

Eulogies: A Memoir
(Excerpt)

For G.

Hey G.

I don't remember the first conversation I had with you, but I remember the last. Our conversations followed a pattern – I'd see you sitting in your uncle's garage across the street from my apartment building – we'd wave, then one of us would cross the street, you'd ask how I was doing, I'd say, *you know, fine*, then you'd say, *you sure, you good?* I'd say *yeah*, then you'd ask how the writing was going.

What have you been working on? When are you going to let me read something?

Sometimes I'd run into you in the neighborhood. Like the time I was in the back of Salahi (where the cat food is), and I heard somebody calling my name from the front of the store. It took two or three times hearing you say it for it to get through my brain that you were talking to me, because you were maybe a little, well let's just say it seemed you had been enjoying your evening. I heard one of the guys behind the counter, I couldn't hear exactly what he was saying, but I figured he was telling you to stop bugging me, because I heard you say, "no, it's okay, she's my homie." As a fifty-year-old white chick, I took it as a compliment.

I remember the last conversation I had with you because it would end up being the last conversation I had with you. We talked about your birthday coming up, it would be your 40th and there was a big party planned at your uncle's place. But you didn't quite make it that far. You were short by two days.

When I heard, I did what I do, I wrote to you. I am writing to you. But I have to say G., it's getting harder, these eulogies; they are beginning to pile up.

So, here you go G. This is what I've been working on. This is for you. Sorry it took so long.

Melting

Hot. It was so goddamn hot.

The heat was different in New York, different from Northern California, where she'd grown up. It would get unspeakably hot there too, but here the humidity, the closeness of the buildings, the sidewalks made even hotter by the exhaust spewing from gigantic air conditioners, the hellfire and damnation of the subway platforms, here it felt oppressive in a way she couldn't imagine ever getting used to.

While she appreciated the charm of her pre-war Brooklyn apartment, during these hot spells the crown molding wasn't enough to make up for blown fuses and trips to the basement to flip circuit breakers over-powered by the lone window air conditioner in her bedroom, the constant drip of sweat down her back, the fatigue. Not to mention the electric bills.

She had to acknowledge too, that it was harder for her now, because of the illness. Her tolerance for the heat had diminished.

It helped if the temperature would drop in the early morning by a few degrees, enough to give her an hour or two of relief from the heat, time to have her coffee and cigarette in the kitchen, prepare some food for the rest of the day. But when it was unrelenting like this, never a break, just a heat that felt omnipotent, it brought to mind unpleasant associations with those public service announcements about checking on your sick and elderly neighbors.

She knew she needed to eat something, even though the heat had wrung every bit of appetite out of her. She opened the door of her refrigerator, luxuriating in the coolness of the

air coming from the large white machine. After fantasizing about climbing in, she stared unenthusiastically at the contents on the shelves, grabbed a few things, placed them on the kitchen counter.

God, I am so fucking tired.

Of the various symptoms of her illness, perhaps the biggest challenge was sleep, or the lack of it. She hadn't slept well in years. It was common in neurological illnesses. Most of the people she knew didn't understand, offering advice for things she'd already tried – yoga, warm milk, hot tea, exercise, meditation – she would just smile and say thank you. She didn't doubt those folks wanted to be helpful, but it was also clear that they wanted desperately to normalize her symptoms.

It's just your age, I can't sleep either.

It was interesting to watch, how invested people were in making her be okay, as if through sheer force of will they could. It wasn't for her benefit, that was obvious, it was just too hard for them, perhaps even harder for those closest to her than it was for her, to acknowledge the reality she lived with every day. While it hadn't been easy she had made peace with her illness, at least as much as was possible. She'd been living with it for long enough that it had become a part of her, kind of like a roommate that you're not terribly happy to have around, but can't find a way to evict. And she was very aware that there were much worse things she could have.

Still, getting a diagnosis of a significant illness had a way of dividing your life into two parts, and the person she had been in Part One – married, good job, maybe not her dream job, but okay, more than okay to the rest of the world – seemed so distant to her now, she could

barely remember that person at all. Part Two – divorce, disability, savings and pension gone, it was more than moving from one chapter to the next, it was a severance, a death of the person she had been.

Something had changed in her when her life had split in two. She'd always considered herself a thoughtful person, but having to face all of these things, not just the illness, but the bigger reality of what it meant, having the realization hit home of how little control we have over the cards we are dealt, how precarious a word "security" is, made her realize how good she'd had it, still did have it in many ways. Her status as a person with a disability had been approved by the governmental gods of the Social Security Administration, but those monthly SSDI payments were nowhere near what she'd been making when she was working. She'd managed to scrape by so far, but it hadn't been easy and she knew that she'd have to make some decisions soon about her future.

She stopped washing the vegetables she was going to use for the dinner she most likely wouldn't end up eating, walked away from the sink and sat down at her kitchen table. It was tiny, but she loved her kitchen. Loved her neighborhood too. The thought of having to leave terrified her. What was she going to do?

Listen.

It was her drill sergeant's voice.

She'd become used to the voices in her head. She would joke about the voices when she mentioned them to others, *no, I don't have multiple personality disorder*, but in fact she didn't much care what other people thought about it. Now she just knew that when she heard the voices, it was wise to pay attention.

“What?” she said out loud.

Listen.

The daylight was finally beginning to fade into twilight; turning to look out of her kitchen window she could see the pale sliver of moon high up in the sky. It would be dark soon. Dark, but most likely not any cooler. She felt soggy. This damn heat. She tried to focus on the voice, the instructions it gave her.

Listen.

She got up from the table, walked into her bedroom and over to the air conditioner. Reaching for the dial that would turn the machine from “fan” to “air” she hesitated, imagining next month’s electric bill.

Just remember this when I need to pay Con-Ed.

She turned the a/c on full blast. She returned to the kitchen, filled a pitcher with water, dropping in some lemon slices and a tray worth of ice. She picked up the pitcher and a glass and went back to her bedroom. She placed the items on a small table. She added her grandmother’s bible, some dried sage, a vial of holy water a friend had given her over her protests that she wasn’t Catholic, a few crystals. It was an altar of sorts.

Listen.

She left the bedroom and went into the bathroom, turned the water on in the shower on the hottest setting.

Hot? Really?

Leaving the water running, she went back to her bedroom, took off her clothes, grabbed her robe, then returned to the bathroom. The tiny room, her Barbie Bathroom, she called it, was now filled with steamy air.

She stepped into the shower, adjusting the temperature of the water a bit to make it tolerable and stood underneath the spray, feeling the heat begin penetrating the skin of her body. After a minute or so it began to feel okay, maybe even more than okay, maybe even a little good. Her muscles began to loosen and she moved around a bit, stretching as best as she could in the small space. Her eyes closed as she turned her face upward to the showerhead.

Okay, what do I do now?

As soon as she heard the question in her head, she felt something tear inside her, like a curtain being ripped in two, and she was suddenly somewhere else. No, only part of her was somewhere else, she knew her body was still under that spray of water, but another part of her was somewhere else. She needed to open her eyes, her eyes in that other place. There was something she was supposed to see, something she wasn't sure she wanted to see.

How do I do this?

As she leaned into the question, she felt arms around her, loving arms, the arms of a mother, of The Mother. The Mother's arms began to merge with her arms. The embrace became their embrace, and the arms, her arms and the arms of The Mother, were as one.

Oh, I know who you are.

Not being Catholic, she had never understood the importance of Mary. But of course, the world needed a mother. She opened her arms, reaching out. She could see everything, everyone everywhere, could see the suffering of every one of her children. She ached for them

to turn their eyes in her direction, to have them see that she was there with them, that they weren't alone. That she loved them. Every now and then one of them would look toward her, pausing for a moment as if trying to make out a familiar face across a room, but mostly they kept moving, not seeing her, focused only on their own narrow path.

She began to cry, she couldn't stop it, she almost couldn't breathe as the sobs poured out of her.

How do you bear it?

And the tearing and rending of the fabric became nothing compared to the breaking of her heart, the breaking of The Mother's heart. To hold this suffering, the sum of all suffering, was impossible. She placed one hand on the tiled wall of the shower to steady herself, to keep from falling as the sobs became wails of grief. She couldn't remember the last time she'd cried like this.

Perhaps never.

And then, as suddenly as it had started, it stopped. The images were gone, the curtain closed, and their arms were only her arms again, and she was just a person standing in a steamy shower in an apartment in Brooklyn.

She turned off the water, her legs trembling as she stepped carefully out of the shower and into her bathrobe, not bothering to otherwise dry off. She walked into her bedroom, it felt arctic after the heat of the bathroom. She filled the glass with the water from the pitcher, drank it down quickly, it was so good, so cold; she repeated this until the pitcher was empty. She was tired, so tired. She looked at the altar, at the items she had placed on it.

What do you want me to do now?

Listen.

But what about these other things?

Listen.

She climbed into bed.

She turned off the light.

She slept.

For G. Conclusion

So, there you have it G.

I'm sad. Sad because I just assumed that I would keep having conversations with you, just as I assumed that I'd keep singing "Folsom Prison Blues" in the car with my dad, keep seeing Julian flash that beautiful smile, keep hanging out at Vox Pop, keep writing screenplays with Ric, watch little Anna grow up. Because, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, we continue to think we have all the time in the world.

Somebody said, *everyone knows they're going to die, but no one believes it*. But it's absolutely the one thing we all have in common. Seems to me it should be on the agenda for discussion. Instead, we like to argue about the things that separate us. But none of us has all the answers. We need each other.

I have an artist friend who creates mosaics. I think you know him G. There are several pieces of his in the neighborhood. They are all quite beautiful, but the thing I love the most about them is that it's not until you get close to one that you realize that everything in it, everything about it is broken. Broken pieces of glass, of clay, of ceramic, whatever, the material doesn't matter, but the pieces don't get on that wall without first being broken.

Maybe we could start there. There's that saying, *be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle*. Maybe we could start there. Maybe we could try to remember that we are all broken.