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On Grief

IMAGINE HERE, if you will, at the start of all this, the wail of the *duduk*. A low cry that stretches long, a dancer's hand reaching back and reaching forward, a weaver's thread pulled taut and trembling.

Between one's fingers, within one's throat, between you and me, something taut and trembling.

Allow me to speak to you about grief.

On the eve of my grandfather's death, my mother sat at the kitchen table, writing, because I could not. My poet daughter, she gutted. Where are your winning words?

Grief lives on the tongue, yes, but I had swallowed mine long ago.

Allow me to speak to you, in my adopted language, to share with you what I know about grief, what years of being an Armenian daughter has bloomed inside of me. Here are my words. Hear me.

My mother preparing her father's eulogy hours before that giant, giant man took his last breath. *Ganz*, my mother's word. *Ganz eyir*, my mother's words in the church. My father, she had cried. You were a saint! At the kitchen table, my mother and her ripped-out notebook paper, her ripped-out heart. The pen in her hand not a sword but a shovel. Hours before he dies, my grandfather dead and buried between thin blue lines.

My mother buried her father and that's the way it is supposed to be. We are told that's the way it is supposed to be so that we may take comfort. But who can tell Armenians that destiny is alive anywhere other than the forehead, written on the bodies of our women, carved down in the black stone of our skin?

I tell you there is nothing romantic about death about cemeteries about ceremony about widows about orphans about black dresses and covered mirrors about coffee boiling and overflowing about demitasse cups rattling in hands cold from damp grass cold from the son's garden hose before entering his house to taste the taste of his flatbread about incense making children sneeze about the priest pocketing payment in his robe after he crosses himself with pinched fingers about dirt under fingernails dirt under feet dirt choking throats dirt covering graves, one grave or a million and a half graves.

When I began writing stories, I was really writing love letters to the women in my family. I am still writing love letters. I was and still am writing love letters to these women in English. I am writing eulogies. But I was eulogizing long before anyone I loved had died. I was writing eulogies for women I had only heard of, mythwomen, mythmothers, mythmartyrs. In my head, as long as I can remember, I have been eulogizing.

I have been eulogizing in English.

But in my heart? *Ganz*, my mother had said. *Ganz eyir.* And I sat there in the first pew, closest to that giant, giant man, so close I thought I could reach him if only I extended a hand, and my mother was saying *Ganz*, *ganz eyir*, and her words reached everyone.

When I began to write, I thought—I still think—I can make meaning of all this, that I can find the truth that was hidden from me since I was a child, my mother's hand letting go at the schoolyard—anything lonelier than an immigrant child on the first day of school? My Bosnian fiancé tells me, as a refugee in Germany, of the black plastic bag his mother had given him, filled with pencil and paper, no time nor money yet to buy him a backpack, plastic bag swinging in his hand, twisting, twisting, crinkling, his teacher introducing him as the boy from a country that no longer exists. And I think, yes, when I kiss him, and no, I think, no—that I can't quite understand what that feels like. My family left our country because things were difficult. No electricity, no warmth in our beds, no unrationed bread: difficult. But my family didn't leave our country because men with guns hated our last name.

Not then.

So I kiss my partner again on the mouth and I think, yes, I do know. I have always known.

Since I began to write fiction seven years ago, my maternal grandmother has lost a husband and a sister. The first story I ever wrote was about a modern-day Turk and Armenian falling in love, marrying, but struggling over the idea of having children. This was my first and last story centered explicitly on the Armenian Genocide, an event widely accepted by historians as the first genocide of the twentieth century, where over a million Armenians were killed by Ottoman Turks, an event modern Turkey boldly refuses to acknowledge as part of its long history. The second story I ever wrote was based on my maternal grandmother, based on all the years she nursed her ailing loved ones. In the story I wrote, my grandmother is

the one who dies first. In the story I wrote, I felt that this was truest ending of all. Not right—no, not right, not just—but true. Inevitable. Of course she'd die first. Of course she's still dying. Of course she was dead from the beginning.

When I ask my grandmother about her marriage to her husband, my grandfather, that *ganz*, that giant, giant man, she says this. She says, "I suffered no pain under my husband's hand. I married on a Saturday and on Wednesday, his father fell ill. I looked after him. He would dirty his bed. He would wear long white underwear. It would become very, very dirty. One night, I woke to the sound of my baby crying. I woke to find the old man sticking his fingers in my son's eyes. I yelled for my husband. He woke and cradled his father back to bed. My baby's eyes were swollen for days." When I interrupt to ask, "Didn't *papik* say anything to his father? Like what he was doing, what he was thinking?" she says this first: "What was there to say?" And then she says this: "The old man's first wife and children were killed during the genocide." "That doesn't justify it," I tell her. "That can't." My grandmother sighs. "He sometimes forgot where he was. Who he was. Sometimes he didn't recognize anyone at all." "Fine," I say. "Him. But what about your husband? Why didn't he do anything to help you? Why were you cleaning up after his father? You, who were just a new bride?" "I was twenty-one," she responds, as if that explained everything.

In the second story I ever wrote, my grandmother dies cleaning her husband's shit from her hands.

I will admit that all of my writing is a false start.

Do you want to know something strange I do? When I have a few minutes to myself, when I am bored or content, I play songs I know will make me cry. I watch videos that will make me cry. I will watch myself as a child dancing and cry. I will watch an elephant's trunk caressing a smaller elephant's trunk and cry. I will imagine losing my loved ones in car accidents, in plane crashes, in fires, in bed, with their mouths open, their nightgowns revealing ghostly thighs, and I will cry. I will cry hard and long and will hurt in ways only my body understands, and remembers.

And then I will stop. I will wash my face. I will return to my book or to dinner or will clean or sleep or kiss my partner on the mouth.

My greatest pleasure in this life is to cry on my own command and to stop when I've had enough. When I say it's enough. When I say enough is enough.

When I write, I am singing my Armenian womanhood to whoever might listen. I am dancing a dance about losses I am only just beginning to understand. I am repeating myself, filling my body and the page with all the same notes. Our mothers are our martyrs. What I really want to say is simply I love you, but instead I kill and kill again the women I create in the image of the women I love.

And I know why I do it. Why I feel I must. I do it for you, my reader, so that you may feel the depth of my love, the depth of my grief, how mysterious it is—please don't ask me to use plural pronouns. It is it and not they. Grief and love, who was the madman who separated the two? For it cannot be a woman who divided the child from the mother, who pulled the child from the depth of her mother's darkness.

It, it, it—it rages in the bottomless well of my heart.

But I do it for me, too. And some of you may have also felt the plastic bag twisting in your hand. Something in you may understand the pleasure in grieving when you know you can stop it, when you know that you can control it, when you can turn the page, erase a few phrases, take the words back to *I love you* and stop the pain from becoming real.

For I am the narrator in all of my stories. I am the one who steps back and says, "The End."

Or maybe I should have said this about my grandmother. That the first time her own mother visited her in her marital home, her sick father-in-law threw a glass of water at her back. My grandmother says her mother was hurt by the sight of it. She went to stay with her other married daughter that night. That is, my grandmother says, when her mother first began her long dying.

And my grandmother's sister, you wonder? This other married daughter? My grandmother's sister buried her child to breast cancer and then her husband to heartbreak and spent the last years of her life dirtying herself and unable to recognize anyone. My grandmother did for her what she had always done. When my great-aunt died, I learned from her eulogy, for the first time, that their mother was orphaned by the genocide, sold to a local Arab, years later rescued by British missionaries, married off at nineteen, and widowed at nineteen and a half. The eulogy went on and on like this, and I'm glad someone remembered it, that they told it in that order, first this, then this, then that, because now I can sit back and I can rearrange the pieces, pretend I can change the course of her life and the meaning of her death.

But despite which angle I look from, where I start, or how I end, the story is still the same. The women I loved were always dead from the beginning.

WHEN I BEGAN TO WRITE, I wanted to do with words what men have done for centuries with aged apricot wood.

WHAT DO I KNOW about grief? I, a child? Well, I understand instinct as only a child understands instinct. I understand that grief is the cause and the effect. The mother and child of tradition. Grief is love meets loss; grief is the child pulled from the depth of her mother's darkness.

Because we have loved life too much, loved each other too much, because Armenians survived when we should not, we have always grieved. Our mothers have loosened us from their womb so that we may live, and what greater purpose to that life, I ask you, than to acknowledge the gravity of their loss, their pain at having to watch us go into a world less safe than theirs? To sit and cry alongside them?

Some Armenians believe that our grief began with the genocide, with 1915, and sometimes, especially on years like this, years marking centennials, it's easy to accept that notion. But that is not when our history began. That is not when we first appeared on this earth. That is not even when we disappeared from it.

I am telling you that I can't date what's written down in the black stone of my skin.

Listen: I am a tree. Cut me down and try to measure the depth of my love.

What lies at the heart of my people's engagement with grief? What lies at the heart of me?

Circles.

Just try to find a beginning or an end.

OR MAYBE I SHOULD HAVE SAID this about my grandmother. That when she was nursing her ailing husband, that giant, giant man, that *ganz,* he would upset her. He'd want water when his lungs were already overfilling; he'd want food that his body no longer could stomach. He'd want to stay on his back, in his own filth, even though they still shared the same bed. "I'd sometimes get angry," my grandmother says. "But I was always so good." My grandmother remembers one moment in particular. She is mad at him, mad, mad, mad, and he looks deeply into her eyes and asks: "My wife, where was your tongue back then?"

An old myth remembered in an old book. To cure one's fear, an Armenian had to find the gravestone of someone either long forgotten by those from their village or someone struck dead by lightning. He would wash his face and hands with water from a glass that rested briefly on top of the stone, and then he would break that glass against the rock, transferring his fear onto the dead person. For the people of Armenian lands, lightning was rare but rarer still was the man or woman forgotten by their village, even years after their death. So tell me: what were those afraid to do?

No, grief is not in me and it is not in you, but it is in us. As a people, it is in us.

THE THINGS I WANT TO SAY about my mother, I cannot bear to write. I don't have the words just yet. Know that she is mad, mad, mad, too, but she too swallowed her tongue long ago. Now she only rages at death when he's there, in a casket, staring her in the face with his eyes closed.

But please, imagine her hands. She once played the piano, the violin.

When I tell her that her hands are still beautiful, she always says the same thing: "My hands are like my mother's."

The same thing.

HISTORY COUNTS ITS LOSSES. But I say, one dead woman from the beginning, all my loved ones dead.

Or maybe this: My grandmother tells me that when she moved into the marital home, she had to bring almost everything herself. Her dowry included a bed, linens, dressers. "They had nothing," she says.

So she tells me a story about instinct. One day, that Wednesday when her father-in-law first falls ill, after the shock, after the fear, there is only instinct. She realizes that the old man will have nothing to wear to his grave. She tells her husband to invest in a small pig. They will feed it and it will grow and it will bring them much money when it fattens. Her husband, that *ganz,* listens, but the pig they buy is sick too, sick from the beginning, and dies much too quickly. They sell it for what they can. With the money, she tells her husband to buy his father a nice suit. It hangs in the dresser until the old man dies, and then she brings it out and dusts it off.

"I was so young I didn't know what I was doing," my grandmother says, "but I thought of that."

Grief is the Armenian's only weapon and her one true burden. We fight against it and we fight for our right to feel it. And not just on one day. Not on April 24th. Not when a body is being buried. Not for a week. Not for forty days. Not for a year. Not for a hundred.

Circles.

Reader, are you tired of my pronouncements yet? But isn't this what you've come for? Something true, something pithy, something you can put on your gravestone?

Grief is the soul of our sensibility as Armenians. Grief may not be particular to Armenians, but we have always believed that to be the case. That this is ours. And what greater tragedy than wanting to claim grief for oneself? For wanting to control it? For thinking you can ever be prepared? For thinking that if you never stop grieving, there won't be a new thing to begin grieving for?

Tragic, yes, but I ask too: what better example of our humanity? I ask you, what better example of our humanity than our hopefulness in the face of our helplessness?

Grief is in our language. It is in our terms of endearment. Who says such silly things as *Yes sirum em kez*? I love you? Which Armenian has ever said anything other than *Hokid Mernem*, or I will die to save your soul?

It is in our dances, in our hands that come together and then fall apart, our hands reaching back, always, before reaching forward.

It is in our poetry. It is Paruyr Sevak saying, *Parzapes Mahn E Mer Siraharvel*. Simply with Us, It Is Death Who Has Fallen in Love.

And it is in the wail of the *duduk*, that aged apricot wood.

When I write, I try to infuse my English words with this very non-English sensibility. I try to create lines from all of my circles. I want to call attention to the foreignness of this pain and the inevitability of this pain and the memory of this pain, of all the pains I have not experienced but I have felt, I feel, I feel to be true, I read on the black stone of my skin. This pain I feel cannot be explained by one grave or a million and a half graves. It cannot be explained by one woman's story or three women's stories. It cannot be explained. I'm tired of explaining. I'm tired, but still I can't stop. How can I stop when my life has just begun? How can I end my grieving when there are still so many women left to love and bury?

This year, no, it is not a special year. Before and after this year, there was, there is, grief. There was, there is, love. There is the woman's body suffering the loss of a child when the world is rejoicing at another birth. There is language to express them both—no, to express it.

It, it, it.

It is the only thing that lives on. Grief: it is how the Armenian loves in the face of so much loss.

Hear me: I am eulogizing in English, but I am reaching for all of you in Armenian.