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## Cure for a Hangover

THERE ARE HANGOVERS, and there are hangovers.

A cure for the regular ache—occasioned by something like several martinis too many, say, and downed too quickly with only a soggy olive in between—might include a hot shower followed by heavily spiced tomato juice, with a couple of aspirin for good measure.

The hangover that concerns me on the other hand, the one that brought me to my knees for years, was not the product of excess though it bore all usual hallmarks: wicked headache, clouded judgment, queasy stomach, and an uneven step. Further, other than the accident of my birth, I did nothing to bring it on. In short, this particular hangover came not from toxic drink but from toxic history, a fact that made it all the more impenetrable by the usual cures.

My grandparents on both sides of my family were Armenian. This is not the non sequitur it may appear, as it is Armenian history I refer to and specifically the Armenian holocaust. Now I realize that when anyone says *holocaust* these days, they mean *Holocaust*, as in the slaughter of nearly six million Jews. Certainly few think of the Armenians.

“Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?” Hitler once asked in an address to his supreme commanders. “The world believes in success alone.” The so-called success he referred to was the systematic execution of roughly one-and-a-half million Armenians in a killing spree which began in 1915 and continued for the next handful of years.

“It never happened,” growls a Turk, “and even if it did, what of it? They had it coming.” But when confronted with this lack of accountability, the Armenian, for his part, sighs from his depths, opens his palms in a gesture of dismay and asks, “What Turk will acknowledge that his yogurt is curdled?”

In fact, there were witnesses to the slaughter and some of them were prominent figures of the day. Their journals and other accounts point a blaming finger at the Young Turks, the barbarous trio who overturned the last of the sultans in their play for control of the empire. The near annihilation of a culture is a massive task, however, larger even than this brazen triumvirate could manage, and so they sought help. They found it in Germany—Germany!—in the eager person of the kaiser, though this too is not a widely known fact. My grandparents, mere teenagers at the time, escaped with only their memories and nightmares for possessions, which they passed on to their children, and to their grandchildren as well. Perhaps the number of deaths can be tallied but the number of debilitating hangovers spawned in successive generations is incalculable.

One of the key aspects of the headache I inherited is that I am considered sensitive. Put another way, I have no tolerance for unkindness and am wary of bullies. The small god of the playground, the prince of the in-crowd, the dictator of the office—brutes can turn up anywhere, and I was raised to be cautious of all of them.

I come by this wariness honestly. As a small girl, tucked safely amid the swirling skirts of endless aunts and older cousins, I heard and overheard a symphony of innuendo about how the bullies can take your children, your parents, your lovers, your property, your dignity, your hopes, and only after that, your life. From these survivors, I also learned to deflect attention from myself, to smile in the face of an insult, to enter a room quietly, and to trust no one—*hear me now, child!*—no one except one's own kind. These are the edicts that echoed throughout my upbringing, the watchwords of a centuries-old culture that was all but annihilated.

Once, as a small girl, I looked up the word “holocaust” and found that the definition went on for some length. The genocide of the European Jews at the hands of the Nazis figured prominently. “Nuclear” was also mentioned, although glancingly, and so too, these days, is “AIDS.” The Armenians were not mentioned, then or now, yet the legacy endures, the hangovers perpetuate.

A headache so severe that the mere blink of an eye brings on shooting pains can cloud a person's thinking. In my case it led to graduate school, and I became a lawyer. Woefully lacking in self-knowledge in those years, I was only faintly aware that toxic history had anything to do with this decision, and that it was not, as I once thought, solely occasioned by the fact that I was in my twenties, had a history degree, and no better plan. And, as it happened, I seemed blessed with at least a modest aptitude for lawyering, which was enough to dispel even a backward glancing inquiry into the appropriateness of the career choice. Despite a fistful of degrees and a whole lot of fun, however, it turned out to do nothing for my headache.

For starters, I had a healthy suspicion of rules, another feature of my hangover. Simply put, the law did not protect my ancestors and this observation alone precluded any possibility that I might blindly hold it above scrutiny—even today, even in America. It was also true that those of my forebearers who survived were often forced to break the law, or at least to tell lies, which in some circles is the same thing.

It went, for example, something like this: a family man, going about his life, minding his own business which was plenty worry enough, was stopped in his fields, or on the road, or in the chambers of the bath house, a mere towel wrapped around his middle. A thug dressed as a soldier demanded to know, "Who are you? What is your name? What is your religion?" If the man told the truth, he died. If he said nothing—and unarmed, as were all Armenians in those years by dictate of Ottoman law—he died. But if he mustered his courage and told a lie—"I am like you, Esteemed Sir, put away your sword. My name sounds like yours, no need for your dagger. And as for my religion, how dare you question my devotion, Your Excellency!"—then he might have been spared long enough to return to his village in time to warn the others that the bullies had arrived, that haste must be made, that the time had come to gather up the children, leave everything behind, and run. *Run!*

Notice please the "how dare you" response. One strategy in combatting bullies is to meet aggression with aggression.

Theoretically, if you shove back with conviction, the bully will back down, and there were times when I relied on this strategy myself though I was seated at a conference table, not standing in the field, and the only weapons in sight were Brooks Brothers suits and Italian leather briefcases. As a generalization, the tactic worked, but as it was not without risk; it was rarely my first choice in strategy. Besides, it was more to my upbringing to deflect attention, or to sidestep charmingly, or, if the worst threatened, to fade carefully into invisibility—the instincts of someone raised among people who witnessed the slaughter of their entire families and nearly died themselves from starvation, from disease, at the tip of a sword, from the blow of a rock, at the bottom of a well, on a makeshift cross, on a spit over a fire, under the beastly desert sun, or from madness over cruelties so harsh I will do you the favor of not supplying the specifics.

These unspeakable things happened in the holocaust my family suffered, and I grew up with a ghostly awareness of them. “*Shhhh! The children!*” my aunties would caution each other, their paring knives flashing as they sat circled around a bushel basket peeling apples for pie or trimming okra for stew, but we heard anyway, a stream of horrible little truths seeping in at the edges of our American childhoods. *Like china dropped from a careless hand, we splintered apart, never again to be reunited. We did what we had to do; what choices did we have? We dressed our boys as girls so they wouldn’t be killed. We dressed our girls as boys so they wouldn’t be raped. And the babies...my God, the babies...*

And, too, there were the overt things we were intended to hear: “Don’t fight with your brother,” my grandmother chided. “You’re lucky your brother is alive,” and “Do your homework—no one can take your education from you.” “Eat your tomatoes,” she also said. “What I wouldn’t have given for a tomato during the exile.” Thus, history lurks forever for me in a tomato.

I was raised in an extended family, with more aunts, uncles, and cousins than I could keep straight. There were happy moments, of course, lots of them, but there were shadows and dark streaks too. Underneath our music and laughter, we youngsters felt the unnamed but heavy press of grief: the furrowed

brows, the ever-ready hankies tucked up sleeves, the black clothing, and the deep sighs apropos of nothing. Even though we had no language to describe what we were seeing, the more perceptive among us noticed oddities, chilling things like the gnarled restless hands of a favorite aunt smoothing imaginary wrinkles from her lap, over and over, ancient hands smoothing down a black skirt in a futile effort to comfort herself. Her lively eyes were suddenly vacant, her active mind was now someplace else, and her voice was heavy with resignation as she whispered to no one in particular, "So, this is the life then, so *this* is the life."

"What do you mean, Auntie?" a young cousin asked.

There was no answer. Though she could hear a tidbit of exciting news whispered a mile away, and though she could hear the dead dispensing advice in her dreams, she didn't hear the child at her knee, didn't hear his anxiousness, his desire to please.

"Auntie?" he asked again, more tentatively this time.

She was rocking back and forth now, staring at the dust motes suspended in a slant of sunlight. She could see the future in the grinds of a coffee cup but she didn't see the light or the dust or the child there before her. In this frozen moment, a space of time as endless as forever, it seemed that no one was breathing, everything ceased.

"Come, eat," called another aunt from the kitchen and the clock began to tick again. The smell of spice permeated the air—voluptuous and exotic to an American sensibility—but for all its richness, it did not cover the scent of blood, the smell of grief.

"Never mind," said the aunt at the stove. She wiped her hands on her apron, took the child's palm in hers, and led him away. "Never mind, don't upset yourself. Everything is fine. Your old Auntie just wants to go home."

"Home?" he asked, his soft chin tilted upwards to meet her face. "But aren't we home?"

He was confused, and frightened, and embarrassed, too, because he could sense that he had already said too much, that he shouldn't ask anything more. He could feel the prickle of shame rising up his neck because he thought he ought to know the answer to his question already. It pained him to see his aunt

this way, present but not present, solid to the touch yet filled with an annihilating emptiness. He felt a sob knot in his throat which he subdued because he didn't want to be seen crying—*what are you crying for? for what?*—he didn't know, couldn't say, and the one who would be most likely to come to his rescue and smooth his brow and say "Never mind then, it's okay," was still smoothing her skirt and looking bewildered as if called back from very far away, before she was ready.

He sensed that her heart was in pieces and that it would never again be whole, no matter his kisses, his adoration, no matter what change and chance may bring. He wouldn't have caused her discomfort for anything in the world but he was aflame with curiosity and couldn't let it go. In the teacup-sized circumference of his world, a child's world, everything was sharply delineated, each thing only itself: joy was joy, fear was fear, sadness was sadness. It would be many years before the lines blurred, before one thing merged into another, before the refrain "It's not so simple," would become a way of life. But for now, it seemed to him a straightforward question—so simple, perhaps he shouldn't have asked but he was confused and afraid and he wanted to know: aren't we home?

But no answer came, just a steaming plate of green beans simmered with ground lamb and smelling flavorfully of tomatoes, toasted pine nuts, and cumin. "Eat, eat," is all the child heard. It was partly a request and partly an order. Dutiful child, he picked up his fork and ate, but he had no appetite. He chewed instead on the undercurrent of despair he heard in the soft voices around him.

So many things unsaid to spare the children, so many frozen moments. We might not have had the words for what we experienced but we sensed more than knew that loss—so bleak, so impenetrable—was the keystone of depression. It hung over us as thick and interminable as the winter sky. Lovers and parents, country and wealth, customs, language, and dreams—all gone in a river of blood, an ocean away.

"Aren't we home?" The question remained. Weeks later, he asked it again, after his prayers (kneeling, side of the bed), and

before the last good night kisses were exchanged. His grandmother drew up the sheets under his chin and said, “My darling, my sweetheart, my angel, don’t concern yourself,” but he *was* concerned and he wouldn’t let it go. Finally, she sighed and said ever so gently, “Once upon a time, in the Old Country...” but then she quit and started again. “When your life has had a knife at its throat,” she murmured, “you have a choice: either you really start to live or you start to die. That’s all then, but never mind. It’s not for you to worry about. Go to sleep.”

As the boy lay wakeful and staring at the ceiling, he fingered the small, gold cross he wore around his neck. He wanted God to appear right then and there so he could have it out with Him. He had questions, questions no one would answer with clear, clean truths. He had been taught in Sunday school that the Armenians were the first nation on earth to adopt Christianity as a religion—then for this anyway, he reasoned, God needed to appear and do some explaining. Either that or there was some mistake here, something terribly wrong and deeply malignant within his faith, and he felt helpless to defend against it, or even to give it a name.

But God did not appear and there were no divine explanations. Neither were there mortal ones. Nobody said much about it—no one wanted to remember, no matter that they could not forget—but still, we heard between the lines: *People died, so many deaths, death everywhere, but a few fled when an uncaring God wasn’t looking. We escaped by foot, in the dark, in a hay cart, on a camel, with a name change, with a lie on our lips, with borrowed clothes and forged papers, and a horse stolen from a Turkish soldier—may God have mercy, that was close. The lucky among us swallowed a bit of jewelry—a ring perhaps, or a coin; we were wealthy once, you know. We tried to stay together but it was like milkweed in the wind. The decisions we had to make—my God, the babies. We died that day though our bodies lived. We were emaciated and sick and half crazed and afraid but still we fled, a few gold pieces plucked from our bodily waste, a little gold, if you were lucky, to cross a palm raised against you...*

The sweeping hand of Death had leveled the playing field and the few survivors—by way of Paris, Marseille, Beirut, Baghdad,

Havana—washed up here, in America. They tumbled maimed into the New World, not realizing that it was itself a flawed world, never guessing that they would beget children who were also maimed in their hearts. What little was said always ended the same way: there was nothing that could be done about it now. Still, it was more a slow awakening than an epiphany to realize that it was up to us, the inheritors of the history, the energetic dark-eyed children born here in America, to make it right, to carry on.

And so I did. I went to law school—more a foregone conclusion than a meditated choice. And if I needed confirmation of the appropriateness of the career path, a modern-day bully surfaced just then and looked in on my life. “I can’t think of anything more deadly dull or more achingly pointless than the practice of law,” he said, though I don’t recall asking his opinion.

*He’s not worth the dirt on a potato,*” whispered my grandmother’s ghost. “*Don’t bother with him, child. Keep yourself small.*”

I tried. I changed the subject, but each time this fellow had something withering or bludgeoning to say. In the end, tentative person that I was in my twenties, I remained silent. To object sounded mewling. To attack was unseemly. And so I would sit ladylike and steeped in silence. *Forget him my darling, my sweetheart, my angel, my everything. Stay silent. Survive.* Practical advice, the advice of a woman who had survived the killing fields.

No matter the remarks of a bully, I went to law school and considered it a convenient antidote to my inherited headache, indeed to injustice of all kinds. Not only did I surmise that it would be a respectable way to use my voice, but I sensed, too, that it would be gesture in the direction of atonement for our losses. (*My God, the babies. What choice did we have? What could we do? Some of our darlings we gave away, extracting promises that they would be well cared for—alive anyway though brought up Muslim. And some...dear God have mercy...we killed ourselves to spare them a certain death at savage hands, their mothers made to watch.*) It was enough already, all these unkind people in the world.

And, initially, anyway, my strategy worked. Thriving practice, fascinating clients, lots of opportunity—what more could a

young woman fresh out of graduate school want? Better yet, I no longer felt soft or melancholy or terrifically naïve as I did in my green youth, but out in the bright, sharp, glittering world of adults, empowered with a mission to fight for truth and justice and vested with the skills to see it through.

On the surface, then, things were going well. But underneath, I had that little problem of no blind respect for rules, and, as it turned out, scant patience for the law's singular adherence to precedent; the law can be so strict, yet in its very strictness it fails us, for life is so untidy. Worse yet, I had an increasing concern over the slippery nature of truth, mindful that it's really story—made up of measurable fact, certainly, but also containing the hopes and prayers of the soul—that stands for a man's truth.

As the years passed, I developed other concerns, too. There were times, for example, when I didn't agree on *what* the real crime was in a given scenario or on *who* the real criminal was. My clients, the alleged bad boys, almost always had their reasons for their massive lapses in judgment. I was a patient listener, but even so I discovered that the guilty man likes to talk as if simply being heard was as close as he would come to receiving forgiveness in a mortal world. And I never tired of hearing the stories, amazed at the complexity of life, and humbled by how a zig instead of a zag could change everything; one faulty step and *whoosh*, through the looking glass we go.

"The business of the law is to draw lines," a law school professor of mine liked to say. But the more I heard, the more I had to wonder: how sharp is that line? And how straight does it run between a saint and a sinner, between a barefaced lie, a white lie, a half-truth, and the whole truth, so help me God?

Increasingly, I tried to include the stories I heard within the legal papers I wrote. My sentencing memorandums in particular were stylishly written to put the context back into the crime—the cold parent, the stupid misunderstanding, the poor education, the abundance or absence of money, or the hundred other things—but I soon discovered that the *whole* story could rarely be told in a court of law. Besides, insofar as the public was concerned, the prevailing attitude was to let the criminal justice system grind

so that the *good* citizens could get back to whatever it was that they were doing.

So much, then, for the antidote to the ancestral sadness I carried.

Eventually, I left my practice and with it my office, my staff, my foreseeable future, and my convenient label of “lawyer;” which had made casual conversation so easy. In place of this fixed trajectory toward at least modest success and security, I embraced a writer’s life, which is to say a life held together by the force of one’s imagination alone. I was still deeply interested in truth and in justice but decided that I had a better chance of finding these things as a writer—and to a large extent, this has proven to be accurate.

Here is something I have found to be true: human beings need steady, important kindness to survive, and admiration and encouragement to thrive; all the rest—the flow of a good life and of good fortune—is extra.

I also understand a few things about aggressors now and why they once loomed so large in my life, and when I come across one now, I see him for his ordinary petty malevolence. Fluidly, almost casually to the untutored eye, I can move beyond him in one dancer-like motion, and in doing so, am reminded of another lesson bred in the bone, passed in the blood: life is brief and is meant to be lived.

My grandparents’ apartment (across the street from the church) was on my route to and from law school, and it was my habit to stop in several times a week as much to recover from the day as to provide them some entertainment. These were pleasant visits marked by a slice of pie, a cup of thick, sweet coffee, and advice, freely bestowed: a clean handkerchief is a necessity in life, good posture can make up for a myriad of shortcomings, and never turn your back on milk put to boil. But once, when spinning theories about the kind of law I thought I might practice, my grandmother reached across the kitchen table, squeezed my hand and whispered her most urgent teaching: *That’s fine, fine my sweetheart, my darling, my everything—but remember this: above all, you must live. Live!* Her phrasing was naked, born of vivid concentration, the whole of her experience distilled into this single command, and upon hearing it, I forgot to breathe.

The implications were clear. In the world beyond my own, great events had taken place, dark and unyielding, and it was up to me to move beyond them. *Live*, she said and in a moment where everything conspired to make the occasion intimate: the softness of evening falling, the pool of lamplight on the kitchen table, the sense that I was being told something important, no matter that it would be many years before I truly understood. Her tone was earnest, and her directive, albeit vague, became my touchstone. *Live*, she said, and it went without saying that I should do so as fervently, prodigiously, and defiantly as my circumstances would permit. The subtext was unspoken: carry on and the bullies will not have won.

Though my grandparents enjoyed a fine old age, my time with them seemed brief. Don't blink, people say, for life passes much too quickly. True enough, but the older I get the more I recognize that the passing of time, so frequently cast as a villain, is nonetheless the surest remedy I know to hangovers of any persuasion.

Blink, your eyes narrowed, your mouth set to grimace in anticipation of searing pain, but wait, the headache has diminished, the miracle of time gone by, tomato juice, hot showers, and the law so feeble by comparison.

Blink and the shadows that darkened one's youth—the genesis some say of every later moment of madness, indiscretion, and betrayal—recede. One's time in the underworld of mourning is over, tomorrow is here and in its newness it demands the benefit of the doubt.

Blink and the next generation has arrived and to your astonishment you have, perhaps unwittingly, perhaps even despite yourself, fulfilled the mission pressed so firmly in your hands: you have survived, you have carried on.

And now, watching the children grow, each so buoyant, so exuberant, as if out of breath from the very beginning, you blink again as if every child is a sun too brilliant to behold. And as you hear the easy confidence in their voices and watch them nibble at the edges of the great untouched feast of their lives, you blink hard to keep back the tears of joy.

Don't blink, people say, but in this context anyway, they've got it wrong.

I am of the third generation—the generation of the grandchildren—the last for whom the events of the holocaust will be more than a mere matter of intellectual or moral interest. But my generation is also the first that can enjoy any serviceable distance from events so wrenching that even the dead, with their propensity to haunt dreams and hover in shadows, haven't recovered. And as we, the grandchildren, gather our voices, denounce our enemies, and teach our young to stand strong, I am reminded that without a hangover, the day brims with possibilities and the night—once the province of monsters feasting on sour yogurt—now holds at least the chance anyway for the sublime sleep of the unfettered.

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