my poncho over my head and cinch it tight leaving a small circle of my face exposed. I raise my pocketed face to the center of its crashing chaos, and suddenly, once more I'm thrust into the center of my own beastly pain.

Niagara's water becomes a mirror. If this falling water could speak, it wouldn't. Instead of words, it shows me how it turns itself over and inside out, swirling and twisting around searching for someplace to land. It shows me the millions of tears that stream down its face again and again merging into a river running away. It opens its mouth wide and settles into the silence of that big gaping hole.

Standing in the belly of this monstrous marvel, the monster inside of me - the beast that drags me endlessly into the past uprooting my sense of self and peace - feels seen. I let out a guttural scream into the wild water. Only Niagara knows there are no words. Only falling.