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*Christine Stark*

*Andrea Dworkin and Me*

I MET ANDREA DWORKIN for the first time at the Madison airport in 1991. I was not entirely sure what she looked like, and I was worried that I would not recognize her when she got off the airplane. Earlier that morning, I'd grabbed one of her books off the shelf at *A Room of One's Own* and memorized her author's photo: a black-and-white shoulder shot of a woman with dark, curly hair and a kind, yet mischievous smile. I hoped she had not changed much since the photo.

I was nervous. Twenty-one years old, new to feminism, new to a life without drugs and alcohol, new to being out as a lesbian or bisexual (I couldn't make up my mind). There I was, standing at Gate Three, in faded Levis and a cable knit kelly green sweater; the late afternoon sun was shining in sheets off the steel sides of the airplanes parked at angles around the terminal. My girlfriend Sue, thirty strangers, and I waited for Flight 590 from La Guardia to arrive. It was a heady moment—waiting to meet a famous feminist. I had not been doing much other than lying on my back staring at the ceiling or curled in a fetal position. I was having so many flashbacks to sexual abuse and beatings, I barely knew which way was up.

When I met Andrea at the airport, I knew very little about her or her work. I knew she wrote about sexual violence, including incest, domestic

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violence, prostitution, and pornography, but I had only read one of her articles printed the previous semester in an alternative Madison newspaper called *The Edge*. I'll never forget that moment. I was in the Rathskellar, a bar and grill in the University of Wisconsin's union, waiting for my next class to begin. I couldn't find any of my stoner, slam-dancing buddies, so I sat by myself. I read her article about battery in *The Edge* by accident. It was on the table where I'd sat. I'd never heard of Andrea before, couldn't have named a single feminist, and knew nothing about feminism. I don't remember the title of Andrea's piece; I don't remember if she talked about her personal experiences of being battered by her husband. I do remember feeling stunned that there was someone else in the world who knew about these things, who named them, said they were not okay. It was a simple moment, really, as most life-changing moments are. Her words pushed against the silence of my life.

My father had beaten my mother and me throughout my childhood. He threw silverware across the floor and made my mother pick it up on her hands and knees. He whipped me raw with his belt whenever my mother went to card club. He raped me. He threatened to burn down the house. He threatened to choke us, shoot us with the rifles lined up against that cold, pale yellow concrete wall in the basement. In the article, Andrea did not look away. Andrea did not say to be quiet. She did not apologize for the batterer or minimize the hurt. I sat in the Rat holding Andrea's article in my hand. I was stunned.

Somehow her words got behind my defenses, because months later, when I joined the Anti-Sexual Harassment Task Force at the University of Wisconsin, I yelled out *Andrea Dworkin* when the group asked for the names of potential speakers to bring to the Union Theater. Somehow, that article, that information, her emotions found a way through the drugged, numbed me to a part that felt that pain, that indignation, that righteous rage. But only for a moment. I put the paper down, went to class, and later that night got as high as the sky with my stoner buddies in the Rat, listening to Van Morrison, The Doors, The Who.

The people on Flight 590 filed off the plane; most were weary business travelers on their way home from a week in New York City or some other East Coast city. I looked over each passenger carefully to be sure I

wouldn't miss the woman in the photo. I was nervous. I mean everyone knew feminists were scary, angry, militant, and judgmental. The yelling type. What if I did something wrong? Said something wrong? Wore the wrong clothes? Worse yet, what if I didn't recognize Andrea and she wandered around the airport terminal looking for Chris, the woman from the Anti-Sexual Harassment Task Force at the University of Wisconsin? What if she had to page me over the intercom? *Chris from the Anti-Sexual Harassment Task Force meet your party at the vending machines near the Bucky Badger Booster Kiosk on level one.* What would she do while she waited for me? (This was before airport Starbucks). And where would she sit, in those orange bucket seats or on the hard window ledges with the heating vents that puffed up the back of your shirt when the heat came on?

Then there she was, the woman in the photo. Unmistakable! It was Andrea Dworkin. Her curly black hair, black T-shirt, and denim overalls. My anxiety turned to excitement. Sue nudged me. I watched Andrea walk behind another passenger, scanning the crowd. Then she saw me and said, *Chris?* I nodded, wondering how she knew it was me. It felt like destiny. She walked to us. *Hello,* she nodded, stopped in front of us and set down two small, gray duffel bags. *I'm Andrea.* Her voice was kind and soft. And that's when my unabashed love affair with Andrea Dworkin began. We walked across the terminal toward the down escalator. She carried her bags, and I worried whether I should ask her if she wanted help. I didn't know if she would be offended, after all, aren't feminists supposed to be self-reliant? She seemed tired as we neared the escalator, so I finally asked her if she would like some help with the bags. *Yes,* she said, and I heard the relief in her voice.

We ate dinner together that night at the hotel restaurant. Andrea smiled when she saw Sue and me hug in the lobby. We talked about the weather (it was still cold), the hotel room (it was fine), where she would be speaking (at the large theater on campus), and the menu (it was overpriced). Andrea ordered chicken. Sue and I ordered salads. Having dinner with a famous feminist developed into me having dinner with a kind new friend.

The next evening Andrea was going to be talking about pornography as a violation of the civil rights of women. The time had come to tell her

why I'd picked her up; why I'd been instrumental in bringing her to the university. Even though I hadn't read much of her work, I had developed a sense of reverence for her in the short time we'd spent together. *Andrea*, I said. *I am a survivor of incest and battery, but most of all I am a survivor of pornography and prostitution.* I was nervous. It was and often still is terrifying to say those words out loud. A survivor of prostitution and pornography. An ex-whore. There are the stigmas—most people have one of three reactions. They think you are dirt and shun you; they think you are some sort of empowered sex-worker shero; or they pity you and treat you like you're stupid and helpless. None of the reactions are appropriate or true. Aside from the anxiety over people's reactions, there is the fear. Psychotherapists call it Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I call it flat-out terror; remembering torture makes my body shake, my mind go numb. They said they would kill me if I told anyone.

Andrea didn't act uncomfortable. She didn't treat me like I was pathetic or stupid. She reacted like someone who knew about prostitution and pornography. (Later I would find out that she was a survivor of prostitution.) She'd heard it many times. She'd lived it. *Are they still trafficking the pornography of you*, she asked, and I felt a kinship with her like I'd never felt with anyone. I knew she believed me, and I could feel she knew exactly what I was talking about. *I'm sure they are*, I said. She cut a piece of chicken; I pushed my fork into a tomato. *Would it be okay with you if I introduced you tomorrow night?* I felt it was important to ask her. Andrea stopped moving. *I would be honored*, she said quietly.

Andrea spoke to a thousand people the following evening. I introduced her and told the audience I was a survivor of prostitution and pornography. I got in their faces. I was angry about my life, other women's lives, how our pain is a joke to so many. How our lives are a debate. When I stopped, a thousand people stood and cheered. I was in shock. Andrea kissed me on-stage. Before she began her speech, she thanked me and said it was the best introduction she'd received in twenty years of speaking. Somehow I stumbled offstage. Andrea gave her speech, and I lay backstage on the floor having flashbacks. I heard what she said and could barely believe it. I felt love, an enormous love for Andrea and what she

was doing: standing up for me. It was then that I knew what I wanted to do with my life.

The next day Andrea said, *Once you can control your rage you will be able to talk with anyone about anything.* I held onto that. It was a heady thing to hear, given that I could barely get out of bed.

My life fluttered to the ground a little bit at a time. Hour by hour. Day by day. Flashback by flashback. Therapy didn't help. I had friends who were survivors, but they were all barely surviving like me. I had a girlfriend who did her best, but my life overwhelmed her. I ended up in a psych ward a few months after Andrea spoke. One day I just couldn't get up anymore. I couldn't go to my 5 a.m. shift at the diner. I couldn't go to my classes at the university. I couldn't read any more textbooks with unpronounceable words about postmodern feminism. I couldn't take it anymore. I wanted to win. I wanted to live. But I couldn't take anymore.

Some people understand what rape does to a person. They know the pain and isolation and self-hatred. But few people understand what prostitution and pornography do to a woman or child. How we are ripped out of our bodies. How we are ripped out of society. How organized and cruel the perpetrators are, how indifferent and mocking society is toward those used in prostitution and pornography. How those used develop all sorts of incredible survival skills, especially dissociation, which makes us seem strange to other people.

My father and grandfather made money off of my rape. They paid their bills with my blood. They bought things—fireplaces, boats, cars, furniture—with rape money. My father and grandfather photographed me being raped and tortured. They made copies of my pain. They sold them to other men as entertainment. I got away, eventually, but then had to face the aftermath. I had to survive the flashbacks. I had to survive the feelings. Being constantly reminded that my pain was entertainment was too much.

I couldn't get up anymore. I stayed in bed, a twin-sized futon someone gave to me. It was ripped down the middle, like me. A psychiatrist agreed to help me with the flashbacks but only if I would go into a psych ward. I agreed. I was admitted. My therapist refused to visit me. It was her policy. Sue bought me some suede green Adidas indoor soccer shoes.

They reminded me of what I used to be: a star athlete and honor student. Now a psych ward resident. It was another shock: I hadn't planned on being a psych ward patient. At eight or twelve or sixteen I had not thought: someday I'd like to be in a loony bin. Alone, unable to function, terrified. But there I was. I found a shrink in the hospital who specialized in treating survivors of prostitution and pornography. He transferred me to another hospital. I stayed there for a month. I don't talk about it, ever. It wasn't a good experience. He and I didn't get along. One time we fought, and he threatened to commit me to a state mental pen. A nice nurse, the only decent person in the entire hospital, I think, calmed me down and helped get me out. The social worker at the hospital put me on welfare and got together an application for disability.

To say I was in shock is an understatement. I was in compounded shock. Shock layered upon shock. I'd had plans for my life. I wanted to be a lawyer or a writer. I wanted to move to New York City. I wanted to live a normal life. Not a broken, staring-at-the-ceiling, screaming-in-my-sleep life. Five weeks in a psych ward changed me. It marginalized me even more. It made me feel like I was not part of society, like I didn't matter at all. I was an official nut. A crazy. It made everything worse. I was even more alone.

I became afraid to leave the psych ward. Being confined does weird things to your sense of self, having your freedom taken away makes you afraid of it—afraid of wide open spaces when what you've known for five weeks are the hallway, the OT room, and the sitting area of the psych ward. Outside, the light's too bright. There are too many people. Too many things happening: people shopping, driving, talking, walking down sidewalks, cutting their lawns, going to T-ball games.

The day of my release, Sue picked me up at the hospital in her '85 tan Volvo. I felt shame: psych ward, raped, welfare, waiting to get on disability shame. I'd flunked a class. But I had one thing to hold onto: I was alive. That's it: a breathing, heart-beating animal. As bad as I felt, I still had hope. I was alive, and if I got on disability, I wouldn't be homeless. Sue drove me to the house I shared with another survivor. I was afraid that nothing would ever be okay. I was afraid I could never overcome what I'd been through. The shrink had told me I would be in and out of the psych ward

the rest of my life. Sue dropped me off; she had to go to work. It was hot, mid-June, sunny. I walked into the entryway; my cat, Cleo, sat curled on the wooden staircase. I was alone. What would happen to me? Would I live or die? I sat down on the stairs, petted Cleo, leafed through my stack of mail piled in a mound on the bottom stair. Bills from the hospital, letters of dropped classes from the university, notifications of bounced checks, bulk mail from a real estate agent, and a Monet postcard. I turned it over. It was from Andrea. I had written her from the hospital, sent her a poem. And she wrote back. *You are a terrific writer*, she said. *I hope you are back from the hospital and doing okay. Best, Andrea.* I held it against my chest. She believed in me. I could make it.