To You From the Past

by Lana Nader

**For an immersive experience, I recommend playing "A Dream" by Flatsound as you read. The calm and reflective instrumentals mirror the introspective tone of the essay.*

It was midday on a sunny day, and my mother and I sat on the marble floor with some books and notebooks. The tiles were cool to the touch, the sun's rays shone through the window behind me, illuminating the whole room. My mother sat in front of me and enunciated each syllable, while I repeated after her. She would watch me write each letter slowly, scratching away at the paper with my mechanical pencil, and every now and then I would look up from my notebook to study her face to figure out if it was correct while hurriedly erasing–blowing and brushing the eraser shavings away– and trying again. That day specifically, I got frustrated when I didn't know what to do, and I said I hated studying. My mother looked at me and didn't say anything for a while. I thought she was mad at me at first, but she suddenly said, "Let's do something else." We sat in the same spot as she painted my small fingernails with nail polish, blowing at them when she was finished with a finger. When she was done, she held my small hands in her palms while looking at my nails. "You know, when I was a little older than you, I loved school. I loved learning new things. I loved studying. But my parents and brothers didn't allow me to continue going to school," she smiled as she looked at me. Bitter and sad, but a smile indeed. "When your aunts and I painted our nails, we would use knives to scratch them off before our brothers came back from school, so we wouldn't get caught." She was saying all this with a smile, but six-year-old me felt immense grief in her words. The sound of my aunt calling

my mother broke the conversation as she got up to see what she needed. I sat there on the cool floor, the smell of nail polish engulfing the room, my mechanical pencil exactly where I left it. I couldn't help but wonder who she would have grown to become if she had the freedom to choose.

My mother grew up in an era when education for girls was not valued. The only purpose they saw in women was to be mothers, babysitters, cooks, confined to their homes and deemed men "responsible" for them. My mother excelled in academics up until 8th grade, until her father and brothers forbade her and her sisters from attending in the name of honor. While her brothers had the chance to continue their education they simply dropped out because they didn't care for learning or homework for that matter. Like many women of her generation, their right to education was stripped away in the name of perseverance and protection from danger, but the true violence was the denial of their potential and autonomy.

In my senior year of high school, I juggled two part time jobs, several AP classes, and managed to dedicate time for my Fashion School portfolio and teaching myself various textile weaving techniques. From September until February, I was on a time crunch to submit my application on time. February came in a flash, and D-day was calling me to pick up the call. It was perhaps one of the most nerve-racking experiences of my life, I was so nervous, so excited, and so afraid of the outcome.

"We are glad to offer you a place at our school!"

The sound rushed to my ear but my brain was not registering it. I closed my laptop and all I could feel was the urge to jump up and down from happiness. I had gotten into the top university in Fashion!

I got in! I got in! I can't wait to tell!...

But who do I tell? My parents were completely against me moving out even for a school that was less than 10 miles away. They would never allow me to move across the country, let alone another country. I didn't dare tell them of the news, not for another six-months anyway.

When I was younger my mother's side of the family kept chickens, and I even had the chance to adopt a cute little chick. I cared for the chick every day and watched it grow into a beautiful, yet sassy hen. One day my mother took my sister and I to the market with the chicken only to arrive at this particular shop. She held the chicken fearfully from its beak and handed it over to the shop owner. The shop owner held the chicken firmly by its wings rendering it defenseless as he grabbed a knife. The man said a small prayer, closed his eyes, and in a swift motion instead of a head was the remains of a life.

Yet there was no prayer said for my dream. No prayer of any kind. When I broke the news to my parents, they were extremely against it, especially my mother. I thought that she would understand, that she would know, that she would recognize my dreams. She forbade me in the name of protection from the dangers of the world. And what choice does a teenager have with no personal bank account, no access to financial aid information, and no college fund? Drown in debt? Run away? I wasn't imprisoned, the door was open, but where would I even go? The knife never grazed my neck, but I felt it snap my wings in half, and in that instance was the remains of a dream.

The same pencil my mother gave me when I was younger became the same one she disdained for letting me hold. She gave me a weapon and told me to protect myself, but she didn't imagine that it would be used against her ideals. My mother was always delicate, soft, and kind–Perfect mother and wife–yet she would abandon all of that for me and my sister, or at least the life she envisioned for us.

"We didn't give up everything for you to go live out on your own."

You gave up everything for me to get a better education, and I delivered.

"You should think of marriage, you are not getting any younger."

But I'm only 19 and he is 27.

"Once you are married, you can go wherever you want."

How different would that make me from a cattle?

My mother gave me a weapon and told me to not use it. She had given younger me a pen and pointed to the sky and told me to dream. But not too high where she can't see. Not too high where men wouldn't see. Not too high where marriage can't be seen. Just like her mother sat by while she fought tooth and nail to continue school, she sat by while she saw me do the same.

When my grandmother passed, my mother and aunts grieved immensely. They grieved for 40 days and never shed another tear about her in front of us again. She would do a memorial every year with *mergahay mammer* (chicken stew), but nothing more nothing less. There is no specific word for grief in our language, it is simply called *kez* (sadness) not necessarily pertains to sadness for the dead. For her, sadness was only reserved for the dead, for those who breathed the same air as us, ate *bamya auo gushte wel ash* (okra meat stew with rice) on the same table, and slept beside us. My mother has only mourned and grieved the dead, never for herself that dreamt of being something other than a cattle with the noose passed from one man to another. Never able to grieve for herself. But how do we grieve the living? How do we grieve the ignored, the forgotten, and erased? The millions of stories of women in my culture being ignored and forgotten without being grieved properly. They too existed, they too had dreams and aspirations, they existed all this time with no voice, no memorial of their dreams, no recognition of their griefs. No one should forget their pain. No one should forget their dreams. But that's all they ever

were told. All that my mother could do was to bury her dreams deep in her heart and hope no noise would come from the attic. Only to come face to face with an incarnation of her dreams reflected through me and I refuse to forget.

When I first learned of the word grief, I thought it was foreign to me. I thought I could not possibly know what that could have felt for me. But it was not foreign at all, it was all too familiar. The definition of grief comes from Early 13c., "hardship, suffering, pain, bodily affliction," from Old French grief "wrong, grievance, injustice, misfortune, calamity" (13c.), from grever "afflict, burden, oppress," from Latin gravare "make heavy; cause grief," from gravis "weighty" (from PIE root *gwere- (1) "heavy"). Meaning "mental pain, sorrow" is from c. 1300. Good grief as an exclamation of surprise, dismay, etc., is from 1912. (Etymology.) But to me, grief is the lingering ghost of love, the cold smoke left behind by a put-out flame. It is the remainder of love. Grief is not just reserved for the dead and departed. Grief is not just ceaseless sadness and sorrow. Grief is not what is buried and covered in dirt. It is the perseverance of tenderness and affection. It is when the world cruelly takes a part of you, and you are only left with a body that keeps going but no soul. It's when the love you hold in your arms has nowhere to go, only to turn into a bile of sorrows that just becomes harder and harder to hold onto. It is the act of worshiping a dead god. I call out to the heavens, but the sky is empty. Grief is not what is six feet under, but it is what continues walking, eating, and sleeping alongside us, though no one else is able to see it. Like a ghost haunting our days and asking to not be forgotten. It is what we shove inside our hearts, hoping it will beat again, only for it to bleed over everything.

My mother never had the opportunity to grieve for her dream or self. She had never realized she was allowed to, that her dreams were just as important as everybody else. The only thing I could do was mourn for her. All I could do was mourn instead of her in hopes that her

story like many other women would not be forgotten. I had grown so attached to her sorrow, I started worshipping it when I really wanted to let her know that I knew, I understood, and I recognized. My mother's grief was only making her more anxious about our separation, and in doing so she began repeating the same cycle that women in our culture have experienced for generations. We have experienced grief for the things we lost before we could even name them. The feeling has existed without being acknowledged or seen by anyone but shared by many women. The only thing they knew how to do was bury it and hope their daughters wouldn't face the same pain. But while there is grief in loss of the loved, there is also happiness in the gain of the loved. I have grieved a chapter of my story, and I'll always remember, but it also means there is the space and time for a new dream to exist, the chance to dream again.

From me, to you who could have been. I see you.

Works Cited

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