**Something Like Grief**

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Can we grieve for people we don’t really know, or is grief the wrong word? Maybe it’s more like a spontaneous chemical reaction, the bursting forth of tears the thing that bonds together, on some molecular level, a community. Syntha had experienced this brief but affecting grief last month, when she’d seen the parents of school shooting victims interviewed on the news and cried at the sight and sounds of their pain. Their tears, the way the father’s chest hitched, trapping his voice in his throat, had caused Syntha’s eyes to water, never mind that she wasn’t a parent and had nothing at all, really, in common with those people. Was empathy the better word—the taking on of another’s grief as one’s own? And which was it causing her shoulders to shake where she now sat in the pew at her grandfather’s funeral: grief for a man she didn’t really know? Empathy for the wife he’d left behind? Syntha watched her grandmother, seated in the first pew on the opposite side of the aisle, dab at her eyes with a tissue scrunched in the same hand as her rosary. Her knuckles were huge and arthritic, knobbier even than the beads of her rosary and just as old. It was the same strand her grandmother had prayed on since childhood, when she’d first learned about the man nailed to the cross, a Godsend who’d died for her sins and so demanded a different kind of grief yet—one rooted in the guilt and obligation of the church.

Watching her grandmother cry, Syntha cried, but not for her grandfather. She wanted to know what it felt like, this hole his death would leave in her grandmother’s heart, like the holes in the chests of those gunned-down kids. Eyes swollen, face red, makeup smeared, Syntha decided in that moment to explore the hole. To answer once and for all what grief was.

After the service but before they put her grandfather in the ground, when his body was still resting in the crypt, Syntha approached with a knife. It was a butter knife that she’d found in the church kitchen. She opened the latches that someone had closed on the casket, stared at the waxy face of the man who’d raped her just once when she was ten, then climbed on in. She undid the buttons of his suit coat, followed by the buttons of his suit vest and then his dress shirt, and spreading the garments, finally revealed his sunken old-man chest. It was unblemished—no need for a Y-stitch autopsy when you die of apparent old age—save for a small incision in his lower abdomen where the embalmer had inserted the tool used to puncture and drain the organs. The organs themselves would still be inside, and that’s what Syntha was after. She palpated Grandpa’s chest with three fingers. It felt firm, unyielding, like the taxidermied squirrel he’d kept in his office. He’d shoved her face into it as he’d bent her over his desk, and she’d been surprised when it hadn’t smelled like anything. Not so for Grandpa, who’d smelled of pipe smoke that day and of pickles now, formaldehyde wafting from him in waves.

Eyes on the prize, she raised the knife and brought it down, hard, into his left pectoral muscle. It slid sideways and up where it struck bone before slicing neatly into flesh. She sawed it around a bit like she was carving a mouth on a jack-o-lantern and when she’d created a big enough space, peeled the skin flaps back as though opening the lapels of another shirt. The fascia looked iridescent in the light through the stained glass windows, which cast the preserved parts in purple and yellow. She stuck her thumb through it like it was a pie crust and she, little Jack Horner. There was a satisfying pop. Only, instead of pulling out a plum, she searched around until she found the thing she really wanted—Grandpa’s heart, wrinkly and dark as a rotten fruit and knobby, after decades of smoking, as Grandma’s knuckles.

Syntha twisted and yanked until it wrenched, solidly, free. Then she held it up to examine it, scrutinizing it for something like grief, and something else like empathy. To her disappointment, she found nothing but valves thick and squishy as calamari; muscle so sleepy at having finally pumped its last whoosh of lifeblood through the heart’s four chambers that it lay still in her hand and whispered no more. When Syntha turned the organ over, it lined up in her palm with the face of Joseph in the window. Joseph’s halo seemed to surround the heart, seemed to make it a holy thing, and Syntha almost dropped her grandfather’s heart in fright. Then she thought about who Joseph was, really. Human father, but not biological or even spiritual father to Jesus, and she wondered whether he cried when he saw his son, a stranger’s son, on the cross. Can we grieve for people we don’t really know? Did Joseph wail out of empathy for Mary? Was it he who took the soldier’s sword and with it pierced Jesus’s side, letting the fluids and the gases drain freely? Did he pray while he did so? Did he weep?

Had Syntha wept while she gunned down all those kids? She didn’t think so.

The teenager brought the heart to her mouth and bit into it, expecting the bitterness but not the sweetness that muscle emptied of blood acquires. She chewed, swallowed, and looked down at her grandfather’s face. Waited to sob. Felt only weighted. Suddenly bored, Syntha dropped the mangled heart on top of the body. She walked out of the church and did not look back.