

I asked people that trusted me:

What's your worst pain?

In order to get the most honest answers possible, I recorded them without their consent. I transcribed their words and because some of their pains were very shocking, I decided to photograph their drawers.

Yolanda Leal

1998

page 1

Interviews documented
by Yolande Lévesque

&

page 4

A reflection by
Cristina Kennington

page 5

Interviews documented
by Yolanda Leal

&

page 41

A reflection by
Cristina Kennington

My worst pain in life... To feel I harm the people I love, that's what's harmed me the most.

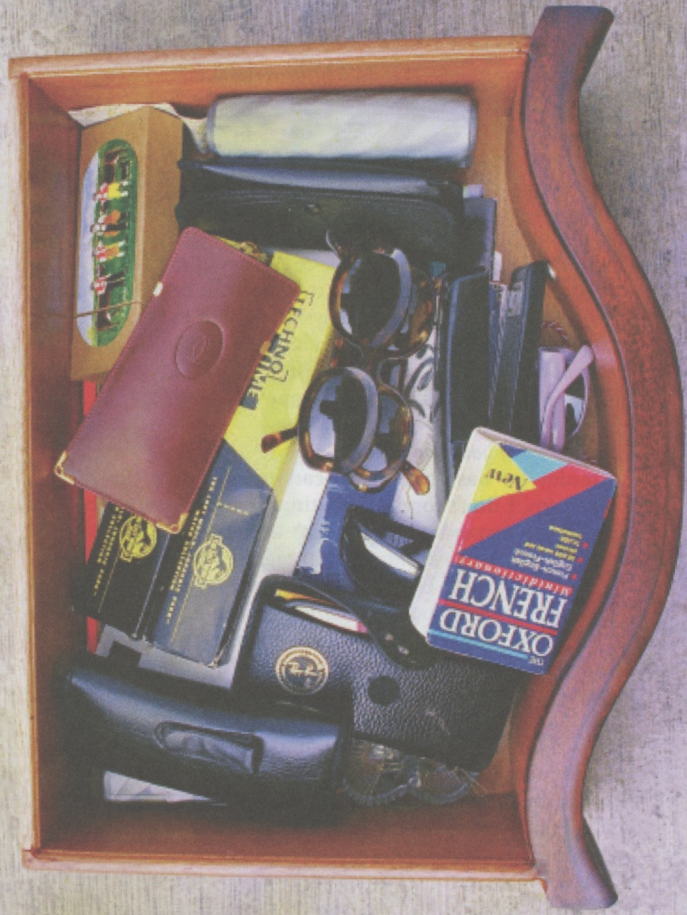
Oh, wow, so it's not physical pain, then?

No, man—none of the broken bones or any of that are as bad as when I was going to be sent to rehab while my mom was dying. They aren't as bad as the girlfriends I've loved, and suddenly making them go through really awful moments. That, and my dad, who I love and all that, and not being the son he would've wanted. Not loving myself enough to say, "Enough, man; you're microcosmic in size; don't get hung up on it. You're not that big." Being selfish; like yesterday, when I hurt my dad. Those are the greatest harms, the ones that hurt the most.

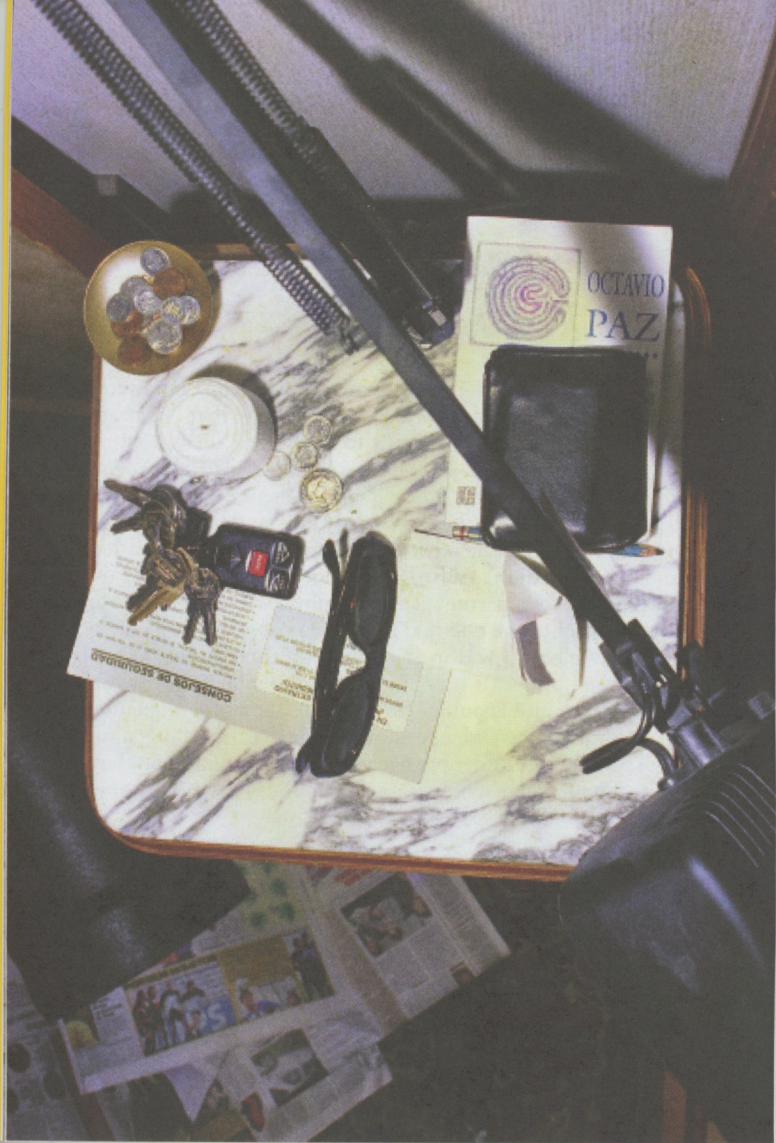
Like yesterday your dad, what?

Yesterday he was going for vacation and I sent him off all fucked up. I don't forgive him things, and that's wrong. He doesn't understand me; he doesn't understand how I can resent him if he's given me everything. But he doesn't understand that I haven't been able to forgive him for some things, that I was never good enough for him in anything, despite being the best football player at school or whatever. And I wanted to please him, but I never pleased me, and now I believe that I never end up pleasing anyone I love. It's nuts of me, because I think I never please myself in anything. I mean, I'm so hard on myself that yesterday—I hit the damn fire straight ahead. The guy from 911 was panting far behind me. I was the one that went, yeah, through here, it's shorter this way and all that; and as soon as I finished, and was just chillin', and everyone was still in there getting smoked, and I told myself, "You're wrong, man, what a bum!" All the fucking team still in it and I'm just chillin', looking at the sky. Up a tree resting, that's what's pained me the most.





I think that the greatest pain, really, is that I can't fall in love with a guy. It hurts me that I can't fall in love, that I'm afraid. I'm so afraid to really commit to somebody for a lifetime. What a drag that it has to be for a lifetime! Instead of being able to love someone a little bit, and someone else a bit, and then somebody else, and somebody else, and for there to be no pain. Because there's always pain, one way or another, and besides, I didn't know I was jealous, but I'm jealous, and that's a drag for a partner. And as to physical pain, I've broken everything, but the one that hurt the most was when I dislocated my elbow. I was in rehabilitation three months and I put on 48 pounds. It was physical and mental pain because my arm hurt and I couldn't do anything and at the same time I was putting on weight, because I couldn't do anything and I kept eating more and more because of that trauma. And then, forget about having to lose those 48 pounds I gained in a year, ah!



Physical, or in the soul?

*Whichever. The one that hurt you most.
My brother's death, I think.*

*Oh, wow! So, it was the soul, then.
Yes.*

And physical?

[Sigh] Physical? I've had many severe ones, my knee fracture...

*But the one that hurt you the most was... what did you call it? The
pain in the soul.*

Oh, of course, and that's the one that has healed the least.

Really!

By now, yes, but a loss takes long to heal.

And was that long ago?

Twelve years old; I was just a kid.



14-04-98

What do you mean, like my worst pain?

*The one where you say, this one did hurt.
Where someone did something to me?*

*I don't know, it can be physical or emotional, or the worst pain.
I've had strong pains but in different phases and different things. I can't compare one with another.*

*But which is the one that...?
The one that's lasted the longest?*

*Yes, or the pain that's had the greatest impact on you.
Well, when Fernando left me. Not so much when he left, but rather everything that happened later, when I didn't end up leaving and found out about stuff he was doing on the side and all that. Also, when my grandma passed away it hurt a lot, but I was a just a kid. That's why I say I can't compare one pain with another, but if we look at it as which pain has hurt me most? Which one has lasted the longest? The thing with Fernando still hurts...*

*Why do you laugh?
Well, yeah, I'd rather laugh so I won't cry. It still hurts and in different ways; it hurt me when he left, it hurt me when he went back to the wedding and told me to piss off. It hurt me when I found out what he did with Jorge, it hurt me when he came to Roberto's wedding. So get this, he arrived on Thursday, and on Friday he told me to piss off, no more, that this wasn't fair for me, whatever. "Stop it, don't tell me if it's fair or not, you're the one that doesn't want anything. Accept that you're the one who doesn't want anything anymore; don't tell me that it's because of me; stop the bullshit."*

And later, he never accepted it, but I knew. I know that at the time he didn't want anything with me because he was with John. And that hurt me too, that I would ask him about it and I'd say, "What's up with this guy?" Because he spoke about him a lot: "What's up, is he your boyfriend?" or "Do you like him a lot?" "No, he's just a friend," and to date he doesn't accept that he had something going on with him, but he did! The lies hurt a lot, the fact that he lied to me. Right now it hurts that he won't talk to me, maybe he has someone, and he doesn't want to talk to me so he doesn't have to tell me he has someone. The last time I spoke to him—that was when his parents left here, around February—and then, by February twenty-something, we spoke, and everything was fine. After that, I called him four times over one month: I left him voicemails three times, and once I left him a message with a girl that lives with him. This was two months ago and he hasn't returned my calls. So I'm not going to call him... This is what hurts me now. What he did with Jorge no longer hurts me. What he did with John no longer hurts me, but Fernando has been a very great pain for me, because it's been hurting for two years now, one way or another. There have been many pains that at the time hurt me a lot. With my grandma, I was the favorite. I was 8 years old when she died, but I was her golden child. And all my aunts were jealous, because she loved me more than their children and I wasn't the oldest grandson or the youngest grandson, but I was the favorite. And besides, the day that my grandma died, my two sisters and I were having dinner with her because she lived with us. And so my mom was going to a party that day, and the beauty salon was a block from our house and she was there. We were with the maid and my grandma. And suddenly, she started choking and I ran to my mom and said, "Grandma is choking," and so my mom goes back to the house, and there's shouting, and my uncles arrived and they kicked us out of the house and they shut us in a car on the street, "Don't come in!" I saw ambulances come and go

and then a priest arrived. Everyone came out crying, and so I said, "She died." It was very shocking for me, and at that time it hurt me a lot but when you're eight it hurts, then you forget. After that I did cry whenever I thought about my grandma, but it's to be expected, more at that age, in a month you forget your grandma died. I think those have been my two greatest pains. Right now I can't think of any other example of something that has hurt a lot, but the pain that has lasted most is Fernando's.

My worst pain?

Yes. Which one has it been?
Well, I don't know. Why?

Just out of curiosity.

My worst pain, hmmm... My whole life, if I had to say so.

Your whole life?

Yes.

How?

With a son I have.

Really?

When he was ten, he started doing crazy stuff, and for all my life it was just him, and even today, he's 35 already, and even today. That's why I came in late today, because he arrived last night all crazy, and well, we quarreled. Everyone's afraid of Coi. He's got a huge body; he's a really big bricklayer.

And what's Coi's story?

Well, he's always lived at the Pen. One time he stole a huge TV set that he could barely get up the hill. He was gonna leave it here at home and I said, "No, no, take it away from here, don't bring that stuff here." Well, they caught him; they grabbed him from beneath the bed, on the hill where he lived with Juana, his wife. Well, then he was at the Pen and I went to see him. And the men that were in there were going to watch soccer, the judges and all that, and the huge TV set was there: "Bring it," the others would say and curse. "No, it's Coyito's." It was a stolen TV, and they took it and they'd say, "Ask Coyito for it." But Coyito has been in jail since he was



little, always! The only one, no one came out like him, no one, just him. All the kids are afraid of him; they run away from him, even grown-ups.

And why do they call him Coi?

Because of Coi. He's real, real skinny, you can see all of this [his chest], real ugly and all tattooed, all of it, all of it, all of it.

And don't you have pictures?

You're just like your mom. The other day she saw him and she told me, "Is that your son? Not that he's ugly, ma'am, but just look at how he goes about." I tell her, "Yes, it's because he's a *mariguano*, ma'am". He's all ugly, a total junkie, absolutely everything, everything. The other day he was all black, walking down the hill and the little one saw him and said, "Oh, just look at that, run!" Poor little guys!

Why all black?

From the *sarolo* or cement. Who knows what he used.

Sarolo?

That white stuff for shoes. And he's up there on the hill, higher up from me. He hasn't been in fights anymore. He used to at first. The police used to come often and they'd drag him out naked. Not anymore. It's because the cops follow him on their horses; they ride up the mountain, to the top, the huge horses, and then he sees them and he runs, but the cops climb up and he goes all the way to the top, up until the highest top and you can see everything looking down. Because, where we live, you can see everything down the hill. "Here come the cops!" and the whole *mariguano* posse runs out. There are many, the corner is full of them.

But are they smoking and harming people there?

No, no, nobody, but they don't want to see them there sitting down. No, they don't pick any fights; people walk by, they're

calm. Coi is always laughing. Yes, he's laughing. I know when he's smoked marijuana because of his laugh and the red eyes, but when he slips something else, he looks very ugly. He switches! The worst is stealing because it's the Pen from there, but Coi, yes, when he was 15, 16, 20 years old, he was up there with an aunt a few blocks from the house, he'd jump over every house, every fence.

What for? They'd catch him because he had stolen.

Yes.

And this morning, what happened?

He came last night. I could tell immediately that he wasn't stoned. He was on something else. He arrived and he kept his eyes peeled when looking at señora Silvia, and Marcelo says, "Tell him to get out of here because I'll carry him and if I grab him I'll throw him down the cliff down there!" "Marcelo, no, just look at what state he's in. Leave 'im. He'll come back healthy tomorrow, leave 'im." And that one in the kitchen dining and this one, sitting here. Then he'd do this to the dishes, "Look, mum, what he is doing", "Leave 'im, leave 'im." "How, mum?!" And then he leaves the house and he still looks at Marcelo and he goes: "What, what?" And, oh my God! These *mariguanos* kill and do something and then Marcelo... *Ay* no! And today I came in very late, the clock struck eight, half past eight, because I was going to go down for coffee. Well, I took the coffee outside and I left it there for him.

For Coi?

Uphill, yes, and there I am begging for him to come down, to come down, and he wouldn't come down. No, well, I closed and I locked it and I closed it so he wouldn't get in. I was walking down and watching to see if he'd come down. *Ay*, no!... I have his records since he was a little kid; he was like this, all his life.

But what's his name?

His name is José Antonio. He's a gardener here at Contry. He no longer does anything like stealing, not anymore; he doesn't want to be in the Pen. It's been ten years since he ended up there.

And how many years has he been in the penitentiary, or are they periods of four months, or a year?

For years, every year or every six months, or something like that, but not anymore. He's lasted quite a while. It's been ten years that he hasn't, because he says he doesn't want to be there anymore. They mess with them so badly, what they do to them, they pour soda water in their eyes, they throw them in the water, they take them to the dam and they throw them in with their feet tied up all the way to the bottom.

Really? At Topo Chico Penitentiary?

Yes, and then the soda water up their noses. Man! He'd even get nosebleeds; the little veins burst. I'd tell him, "If you don't learn you'll be sent back," and he'd fall in it again. "Get me out of here, mum, I won't do it again". I won't do it again. They never change.

They forget about it.

They forget about it, just him, because these ones I've got, no one has fallen, nobody.

How many do you have?

Seven and six. Seven sons and six daughters, and now, now not anymore. I'm alone now, it's just me. I used to provide for Marcelo; now I don't give him anything to eat and I don't clean after him. It's over now...

And so you said, "I'll come to the hill."

Yes. Yes, because we lived over there by Garza Sada and I said, "Let's go there, better." They were giving plots of land here in

San Angel, and suddenly we took the knoll, on the very hill. I would fall asleep and he'd be there by the window keeping a lookout, because the police would arrive and "Run!"

And so when you were on the hill already...

Like that, on the hill. They'd arrive at night like that. It was three or two in the morning when they arrived, he already knew. "Run!" and he was gone, up the hill. They wouldn't catch him there. That's why I made him stay on the hill, so he could run.



Physical?

The worst pain that you've had.

My worst pain, when I wanted to get an abortion, or breaking up with Rosa and with Daniel.

Those two; those three.

Or when my brother molested me, I think. But you know, I've really known how to manage them very well. The thing with my brother could've broken me into pieces. He molested me from the time I was five years old until around ten. I feel that I handled it very well. I don't know if that's what made me gay. I've come to think that, but I'm not going to blame him either. There haven't been pains that you'd say, "Fuck!," thank God. I don't know if I hide them too much and one day they're going to make me explode, or I knew how to handle them well, but in the end, suffering in that there's a pain, no. It's funny, I swear that I was thinking exactly this about two weeks ago, because I've been overly happy lately. I have streaks of being too happy for several months. "Is it imaginary?", I've asked myself, "Could it be a lie that I'm happy, so happy?" Because I think it's very strange. "What problems have I had? No problem has really left such a mark on me". I mean, I hope I'm being honest, but I don't know if it's true or not. If it's honest, that's fucking awesome.



Physical or mental?

Whichever hurt you most.

You have to tell me which one, because I've got a very strong physical pain, which was when I fell off a trampoline that was ten feet high; and a mental one, when I moved to Mexico City with my partner and he began to make out with a chick in the living room in my house, kissing on the mouth. I walked in and I poked him in the back, and he pushed me.

But which one hurt you more? The one on the trampoline...
 One is physical and the other is mental, emotional.

But did they hurt the same?

Well, not the same, but like, whatever, similar, a lot.

Was the one with your partner a long time ago?

Three years ago. I had just moved to Mexico City. I get there after leaving behind my whole life in Monterrey to go live with him. He throws a party, and so everyone thinks he's straight, he starts kissing with a chick, but a skank, trashy, ugly, dark, and I cried for like three hours nonstop locked in the room, like, "Welcome to Mexico City."

You didn't stay with him?

Yes, that was my second worst pain, to have stayed.

How did you fall off a ten-foot high trampoline?

I was climbing on, and the rail didn't reach the edge, and then I saw that some cousins were coming full speed towards me, I got scared, I wanted to get back on the ladder and I fell.

But you didn't fall in the water?

No, I fell on the ground.

Did you break something?

My head, eleven stitches on my skull, skull fracture and all.
When I reached the hospital I was almost dead, they revived
me and all. That's what left me crazy, I think.

And how old were you?

9 years old... Horrible...



(Piano music)

And I was impressed by how she was singing with all her heart. I told her, "Lucila, I hope you always sing like this. What a beautiful thing you sang!" And she says, "You know why I sang like that? I just lost my boyfriend." See, he broke up with her and left for the United States, but she came singing, dying.

Is it that your pain calms down with music?

No, but it's because one feels. That's why Beethoven used to say, "I create my sad songs from my great feelings, from my great sufferings." There are different kinds of artists: Heifetz, a great violinist; I heard him when I was 14 years old. He had two violins, and a suit, and I haven't forgotten that he wore a peacock tailcoat. No! It was black, he razed everything to the ground. That man was very happy whenever he played. Amazing, so handsome, playing beautifully at 24; women followed him around the world. How lovely! He was a *virtuoso* in every sense; he never lied to anyone. He married a famous movie star and he'd tell her to go with him so that he wouldn't be bothered. Like that, well, look at the flip side, a multimillionaire earned money from the records and from everything; he made a lot of money, and then a friend of mine, who is also a violinist, told me that he separated. I said to him, "Well, why did they divorce?" since he's such an upright man. He was a man who was devoted to the violin; for him, his life was the violin, nothing else mattered—not the kids, not anyone. His children hated him. How sad, after behaving as well as he has. But to him, his life was the violin and music, not his wife nor the kids.



Have you had strong pains that through the music you...?

Yes, one daughter died. My wife played piano very well, and when she began having children she began to play completely differently. She never believed me; she thought I was mocking her. She played better than me, I'd tell her, "Girl, you're playing so nice. You're playing so different." She used to tell me, "Don't mock me." She was already a mother. I had 9 kids. My wife was a family woman, really; she said that I was, but she was the one who, just as soon as our kids grew would say, "Let's see how they succeed." Like that, so ignorant. In that sense she was an ignorant woman, and I say, so many of them were gravely ill, grave children, will they die or won't they. That screws you up right here, and then you have to empty it out somewhere, in music, right?

My worst pain is one in my spine when I was in bed for two days in so much pain that I wanted to kill myself. My doctor used to treat my teeth without anesthesia; she'd tell me, "Raise your hand when it hurts," and then I'd raised it now and then, and Ayl, but without raising my hand. I didn't even know what toothache meant or anything else, until I knew about my back. I said, oh fuck, this one is, without a doubt.

That's the worst pain in your life?

Yes, in my whole life. Why are you asking? If it's a joke, just don't start...

No, no, no, just out of curiosity.

Now I'm going to ask you: you're in the desert with a lot of heat and sand, you have five companions with you, a horse, a lion, a sheep, a cow, and a monkey. You need to get rid of one of them. Which one do you get rid of?

The lion.

First the lion, and then you keep going, the same circumstances, and then who?

The lamb.

The lamb, still same conditions. Another. A third one.

Cow, monkey, and what?

Cow, monkey, and horse.

Cow.

Cow. Now you have two and you must get rid of one.

Horse.

And you're left with...



The monkey.

See, just like me, I kept the monkey. Well, that's a Japanese archetype test. Every animal symbolizes something. The lion means pride, which was what you got rid of first; then you got rid of the sheep, the sheep means friendship; then you got rid of the cow, the cow means basic needs; then you got rid of the horse, which means passion; and you kept the monkey, which means children.

Children!

I kept the monkey, too.

Wow! Okay.

Yes. It's a test I saw on the Internet.



Man! When Paulina left, days ago, I tell you. It was when she left and she left me there and she got mad because I wouldn't drive her to the airport.

And how long did it hurt you for?

Right now she's the one that's hurting. I called her on Saturday. Aaaah!, she cried and cried on the phone.

And how long ago did she leave?

In November, and she lasted two years with me, like a year and a half. Well, we'd been together four years, fighting for like year and a half, and she got used to the good things, and now she tells me that I was her best friend. "I don't want to be your best friend!" and she'll go, "You're never satisfied with anything. You're always bugging me, all life long!" I think that's the nicest thing that anyone has said to me in my life, really.

And you haven't seen her since November?

No! I saw her in December, and I saw her now.

Oh, well.

Ah, you see!

My knee.

Your knee?

My knee. And that's my most fucked up physical pain.

And emotional?

That's a secret I won't tell you.

But what happened to your knee, then?

Football. My knee cracked with a strong play. It fucking cracked, six or seven years ago.

Does it still hurt?

No, I recovered nicely and I saw the best doctors in Monterrey. I went to Houston and I ended with the best doctor in Mexico, who's the knee doctor for the UNAM Pumas in Mexico City, which was the champion team back then. He was the doctor for the American football team, for the first division football team, and he's from the Faculty of Medicine there at the UNAM, Mexico's largest university. And I turned out fucking great. In fact, the only fault there is, if you touch here... Touch here. He left a small bone that sticks out a bit, because he forgot to slice it, and then, after it had healed and everything, he touched me and said, "Ah, you have this bone that popped out. No biggie, though. Come over; we'll make an appointment and get an operating room and I'll slice it so it's smooth." I told him, "No operating room and no slicing," and I'll stay like this.

And you don't want to tell me about the emotional one?

No, I don't go around talking about my intimate life.





My tummy, my leg and, um... my tummy, my leg and my foot and my head.

Does your tummy hurt a lot, Romano?
Yes.

What do you feel?
Hmm, that I don't poop.

And it hurts because you can't take a poop...
Yes, because the poop comes out very strong. Because the poop comes out very strong!

And your leg, why does it hurt?
Because I stay on the potty a lot!

And your leg falls asleep, or what?
Yes.

Does it tickle or what do you feel?
It tickles.

And your foot? Why does your foot hurt?
Also because I stay on the potty a lot.

And your head, why does your head hurt, Romano?
Because I do a lot of exercise.

What exercise do you do?
Somersaults.

Somersaults! When you're in gym class...
Yes.

I hurt the people I love; There's always pain, one way or another; Loss takes a long time to heal; I can't compare one pain with another; My worst pain, hmmm.... my whole life, if I had to say so; I've never had a pain that has torn me to pieces; That was my second worst pain, to have stayed; Is it that your pain calms down with music?, Which one do you get rid of?; That's a secret that I won't tell you; My tummy, my leg and my head.

Physical pain can be encapsulated in an event, an illness, a name. Emotional pain invades us, confounds us, shapes our paths or leaves us without one. It influences what we feel and think in our daily lives. When asking "What's your worst pain?" in the context of fellowship and friendship, the most intimate memories and pains are evoked.

We put our pains away in the hope that someone stumbles across them, perhaps providing them with a different meaning. Badly hidden secrets that surface with a single question; drawers hidden in plain sight to be opened for prying eyes. Both physical and emotional pains become part of who we are; they can help us grow or can prevent us from doing so. We have the need to communicate what we are, what we have lived and even what we hide. When we communicate with someone who listens, we reaffirm our existence, we process what we lived and we delve into our life experience.

And, like pain, the need to communicate is experienced differently by each one of us. For some, it's an uncontrollable urge that springs with the first intimation, whereas for others it is an easily suppressed need. Why do we remember? Why can't we forget? Why do we hoard objects? Why can't we throw them away? In the midst of drawers and secrets, the other's pain makes us turn to look at ourselves. What lies within our drawers? How would we answer that question?

Of the things we keep in drawers, how much have we kept by choice, by will? Do we keep it in order or disarray? Does it help understand who we are, or does it prevent us from recognizing ourselves in front of the mirror? What can we do with what we keep? Why won't most of us clean out our drawers? Why do we avoid turning our gaze toward our souls?

We tend to keep our maladies as objects—as unchangeable, immutable situations. We think that what happened is something finished, which cannot be modified. We use these memories—objects—as elements to tell ourselves our story, our identity and our destiny.

We all build our identities and our lives through stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. In this retelling of stories we grant importance, value and relevance to different elements.

It's called “narrative” in psychoanalysis, and it isn't static: the same story can be told a thousand ways. Although the story doesn't change and we can't turn back time, we can tell it more completely, emphasize different aspects and thus, through narrative, the processes of reconstruction, construction and re-appropriation allow us to change meanings, see experience not only from one angle, but from all, weigh each experience differently, and even draw strength from what used to make us weaker.

Cristina Kennington

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