

Predilection & Pain: The Spectacle of Feminine Composure

words **KAREN LEONG**

“There were always in me, two women at least, one woman desperate and bewildered, who felt she was drowning and another who would leap into a scene, as upon a stage, conceal her true emotions because they were weaknesses, helplessness, despair, and present to the world only a smile, an eagerness, curiosity, enthusiasm, interest.”

— **ANAIS NIN**

(i)

The most recent time I left Hong Kong International in tears was this February, outside the departures hall on the glass-plated L1 of the International Terminal. I was competing with my father in a screaming match that left my face mulchy with snot. Originally I didn't want him to take me to the airport. In a direct act of attrition, my grandmother made a snide aside to my mother and sister and others about *my heartless ways* that led me to renegeing on my initial decision — and this turned out to be a stitch-up.

My father came to pick me up. It was the first time he had done so since 2017 when I first left for Sydney, and with real rancour, we let each other have it. This would have come as a bit of a shock to the passersbys who darted away from us, locked in a dead heat on the walkway where we erupted in the same slew of Cantonese and profanity-laced Queen's English. After thirteen years of percolating rage, the script was the same: both felt the latter treated the other terribly, he felt no move from my part to patch up our relationship, and I felled any advances from him to make up after years of maligning my mother. It was botched, prickly, and very old news.

“Don't you FUCKING speak to me like that,” I said, angling away from the blob where his sneering, angry face poked through the haze of my vision. I was reminded of when Toni Collette had infamously said the same to her son in the film *Hereditary*: “DON'T you swear at me, you little shit! Don't you EVER raise your voice at me! I am your MOTHER! You understand?!” In the movie, her own face is blotchy and bubbling. She's overcooking with emotion before she coaxes herself back into many roles of reprisal: mother, daughter, preparer of dinner. Without missing a beat, Collette's face smoothes out with imperceptible blankness — and back to her chicken she goes.

[A video depicting the very clip above](#) made rounds on Twitter and Tiktok in 2021. Colette transforms from hysteria into what can only be described as a pastiche of glamour; complete with an exaggerated smokey eye and a puckered, glossy O where her gaping mouth used to be. In the shelf life of our media cycle the video is now considered obsolete, even ancient. What clings like a burr for me is the seamlessness of the edited reaction layered over the original. Even the motion of her transformation turns into a serendipitous still — static, fixed in place in the higher name of self-embellishment.

When I finally leg it inside Customs, I catch my own pruny reflection on the side of a reflective pane. Experimentally, I turn my head at a 90-degree slat. I make sure I smile widely and evenly for the immigration officer in front of me, dimpling a little as if I am no less, and the division between my state at hand and the photo on the little blue book is minimal, at best. It then began to dawn on me that my shock response to pain is my composure.

(ii)

The imagery of composure after duress is a feminine one. I think of the Greek Menander when he says, quite baldly, “[Woman is a pain that never goes away.](#)” In response to that, Leslie Jamison’s [Grand Theory of Unified Female Pain](#) posits that very assignment as a threat: the belief that being a woman *requires* being in pain signifies the pain as “the unending glue and prerequisite of female consciousness.” I mewl at old wounds by making sure I am unflappable, and as such, am granted passage in the world away from humility and threat. I have always found this to be the case — the world as it stands only seeks to bludgeon the possibility of a woman without suffering. So I will do my best to rebut this the only way I know how: with a heavy and adept hand at glamourising the tragic.

(iii)

A recent reincarnation of Princess Diana in the movie *Spencer* has Kristen Stewart uttering this line to her reflection while alone in the bathroom: "Don't ever let them see you cry." Lady Spencer’s decision to take refuge in the bathroom is bloated with contextual importance — by all accounts, Diana was a famous bulimic. But more than that, the bathroom was a place where she is portrayed to have access to as a co-opted place of shelter. In-between stodgy royal dinners and the stinging eye of her family, Di has the opportune capability to do something we’ve all tried to do — regain the upper hand.

To a friend, I texted the same words last Christmas Day. We have both taken to composing ourselves in the toilets of our family homes, as holidays tend to indicate a surfeit of conflict for all who have grown up with their father in-absentia or their mothers as bullies. The quote has become a rallying cry every time any of us identify firstly that our masks are slipping and secondly that our pain flaring up is a chance to curb it into submission, making us like Di, delicate, steel-forged, and trudging on.

This is a more comic reiteration, borne out of my friends’ pseudo-American, Carrie Bradshaw vocal affect: *Don't let them see you sweat, kiddo.*

(iv)

In [Fingertips](#), Lana Del Rey sings,

*I couldn't hear what they said on the telephone
I had to sing for the prince in two hours
Sat in the shower
Gave myself two seconds to cry*

*Sunbather, moon chaser, queen of empathy
I give myself two seconds to breathe
And go back to being a serene queen
I just needed two seconds to be me*

With such authorised certainty, one is sure to believe that Elizabeth Woolridge Grant knows how to collect herself after a meltdown. Her decades of shying away and courting the limelight in equal measure have proven this need for self-possession as fundamental to every aspiring wayward woman, desperate to prove her worth through the infinite reserves of her pain. *See how well I am doing? It is an act of self-love to pretend that I am infallible. It is beautiful to wear out my wounds like armour, claiming it as a bespoke part of me.*

Then, there's the East Asian bent to everything I know. This scene from Min-Jin Lee's novel [Pachinko](#) rattles in my head all the time:

"A woman's lot is to suffer."

"Yes, go-saeng." Kyunghie nodded, repeating the word for suffering. All her life, Sunja had heard this sentiment from other women, that they must suffer—suffer as a girl, suffer as a wife, suffer as a mother, die suffering."

The complication of my identity as a woman from Hong Kong is one that infringes on this fantasy a little. I do not claim the same free-falling liberation of Lady Di or Lana Del Rey, who can wade freely in their tragedy-making without the matrices of race. Appearing demure or subservient is simply not an option. Refraining from my feminine right to self-aggrandise is not an alternative either. So, what now? The secret third thing I desired could only be traced to something beyond the curtain and the illusions when I first understood the very nature of hurting.

(v)

When I think of the self-possessed, I think of my 嫲嫲 — who in her senility has become a thorn by my side. It is not easy for me to admit that she is the paragon of feminine composure herself. My father's mother has high, full-angled cheekbones, and the same lips I line with brown pencil. Once at the age of twelve, she guided my hand around the clefted ridge that formed a crescent moon on her forehead. A present, she told me, from the Japanese, when they were bombing her hometown of Lufeng as she and her sister were breaking safe passage into Hong Kong. She looked directly at me with an arch in her eyebrow. "So make sure you protect your own sister, like I did. Even if they are trying to kill you." Following that conversation was an uncharacteristic lull in my usual catfighting with my younger sister, even if no one could find an answer as to how I transitioned overnight from tyrant to peacekeeper.

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Two years later, when my grandfather was in a casket, I was asked by my family to deliver a eulogy at his funeral. At this point I had already declared myself something of a writer. It was developing into a pipe dream that delivered me from the everyday abject horrors of pre-calc, my mother's shrinking self, and the inevitable demise of an eating disorder that had conquered my fourteen year old conscience. I walked to the front of the lectern, and I recall

the sensation of my mother's black dress whooshing in the space that separated my body from the fabric. I thumbed the metallic lapel on the side-hem for good luck: it was ill-fitting, but it was Armani. Within minutes I was weeping.

No one bothered to rescue me, sopping wet and drunk with grief except for the woman who married that man for decades more than I did. She loved more than I did when he was whip-smart and driven, hoisting the Leong name out of poverty. She knew him years before I did when he was to be a devoted grandfather who doted on his eldest granddaughter, who encouraged a teeming interest in literature and took her to the school bus every morning. To my right I saw her cross-legged like a lion carved in stone, the same stubborn set to her lips.

麻麻 comes to the same conclusions I do now. "Don't cry, stupid girl. 唔好喊. Mm ho ham lah. Don't cry."

(vi)

On the eve of my 25th birthday, I am a little sad, a lot sad, about what I'm not sure about. I can make out in cloudy shapes that I am thinking more about Hong Kong, about my mother and my body which I spent so many years sheathing in judgement. I fall on Miley Cyrus' Dead Petz single, "*Karen Don't Be Sad*" to rescue me from the brink of mental lapse. Here is a snippet:

Oh, Karen

You know you're only letting them win

By letting all their lies and hate

Destroy you from within-in

Oh, Karen

They've taken away your smile

But you can give it back to us

Just fake it for a while

So Karen, don't be sad

I deduced that I was pathetically sad — no, scratch that — that my sadness is pathetic, and that there exists no line of reasoning rational enough to pathologize my sadness. In [Women Can't Be Heroes](#), C.S. Lozie says, "Male pain is displayed as epic tragedy while female pain is normalised as a psychological inconvenience and, further, trivialised as an inconvenience that women choose to complain about. Male pain is a threat to the strength and endurance of masculinity while female pain is femininity." I believed strongly that if I could downplay all that I felt, I was fucking game. This thinking had carried me all through my adolescent years,

even when I had fainted during a particularly gruelling mile run and my classmates barrelled around my phys-ed teacher to catch a glimpse of my body strewn over a wheelchair. My vision slowly returned. A kinder-bueno chocolate bar was thrust onto my lap, and I remember shaking my head feebly but with resolve: *No*. They wouldn't get to make a mockery out of my sickness. Only I could ruin myself.

(vii)

Blanche Dubois, Marie Antoinette, Amy Dunne, Karen Leong. Under a taut-drawn smile, it's all there, if you know where to look.

(viii)

Where do you hide when there's no one left to perform for?

I am looking at the face of my mother, the very being I first affixed the word glamorous to when the word found its way into my vocabulary. I am telling her for the first time since I was young that she had hurt me when she retreated into herself, gouging on her own sorrow from her husband leaving her. In my telling and in her apology we both want the mercy of being beautiful. Now it is my turn to ask for beauty, and hers to deny me. I have become a luminous paradox, doubling and turning over in her eyes, a prism of her ghosts, her years sunken deep into somewhere lost, and far away.

My face is sliding into hers, sharpening into focus, wet with years of pretending like she wasn't capable of doing harm to herself and to me. The tea on the table is turning cold. She is gentling with her silence, letting me stop and start amidst the sobs that are punched out of me, attracting the disgruntled stares of others dining in the same Cha Chaan Teng hole-in-the-wall in Kowloon City. I wonder what I have unknowingly prescribed myself just this once, in the humility of allowing myself to be bare and undressed before my mother. Aren't I the harbinger of her original pain? Isn't her original sin bringing me to this world, and telling me through grit and gnashing that all she suffered was worth holding out for, until the luminous end?

[Leslie Jamison](#): "Pain that gets performed is still pain. Pain turned trite is still pain." Why dwell in the artifice of it, if at all? The result is that feminine composure is equally palatable, and perverse. Here is a lofty confession: I am aiming for the stars. I am dreaming of becoming a woman who can hurt without myth and without flowers.