

All These Afters

By Tala Abu Rahmeh



didn't think it would happen to me while standing in front of a bulletproof window at the Danish consulate answering questions for a visa to Iceland. Where do you live? the woman asks. Ramallah, I say. Who do you live with? My aunt. She looks at me, slightly confused. Why? My mother is dead and my father lives in Jordan.

I am 30 years old, about to pack my bags to go to one of the farthest corners of the world entirely alone, and a complete stranger has the power to make me cry with one single question.

My mother died six years ago. Ovarian cancer. My life is split into two very distinct dimensions, before and after. Before isn't very clear. Some photos and old letters soften the blow of forgetfulness, but I'm always burdened with all the afters. The day after, when we followed my mother's body in an ambulance all the way to her village. The year after, when I cried in the bathroom five minutes before my graduation ceremony. The world after where everything feels a little grey, no matter the weather.

It seems that grief is a fantastical emotion. It creates victorious tales of survival and perseverance; it has support groups, novels and films, it's a space where all of us become poets carrying the weight of the most unoriginal human experience, death. I wondered about grief for so long. I tried to dress appropriately, cry at certain life intervals, reject life's small tragedies while trying to maintain certain compassion towards people's problems, but I have continued to fail. I don't care for dead grandparents. I cry mostly when I'm happy because I realize that my mother is not there to share the joy, and my heart crumbles inside my veins whenever I read a good book that my mother, the most beautiful bookworm, will not be able to experience.

Most days I'm faced with a mountain of a realization: the longer I live, the farther I'll get from the last time my mother touched me. I think of growing older as a swim away from the womb that brought me into this world, and into the fattest, most exhausting leg of the ocean. I panic and worry that my



Green sun, by Palestinian Artist Ismail Shammout, from the 1960's

entire life is but a journey through a pain growing backwards. Some days I think, if my grief were a child, it would be in first grade.

What do I do with all my afters? I asked myself the first day I started teaching five years ago, and somehow, the noise of 18-year-olds drowned out my nagging existential question. Their stories about love and loss in its most basic form made me feel less alone. Their mostly horrible poetry brought me back to life in a way scripture never did. My students, who had their own crosses to bear, baked me cake the days I couldn't bear mine.

The yelling of my friend's three daughters while singing along to "Let it go" and secretly pinching each other makes my memories of my mother's disease less cruel. Their unfathomable English and the way they pet the cat they so strangely hate open up the possibility that this world was not only made for cold tiles and hospital rooms but also for water colors and rebellious 3-year-olds.

What is it that I'm doing with all my afters? I'm not sure, but maybe I'm watering wild flowers in the space past survival. The miracle of finding beauty in the silence after the impossible scream is also the most unoriginal

What happens in the space past survival? Tala Abu Rahmeh explores a life after the loss of her mother to cancer, and the journey one goes through after a monumental loss. Before and after is how she splits her life. So what exactly is there after?

human experience, but it's one we don't remember to hold closer. The day after my mother died, my cousin, then 14, force-fed me chips and told me that now she would be my mother, and we would be cats. The year after, I dedicated my thesis to my mother, and today, against all odds, I mostly laugh when I think of her, which is more than I'd care to mention.

Perhaps life is a series of yelling children, broken dreams, and unmentionable losses; but in the middle of all the disappointment lives a room that gives us light, good food, and a certain 3-year-old who mispronounces the word "shapes," and in that room are our most breathtaking mornings.

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