



To Simply Name It

Aloud

On the cinders of her career, her past identity and her family's expectations, **Helena Bala, BA '10, JD '13** built *Craigslist Confessional*, an index of trauma—dealt and endured—that strangers ask her to divulge.

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STORY



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ILLUSTRATIONS



It's a late July night in New York,

and what's left of the summer is hanging on like a wet Band-Aid. Helena Bala's apartment on the Upper East Side sits 21 stories above Sloan Kettering. Ambulances meander in and out of the emergency lanes, lights on but silent. A haze hangs off the East River and bleeds up to First Avenue. It's one of those nights where a drip of mystery liquid landing on your scalp is either air-conditioner condensation or a fat drop of fog water.

Everyone's air conditioning is working overtime this summer, including Bala's. I'm greeted first by Stanley, a chihuahua-corgi mix named after that mustachioed, rumpled *Golden Girls* character. Bala shoos him away with a slippered foot—she is very, very pregnant. Her husband, Alex Fortenko,

MPH '11, MD '15, an emergency physician, steps out of their bedroom for a moment to say hello and dips back in—he's studying for a test coming up later this week. In exactly two weeks, she'll give birth to their son, Ronan.

Usually, when Bala meets a stranger, it's to listen to them talk for an hour about their lives. She's the creator of *Craigslist Confessional*, a side project turned full-time gig, an online column and now a book deal. She quit her job as a lobbyist on Capitol Hill to do this. But tonight, she's on the other end of the notebook.

Joe was a homeless man who hung out outside of her office building in downtown D.C. You can almost see the White House from there—it really is almost next door.

It's tough to get accurate surveys on homeless populations, but in D.C., there's something like 7,000 people living on the streets. The disparity can be shocking: A block away from an encampment of houseless people, some of the wealthiest individuals in the country make decisions for the rest of the nation.

Joe liked to hang out at this particular spot on 13th and G, despite the building's security guards harassing him frequently. Bala, BA '10, JD '13, saw him on her daily trips in and out of the lobbying firm, often to go to the Hill for catered meetings. On those days, she'd bring back the leftovers for Joe, and they built a friendly, albeit superficial rapport: niceties, a handoff of food, a tenuous carb-based thread of connection.

Until one day, she didn't. *Are you upset with me?* she remembers him calling after her, when she came back from one of those meetings empty-handed.

"It hit me," she says of that day in 2014. "It was this realization: I think that this is a casual, 'I'll bring you food whenever I can' thing, and he's actually depending on me for the food."

Bala sat down on the sidewalk outside of her office and had her first real conversation with Joe. He told her how he got to be in this place, and she told him how deeply unhappy she was with where her career was taking her.

"It was dawning on me that I'm complaining to this homeless man about my life, but it was just this moment of realization that I didn't feel like I had anybody else in

my life to tell all this to, and he certainly probably didn't have anybody else," she says. "So we had this genuine heart-to-heart. It was like an unburdening, a confession, basically, for both of us to be able to tell somebody something and not feel like it was going to make us regret being honest about what we were going through."

Eventually Bala went back up to her office, to the job she loathed, and posted an ad on Craigslist that implored, simply: "Tell me about yourself." It seemed like a natural thing to do at the time, in small-world D.C., like selling an old TV or posting an ad for a free couch on the curb. Maybe it would fill the void she'd opened with Joe.

"I posted it, and I was like, alright, I'm probably not going to hear anything back." She woke up the next day to dozens of replies in her inbox.

In the months that followed, Bala started meeting strangers who contacted her through Craigslist in coffee shops and over the phone during her lunch breaks, after work, on weekends, during any spare time she could fit an hourlong conversation. They punctuated her days at the lobbying firm as small moments of clarity in an otherwise beige drift.

Her first meeting was during a lunch break. The stranger was a former heroin addict, a woman who walked Bala through a tour of her past: *This was the corner where I used to shoot up, this is the JCPenney I used to steal from for more drugs, these are the scars I keep hidden with long sleeves.*

"You see her life, you see the city and everything transform in the context of what she's shared," Bala says. "This person, who before was just like any other person you didn't know anything about, and now an hour and a half later,

you've become immersed in their lives."

"It's transporting," I say. "You're entering a different dimension through someone else's perspective."

"Imagine doing that three, four, five times a week. It's the most fascinating thing."

Late back to work, Bala got to her office, closed the door and wept. She immediately knew she had to do more of these meetings, somehow.

"When you do something you really love, even though you're not getting paid to do it, it feels almost like you're cheating to do something else," she says. "It was a constant thing in the back of my head."

The decision to quit law was eventually made for her. A few days before her 26th birthday, Bala's parents—still under the impression that their girl was happy and thriving in law—announced that they were coming to D.C. as a surprise. She emailed her boss to say she would need to take a day off, and did.

When she came back on Monday morning, HR was waiting for her, with her boss. Taking an unexpected day off at this firm was nearly a capital offense. They confronted her about the unplanned vacation day, and asked her if she was happy there. No, actually, she wasn't, she told them.

"There was this weird standstill where it felt like something wasn't being said," she recalls, "and then I realized what wasn't being said was, 'I quit.'"

She didn't tell her parents she'd quit her job for about a year.

"They were asking every day, 'How's work?' and I was saying, 'Really good!' It wasn't a lie, for the first time."

When Bala did finally confess, her mother cried, she says, and her father didn't speak to her for almost a year. ■





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— When Bala was 11, in August 2001, her family moved to Fairfield County, Conn., from their home country of Albania.

She brought with her a “terrible accent,” a mix of her mother tongue and the British affect of her teachers at international embassy schools.

A month later, two planes hit a pair of buildings in New York, and a classmate called her a “towelhead.”

Bala was born in that tiny nation on the Balkan peninsula in 1988, right on the cusp of revolution.

“It went through a huge political turmoil,” she tells me—a very succinct way of saying that communism in Europe was on the precipice of upheaval. With the tiny nation—and the world’s only atheist state—standing as a hardline communist dictatorship, the revolution would not roll smoothly through the Bala family’s home country.

But Bala was a child through all this, and the way she viewed it all was through osmosis of her father’s outlook about their future.

He was in the Albanian foreign service, the Albanian ambassador to Slovenia, and they moved to Slovenia when she was 6, then back to Albania again shortly after. She describes him as “highly hopeful and idealistic,” a man whose optimism about his efforts to effect change in Albania’s fledgling democracy started to wane only once they were forced to seek asylum in the U.S. The combination of turmoil back home and life in Fairfield (a place that two years ago *The Atlantic* called “the epicenter of American inequality”) ground him down.

They moved into a one-bedroom apartment that belonged to Bala’s aunt in the south end of Bridgeport, a deeply poor, frequently violent city. She slept on a futon in the living room. Her father got a job as a security guard at the nearby Home Depot. Her mother—who had a career as a medical doctor back home—cleaned houses and brought her young daughter with her on jobs to help.

“That was crushing for her, having gone through all that education and finding yourself suddenly knee-deep in somebody else’s bathtub,” Bala says.

The one thing her parents did spend money on was their daughter’s education. They sent her to a private school in an affluent part of Fairfield, a trial she describes as “play acting” to fit in with her wealthy,

white classmates.

Then there was 9/11 and that cruel classmate, whose dad was a firefighter.

“I just remember being completely destroyed in a way I didn’t understand,” she says, recalling her 11-year-old brain trying to wrestle with what she knew was senseless, petty cruelty, but couldn’t place why. “I just so badly wanted to be accepted at that point, to be one of the rest, and the tragedy of what just happened I had perceived as something that had affected me just as much,” she says. “I felt like I was part of the aggrieved, and being separated and made into this part of the problem was just ...”

Stanley the dog has sidled up to my crossed legs on the couch and is licking them with relish.

“Oh stop, come here, Stan,” she coos, and he toddles over to flop into her thigh.

Bala slept on that futon until she left Connecticut for GW.

“For four years [GW] was just frickin’ fantastic,” she says. Bala arrived on a scholarship and other financial aid; she was in Phi Beta Kappa and graduated summa cum laude with a bachelor’s degree in international affairs and a minor in Italian.

You’re doing so well, her parents told her, why not just follow that momentum straight through to law school?

“I remember having this mini crisis; I didn’t know what to do, whether I wanted to go to law school or even be a lawyer, but I wanted to help people and do human rights,” she says.

When Bala tried to communicate these reservations to her parents, it could have gone better.

“The level of freak-out, I have yet to see to this day—of just the panic: ‘No! We did all of this for you. We made such big sacrifices that you’ve seen and been a part of. Why would you want to do this? You have an offer and it’s a good one and you can go and it’s a great school and you get to stay in D.C.’”

She skids to the end of this sentence and pauses to think before summing it up, bluntly: “I got strong-armed into basically going straight to law school.”

The first year of law school? It’s a “shock and a half,” she says. “... I knew immediately this is not for me; that I’m not gonna do this for the rest of my life.”

For a little while, it looked like she might anyway. The momentum didn’t stop after graduating: She worked as a legal fellow on Capitol Hill and eventually contacted a classmate who was working at a lobbying firm. The next Monday, Bala was a lobbyist on the Hill. They handed her work for clients at universities and research centers focusing on health, and a salary she calls laughable.

“My parents were so proud,” she says. “They saw my office was right next to the White House, and they were like, ‘Wow we’ve made it, this is what we worked for’ ... and it was just crushing, this feeling of being completely stuck; I don’t know how to get out of this, I’m not happy.”

She stayed nearly a year.

Bala’s thumbing through a set of notebooks from confessions

over the years. She keeps meticulous notes for each, writing neatly in every space on the page, and flagging each with a Post-It Note: “Childhood incest.” “Addiction.”

The three of us—me, Bala and Stanley Zbornak—have interrupted Alex’s studying to unearth these notes from a dresser drawer in their bedroom. She pulls out several notebooks from the pile of all different sizes, most with sticky notes and paper scraps peeking out between pages. We flip through a few, pausing briefly to reflect on various marginal notes.

“I’m an atheist, so I don’t believe in higher power or fate, things like that,” she says. “What I believe is the here and now, and the humanity of us—the love we give to each other, and the good moments we create, and the struggles we help each other through ... I think it’s very incremental, little by little, these moments that have the capacity to change our lives completely.”

Four years of living on credit and pushing back loans in order to be the scribe of people’s lives—or at least the small window they cracked open into their lives: The heroin addict who wept to God in a rainy Toys-R-Us parking lot. The father who molested his two young daughters, decades ago. The widower who found the strength to rebuild his life in New Orleans. The double-amputee veteran.

“It’s the activity of being human every day, and this just so happens to be my way of acting out my humanity,” she says. “I always think of how life could have been so very

different had something not happened or had something been skipped over. The little coincidences that keep us together, and push us apart.”

There are moments in life when the reality of what’s happening to you, around you, can be heard.

The clatter of the day stops and it comes: in the dim blue light of early morning, when a mother creeps into her child’s room to make sure her child is still breathing. Or when the sallow glow of waiting-room fluorescence draws it out. When a wife looks at her husband and thinks: *He’s wasting away.*

When you admit to yourself that you’re not just tired, but that the tiredness is bone-deep, a long, cold well you’ll tumble into if you lean too far over it.

“What do you do, where do you go with that sadness,” Cyd asks me. “Where? When, in a quiet moment, you look over at that person and think, ‘Oh my god ... This is happening overnight, my god.’”

Cyd—who asked to remain anonymous to preserve the spirit of Bala’s project name—is calling from her home on a river in Montana. Months earlier, in April, she’d been sitting near the same spot when she first heard Bala’s story. She was sitting alone, reflecting on the month she’d had. It had been a hard month. A segment featuring Bala and *Craigslist Confessional* on *CBS Sunday Morning* came on the television.

“I’m watching this piece, and I’m thinking, what an amazing project,” she recalls. “I just felt compelled to write to her and to say, this is an amazing project.”

The email she set out to write wasn’t the one she sent.

“I started writing, but instead of just saying ‘great job,’ I was writing and expressing my sadness, my fatigue, my feelings,” she says. “I just kept typing, it kept getting longer ... It was just sort of, *Hey I’ve had a great life, I’m still having a great life,*



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this is who I am, here are some things that have happened to me through my life. I know everyone has them, but I was telling her: These are mine.”

Hers are not everyone’s. Cyd was raped when she was 13 years old. Her daughter, now an adult, was born with congenital heart disease, and her husband, a former Marine, fireman and “all-American guy,” she says, was recently diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

These are the things she and Bala talked about, over three phone calls. Three calls is an exception to how the confessionals usually work—if someone has something particularly complex to talk about, Bala allows for several conversations. Usually, however, it’s just one.

“I was saying, ‘I’m tired,’” Cyd recalls of their first contact. “I hadn’t really said that to anybody; I’m a very positive person—energetic, happy—I don’t have depression or any of those things, so for me

to actually say out loud to someone, “You know what, I’m tired,” she laughs, resigning to the admission again. I can hear her smile through the phone. “And I’m a little bit sad. And that’s the truth.”

So she and Bala talked about these not-so-ordinary crises. As they began, Bala listened, and then interrupted: She wanted the feelings about this event, not the facts on a timeline.

“It’s easy for some people to intellectualize—*oh, this happened to me, and this is a reason I’m feeling sadness*—but not really go to the deeper layers: If you would really like to know, yes, this was devastating,” Cyd tells me. “She wants the real, true, raw feelings that I had when this rape occurred.”

Cyd’s in her 60s now. This happened to her decades ago. So much has happened since—some of it beautiful, some of it also painful—and she’s had time to process it and move on. But this phone conversation with a stranger she’d emailed days earlier brought things to the surface Cyd hadn’t wrestled with before.

What do you think this man thinks today about what happened? What was his reaction after?

“Answering those questions was very healing,” Cyd tells me. “It had so much to do with her insightful questioning ... For lack of a better description, she identifies something for exactly what it is. She’s very straightforward. She doesn’t try to candy-coat it, she just identifies, ‘This is what you’re talking about.’”

In the CBS piece that Cyd saw on that quiet Montana morning, a psychotherapist was interviewed to pose a contrary perspective: What if reopening deep wounds of the past actually isn’t healing?

Bringing up the psychotherapist’s words from that segment still rankles Bala.

“The guy did this interview on how he thinks that this is just helping people pick at their scabs and unless you teach them to heal ...” she says, trying to remember the rest.

“I think he said you’re just putting a bandage on serious mental health issues,” I correct, cringingly.

“Yeah! Yeah, yeah, yeahyeahyeah,” she says, rocking. Stanley, unexpectedly jostled, adjusts his haunches and resettles.

It’s a comparison Cyd rejects entirely, too. It’s not the same as therapy, and isn’t meant to be. The confessions aren’t meant to give anyone tools to cope with their pain, but to

begin to simply name them aloud.

“There’s something very different about just the human-to-human connection with a fellow human being who is just not necessarily trained to do this specific type of work, but who is sort of saying, ‘Tell me about your life, tell me about you, tell me something about your sadness, your troubles, your struggles,’” Cyd says. “It’s a very different experience. It’s a very free feeling, so it seemed very easy to say, ‘Well, if you’re asking, if you’re interested, this is it. This is how I’m feeling.’”

Bala asks these probing questions, she says, not to rip off scabs, but to get at the meat of what the other person is feeling.

“That building of the narrative, of the person trying to lead you from point A to B and tell you how it all happened, that I think forces the need to come up with a ... conclusion.” She draws out this word to its last syllable, dragging it through every letter. Con-cluuu-sion. “It isn’t always a happy conclusion.”

A lot of people call Bala with stories that end with some hope. Like Cyd, they just need to tell someone what they’ve felt in the early hours, in the waiting rooms, in the darkness, alone.

“This is the end of the chapter of what they’re trying to tell and lets them put that aside for a little bit,” Bala says. “That’s the purpose of it, the ability to unburden, to say anything without fear.”

Stanley snorts and scoots off the couch.

I glance at the clock; It’s late, and it’s going to take me an hour and a half to get back to Brooklyn, but there’s still a question I haven’t asked.

We’ve done a lot of talking about other people, a lot of looking at Bala sidelong—through a rearview mirror of her subjects, her passions. I don’t know if I’ve seen her directly yet.

“Do you think this project will affect the kind of mother you’re going to be?”

“Um ... I’ve always—it’s funny—I’ve always thought about doing this in a very idealistic way,” she says, folding one foot under her and passing her hands over her stomach. “It humanizes that vacuum we feel around us, of people we don’t quite know and don’t know how to reach through this tough

membrane, and just grab onto the mushy parts and say ‘Hey, I get you, I see you, I understand.’”

She lets go of her belly for just a second to clutch at the space in front of her.

“It has always been the overarching theme of this, creating that space in hopes that people will take it into their hearts and make that understanding. With Ronan on the way, it’s made ...”

The atmosphere in the apartment changes. It’s a little thicker, a little more charged with some tension I can’t place. It feels like it might rain in here, like the late July humidity outside might break in this room.

This is the moment, for us, where the world shifts just a little. The dimension of her perspective starts to open up to me—not as a window into the past, but as she sees the future, the very near future. I start to notice things around us I’d only passingly taken into account before: the Uppababy and Pack and Play boxes still unopened in the corner, the crib and bureau that will soon be filled with diapers and clean bibs. They were always there, but now they’re really there, different for being under the spell of her perception.

“It’s made it so much more real, because I’m not any longer doing this in hopes of the world benefiting from it. I kind of almost do it in hopes of him benefitting from it one day.” Her voice breaks, and now I realize why the room’s electrified. We’re talking about *her*, finally. We are through that tough membrane.

“You never know what your kid’s gonna go through, you never know the life he’s going to have, the struggles he’s gonna deal with,” she says. “You want the world to be kind for him.”

One day, maybe, someone will do the same for him. She hopes. One day, he’ll feel it in other people: a kindness, a softness. “So you put out good and hope it comes back.”


Helena Bala’s stories can be found at [CraigslistConfessional.com](https://www.craigslistconfessional.com), and are reposted in part on [TheOutline.com](https://www.theoutline.com) and [QZ.com](https://www.qz.com).


Her book is due in stores
July 2020 from Simon & Schuster.