

Emma Burris

Beginning Fiction Workshop

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I Love You Pigeon, Be My Bride

“It’s been a year since it happened. Meaning it’s been almost a year since I got out of Bellevue, which I don’t want to talk about at this point. I think the weight of his death was so strong that it rippled over those first few months after, swallowed the events of June and July and August of that year into some pit. Or black hole, it doesn’t really matter.

“What surprises me the most is that I haven’t gone back to Bellevue. Out of everything, that may be what I remember the most clearly, the leaving of it all. The nice psychiatric postdocs waving me goodbye. Handing me a freezer bag filled with the shit I brought—my phone, my wallet, the keys to our apartment. Shoving a stapled doggy bag full of new medications into my hands, which they only let me take once I made them promise I wouldn’t try to down them all at once. Then, it was...*off*. There you go, right out into New York City, just try not to kill yourself, okay? Just take these pills and go to therapy once a week, we won’t have any other way of supervising you, okay? Seems like maybe not the best system, but hey, what can they do.”

I look around Dr. Finch’s office, scanning to see if there was any sign she had worked at Bellevue. None. Just heaps of textbooks and unsettling “calming” art.

“And I know you asked me this already, but I didn’t want to kill myself, to be frank. I was just...afraid I would? Afraid I

I didn’t want to kill myself, so I let things around me die.

The strawberry banana smoothie turning brown on the countertop.

would *want* to kill myself or afraid I would actually *do* it, I don't know. I was just afraid.

"Anyways, there's no use in really rehashing what happened with Piero. I don't want to talk about it more than I already think about it. I've thought about it so much."

"The crazy woman on the street, the Academy Award-winning actress, it's not much different from what we've all seen. But feeling it, going through it...replaying that moment every single day in your head...the moment when you found out that your fiancé, the love of your life, once-future father of your children, the man you didn't even get to *marry*..."

"It was just..."

"It was just...bad. It was just bad."

"So it's been a year. It happened, then Bellevue happened, then I was out. Readjusting to work, not readjusting to life. 'You look so much better!' my friends would tell me. 'You sound so much better!' they would say. My parents began making less frequent, less urgent trips to the city, confident in my ability to move on. Because your friends and your family move on from your grief, whether or not you do. They give you a time frame to lean on them, a deadline to meet. Then they tell you you're getting better, you're looking healthier, you're smiling more, the bags in your eyes are subsiding. Even if none of those statements are true.

"And everything just feels so monotonous now, like I'm living life on autopilot. I'm either sobbing until it's impossible to breathe, or I feel nothing at all. But despite this the world doesn't

Heaps of condolence flowers wilting away, leaving the apartment to smell like Persephone's Hell. Store brand cereal drowning in

expired milk. Soggy. Sour. Breathe your last breath.

I've thought about it so much. Too much, really.

Obviously. But at the end, I don't think it matters how he died. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was sick. He was murdered. He died a slow, painful death. He dozed off in the bathtub and drowned. He was the first person to die of the physical effects of low-grade anxiety. He jumped off the ninth floor of the Plaza. He was pushed into the Bronx Zoo Tiger pit. He bit his tongue too hard. He was mauled by a flock of segway-mounted tourists. He swallowed a thumbtack.

Really, with how much I loved him, it would've hit me the same way no matter how it happened. A sudden intake of breath, another, another, another, anotheranotheranotherinquickrapsuccession, sobbing, tears *tears allthetearsinmybody* leaping running out of me sprinting to the floor, as if they were trying to weten his freshly-dug grave. The feeling that I was having a heart attack, hoarsely, aggressively wheezing at Junie, who was there when it happened, to call 911. Lying on the grimy tile floor of Junie's lobby for over an hour, until I let her help me up. Crying so hard I puked. Thoughts and thoughts and *thoughts racing* through my *head*, thoughts and thoughts and *tears* and oh, my

chest...

care, the days just keep coming.

The days just keep coming, snailing along, leaving a sad

“And that’s nice, in a way. Only living for the sake of being alive. Knowing you can technically check out whenever you want to. You don’t need to buy your friends birthday presents because nothing matters. You don’t need to call your mom because nothing matters. You can sleep in and slack off on your quarterly company presentation because nothing matters. Hey, you don’t have to be future-minded anymore—screw saving for retirement and put those funds towards ordering Uber Eats, since it’s not like you have the energy to cook, anyways.

trail of mucus behind them, coughed up from indifference and despair. Apathy can be quite a spur. Being suddenly devoid of meaning means you care so little you can’t even muster up the courage to do anything about it. So you essentially become Sisyphus himself. Each day is your rock, the top of each hill is the moment your eyes pull down their shutters, begging for sleep. It’s not that hard, really. You just keep going because you convince yourself that there’s no other option.

“But the truth is I can’t let myself think that way. I don’t care, nothing matters, but I still feed the stray cat that lives on my block. I don’t care, nothing matters, but I still wake up in time to get to work every day. I still offer to give old people my seat on the subway. I still give waiters at least a 20% tip regardless of how shitty the service was. And I don’t know why. Sorry, what was the question?”

“How long has it been since your fiancé passed?”

“Right, right. My bad for going on a whole rant.”

“No, no, it’s actually quite useful. I’m glad...”

This was my first session with Dr. Finch. Before her I just had a therapist, a LCSW I would meet with online who would always be looking off at some off-screen object during our sessions, completely disengaged. As for the meds, I just got them refilled monthly from the staff at Bellevue. But then my therapist decided she suddenly wanted to go live on a sailboat and work as

Every day I remember to take a shower I sit down on the floor of the tub, draw my knees to my chest, and think about him. I don’t want to cry, but mostly I do. I try to stop it by pressing the heels of my hands deep into my eye sockets, as if applying pressure would stop the flow of tears. It doesn’t, I know. But at least it feels good—it makes me see stars, which makes me think of him. I don’t believe in God, but I still like to think Piero’s looking down at me from above.

a freelance travel vlogger with her husband, which meant she couldn't legally see me anymore—something about being outside of state lines. So now psychiatrist it is.

"And how did you meet Piero?"

"We were in a class together in college, Elementary Italian. I wanted to learn something new for the language requirement, whereas he just took it for the easy A."

"Was he fluent in Italian?"

And the simple change in tense sets it off. Dr. Finch hands me a box of tissues resting on a table beside my armchair. They're the weird kind of tissues with the lotion in them, the kind that makes your fingers grimy and your nostrils tingle.

"Yeah, he...he was an international student, from Turin.

We each had crushes on the other the whole semester, too scared to initiate a conversation out of thin air. Only until our class met at the professor's house for dinner after finals did we start talking—really talking, about things beyond *Cosa ti piace fare?* and *Cosa hai mangiato questa mattina?* Then we exchanged numbers, and went a whole summer of texting—each yearning, neither saying it outright, since it's summer, and what are you gonna do? On the first day of the fall semester, we made things official. And it's been absolutely amazing ever since. Or, was.

"I've told that story hundreds of times. It used to be one we told together, interrupting each other playfully, adding more details and anecdotes as we rubbed each others' knuckles, fiddled with each other's fingers, batting feet beneath whatever table we were sitting at. It was a ridiculous story, a slow burn, as my

Was he...

Was...

Too scared to tell them. Who to call first. Shaking,

dialing up his mother's phone number. *Tesoro*, she sobbed. *Abbiamo appena ricevuto le notizie*. A fleeting moment of joy—I didn't have to be the one to break the news after all.

Summer of despair. We buried him just in time for name day, his *Onomastico*. Piero, what am I supposed to do with this life I've made now that you're gone? Your family, your language, I've learned and loved it all. And for nothing, it seems.

I've started to lose fluency, to lose contact with your parents, your brother. Years down the drain, slipping away.

friends called it. It was funny, and entertaining, and had a happy, satisfying, ending. And now it's the very beginning of a tragic sequence of events, not even entertaining enough to warrant being called a 'story.'"

"...I understand you currently are on Xanax, Lexapro, and Haldol. Who prescribed these medications?"

"Oh, I'm not sure, it's what they put me on when I was committed."

"And you've been taking them consistently at this dose for the past year?"

I nodded. Dr. Finch looks confused, pulls out her computer, and begins furiously typing. "Yeah, I'm not convinced these are the right drugs to be taking based on your condition," she offers, after some time. "Based on your medical history, there's really no reason to be taking psychiatric drugs of this nature and dosage level."

"There's...not?"

"No, there's not. Grief is a natural human process, Olive. It's not a mental illness. It's true that in some cases, such as your own, grief can induce suicidal ideation. But you've expressed that you're not currently suicidal, and looking at the literature, you're at a normal state based on the grief you've experienced. This is a process healed by time and therapy. It's your choice, but based on speaking with you it seems like these medications may be putting a damper on your ability to experience the full range of positive emotions. Based on the data and my clinical judgment, I would recommend easing off of the Lexapro and Haldol and reducing

Not even entertaining enough to warrant being called a "story." Because it's not, really. It's something nobody wants to

hear. And if they hear it, they think *I'm glad it's not us. Let's be grateful. I love you*, forgetting about it all the next day. It's not a story, it's a signifier of luck. A foreboding reminder of the importance of appreciation.

I just wish I had those months back. That semester, that summer. The time we would've spent together is one of the things I wish for the most in the world.

After some time, I started neglecting things. When I went back to Minnesota, I drove without wearing my glasses. I wasn't careful with kitchen knives. I didn't look both ways when crossing the street. I wasn't going to kill myself, no. But a part of me hoped I would die, and that it might even be my fault.

Grief can induce a lot of things. It can make you sit down in the middle of the street and weep because your plastic laundry basket's handle broke. It'll make you lay down on the High Line because you just heard someone speak Italian, and you're afraid you'll jump. It'll prevent you from ever leaving your shitty apartment in deep Brooklyn because he lived there, and maybe there's a part of it that still smells like him, maybe there's a hair left in the crack behind the sink, maybe there are still

the Xanax to 0.5 mg per day, for now. How does that sound? I fingerprints left on the fridge.

know it's a lot, and I know this probably wasn't what you were expecting. It'll be gradual, though."

O

Though she wants to wean me off the pills, I don't know if I can. I'm scared that once they remove themselves from my bloodstream, then the intense, violent despair will come creeping back. That it will emerge from its cage where it has been sleeping for the past year—present and tangible, but contained. Known, no uncertainty. Now uncertainty unbeknownst.

N

E

A part of me wants to blame the pills. Because then this grief would stop, right?

W

I don't know. How could I trust someone I've known for forty-five minutes to give me a prescription to heal a wound that was preparing itself to be opened for eight years, and has no intention of ever closing itself up?

E

And the pills—little lockets of hope I shove down my throat, how different are you from the pennies I throw in the park fountain? How different are you from dandelions, eyelashes,

K

birthday candles? Aren't you just a wish?

"When you met with your last therapist, did she give you homework?"

This isn't a broken bone, this isn't a stomach bug.

"Homework?"

There's no guarantee anything will heal me.

"Yes, homework can often be useful in the context of therapy, so that you can carry the skills you learn here beyond this door."

My body runs solely on inertia now. I am nothing more than an atom set free in an empty space. So I suppose there's no reason not to give it a try.

"No, no homework. We just talked."

"And did you find that helpful?"

"Yeah...In the moment I did. But I guess for every session...it wasn't, I never really believed I was getting better.

For every one week of immense, intolerable grief you can have one (one) forty-five minute session of therapy.

Maybe you're right. But maybe it just won't get better."

"Sometimes, people find that—"

"—I'm sorry, could I ask you a really quick favor?"

"Of course."

"Could you just speak to me a bit more like a regular person? I don't know, I just don't feel like this therapist lingo is really helping me at all."

"Sure thing. Let me rephrase that then—and let me know if you'd like me to readjust—you have to want to get better to actually get better. People...people who benefit from therapy are the people who do more than come into the office once a week. There's homework, there's self-reflection. And there's a lot of motivation."

"Yeah?"

"Why don't we try something new for next week?"

Five minutes before our session is set to end, she walks over to the printer down the hallway, her flats flip-flopping on the vinyl-tiled floor. She returns with a bundle of paper-clipped prompts, worksheets, and pop science articles. "101 Journal Prompts for Grief." "The Five Stages of Grief: Debunked." "Science-Backed Ways to Heal from the Loss of a Significant Other." "Mindfulness Exercises for Grief." "Let Loss be Your Tool, not Your Toll."

"You don't have to read all of this, and I don't expect you to respond to all of these questions," Dr. Finch stated as I began flipping through the bundle. "Our job together is to help you reflect on the happy times you shared with Piero, so you can

transform your grief into something positive. Just try to at least do a few of these journal prompts for next time, okay?"

101 Journal Prompts for Grief.

T

14. Did your loved one call you a special name? Reflect

on how that name makes you feel.

H

He used to call me *piccioncina*, little pigeon. *Ti amo, la mia piccioncina*, he told me, the morning he died. *Non vedo l'ora*

R

di sposarti. È la cosa a cui penso di più al mondo. I can't wait to marry you. It's the thing I want most in the world. Sii la mia

E

sposa! Subito, subito! he would say, dancing around the apartment with his shoes half-on. *Be my bride, be my bride. I'd marry you now, I need to marry you now. Ne ho bisogno. Just a few more weeks*,

E

weeks, I would tell him. Just a few more weeks.

I wish I had married him at that very moment.

M

29. What is your favorite gift your loved one gave you?

O

Perhaps our one-year anniversary, when he made me a miniature papier-mâché sculpture out of the two of us, constructed from the pages of the Elementary Italian textbook we

N

had to buy at full price. Or maybe my wedding veil, now hanging on a nail above our bed, unworn, which he bought from a

T

seamstress from a village in Sardegna.

H

55. Do you remember the first time you and your loved

S

one expressed love for each other? How did it go?

"I'm unsatisfied."

I remember waking up for the first time in Piero's dorm

"You're unsatisfied?"

room, nestled within his baby blue bedsheets. I watched his

"Yeah. I've just been bored these past few weeks."

beautiful sleeping face, watched his breath blow back his hair, just

When Piero was alive, I used to get home from work and be with him. We would spend our time together on the weekends, go to museums, walk along the water. After he died, it's like the shape of his body was just filled in by my grief. But now...it's like he's gone, and the grief that became him is finally starting to subside.

So what do I do with that time?"

"What do you want to do with that time?"

"I don't know. In a way, it's overwhelming. It's like I have this immense amount of freedom I've never had before. I was living at home, and then I was adjusting to college, where all I was doing was my schoolwork. And then I met him, and it was him. Once we moved to New York, it was the two of us and the city. Then it was me and my grief. Now it's just me. I don't know what to do with that."

T

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to let it fall back down again. His eyelids fluttered, heavy. His freckles seemed to dance, flooded with light. I whispered to him, I love you, I love you so much. I can't wait to say it to you someday. Then he smiled, opened his eyes, and said it back.

I don't know why I do it but every morning I go up to

Sea Gate and stare at all the pretty little houses. I stick my hands through one of their gates and let a big friendly dog lick my hands. He is brown with spots; he enjoys licking the sweat from my palms like Piero once did. I laugh at him, give him a great big kiss on the forehead, and walk back the way I came.

Junie, hey, I say to my phone, dangling my legs above my head, back resting on the bed. I know it's been a while. I've

been busy, you know, with work and all, I lie. Do you want to grab coffee anytime soon? I scroll, dial, scroll, dial, constructing rosters in my head. Owen, hey! Mia, how have you been lately? Eden, are you free to hang out anytime soon? I've been busy. I've lost track of time. I've been meaning to call. I'm sorry.

O

Don't worry about it, they all say. How have you been holding up lately?

N

I've been good, actually, I say, meaning it. I haven't been "holding up." I haven't been "making sure to take care of myself."

T

I haven't had to—I just do. It's been coming naturally to me lately; it hasn't been something I need to prod myself with sticky

H

notes and checklists to get done.

S

"I've started looking at apartments."

I've started teaching part-time at a night school in the

"That's a big step. How does that make you feel?"

East Village, a program for English speakers learning Italian.

"Everything," I laugh. "I didn't want to ever leave. But now that it's been—what, already a year and a half?—I think I'm ready. Which isn't a thing I ever expected myself to be. I was afraid that this apartment was the last piece of him remaining. That if I left, it would be shutting him out of my life forever.

During the first class of this term, I asked each student why they chose to learn the language. *I'm moving to Italy in six months for my job. I'm an art historian and I hate translating. I'm learning it for my girlfriend; I want to marry her someday,* one college-aged girl peeped. *Why did you learn it?*

"But I don't think that way anymore. Over the past six months, the apartment's started to lose its association with him. It's finally become *my* apartment, not ours. And now that it's become that, I've realized how much I just hate it, you know? The ceiling leaks every time it rains. My bedroom floor's at a tilt. Not to mention the location is ridiculously far from everything, and I can afford to at least move a *little* closer to Manhattan now."

I take the late train home and think of him, and the groceries, and the logistics for my flight to Boston to visit college friends. I think of him, and a movie that's being screened at Film Forum, and what to get my mother for her birthday. I walk up to my apartment, throw my keys in their bowl, and ready myself for bed, warmed by contentment.

"It sounds like you're feeling good about this."

"I am, to be honest. I want to be closer to my friends. I want to live in a new neighborhood, meet new people. In a way, I feel like this apartment suffocates me, like its association with

Voglio essere stretta con voi di nuovo, I told his mother. *I want to be close with you again. In honor of him. It was too painful at first—I couldn't have that reminder. But I'm ready now.*

Piero is pulling me away from everything else I want to do.

I love him, still, maybe even more than I did when he was alive, isn't that crazy? But I'm also ready to leave this shithole behind. Because that's all it is, really. I'm not giving up the memories, I'm just moving to a place where they can exist without the cockroaches."

O

I love you, still, maybe even more than I did when you were alive, I write, addressing him. I've taken to doing this every once in a while, to let him know how I'm doing, update him about what's going on in my life. I don't know how that's possible. I suppose it's like how we used to say—how our love for each other grew stronger by the day. I just never knew that would happen even in death, you know? I'm grateful it does.

N

It's nearing two years since you've been gone. I've been

E

trying to write down every detail about our life together so they don't slip away from me. How when I asked you to scratch my back, you would spell out love letters on my skin. The way you despised minced garlic. That face you would make that you thought showed anger, when I could really tell you were trying not to burst out into laughter. How you thought geese were beautiful.

M

The truth is, I am forgetting things, no matter how much I write. But I think that's okay, actually. I would have forgotten them even if you were still here; so would you. I think that's just

O

how life works. The beautiful moments are meant to be cherished when they happen. Forgetting things is your body's way of guiding you to the beauty of the present.

N

We were talking about the rent, yes? the realtor says, coming back from the bathroom.

T

Yes, it's a little high, and I'm still evaluating other options, but I'll get back to you. I'm still...highly...considering it,

H

"Dear Dr. Finch," I write. "I understand we were supposed to meet next week, but I was wondering if you'd be okay with not meeting any more, or at least maybe just meeting once every two or so months. I know we've been meeting less frequently now that things are better, but I feel that I'm at a good

I reply, shaken by the furious sound of beating wings. I'm sorry,

place now. And you were right about the meds, by the way. I *I'm just a little...distracted, is that...*

don't think I needed them. I've been feeling so much better, so less emotionally blunted now that they're out of my system.

"Our sessions aren't a burden anymore; the homework you give me is no longer a pain. I remember you told me at the beginning that our goal would be for my grief to be transformed into joy. Well not joy, necessarily—but a peace with the past, and a happiness looking back on the time I spent with Piero. And after some reflection, I think I'm there. Warmly, Olive."

Oh, yes ma'am, there are some pigeons nesting here, but

we'll have that taken care of. We can call some exterminators should you choose to sign the lease.

No, no, they're no problem at all—please don't call an

exterminator, I say, approaching the windowsill. On the edge lay a cluster of eggs, cradled by a bed of twigs and pine needles. The pigeon nestles on the edge, fluffing its wings, cooing gently. It's marked with brown streaks, curling themselves around its head, reminding me of the way Piero's hair used to do the same. *I love you,* I whisper. *Piccioncina mia.*