Weltschmerz AF

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Chapter 1: To Bear Witness

I was going to lie just now and say “For *weeks*…” but screw it, I’ll tell you the truth—it was months. For *months*, I maintained this self-destructive, innate refusal to look away, even when bearing witness tore at every fiber of my being. Everyone kept telling me the same things, well-meaning advice that made me feel even worse. *Stop looking at the horrible stuff online,* they said. *You need to disconnect. It’s so bad for you. You need to sleep,* they said.

No kidding! If I could snap my fingers and disconnect, be fine again, be a good mom again, don't they think I would have done it already??

I arrived at my psychiatrist’s office already stressed, already late for work, my heart racing as I hurried to the front desk. But when the secretary glanced at her computer screen, she frowned slightly, telling me my appointment wasn’t for another hour.

I don’t even know what broke me—frustration, embarrassment, exhaustion—but suddenly, tears were streaming down my face, right there in front of her. I felt exposed, overwhelmed, and mortified.

When I finally sat down across from my psychiatrist, still wiping away tears, I asked her the question I'd been holding inside:
“Am I crazy? Why do I feel things this deeply? Why does everything hurt so much?”

She looked at me quietly, and when she spoke, her voice was gentle but certain. “You feel empathy for those who are suffering. That doesn't make you crazy—it makes you human.” Then I saw tears, quiet and restrained, trickling down her own face. Around her neck was a dog tag with the words “Bring Them Home” inscribed on it.

I sat there, all sniffly, flicking away hot tears, feeling something like relief… understood… validated. She too was hurting.

Later that day I listened to a lecture sent from one of the school groups or maybe my work support group... The lecturer, a psychiatrist, shared a story about her friend diagnosed with breast cancer, who had to undergo a double mastectomy. Her friend was devastated, understandably depressed, grieving deeply over her loss. But everyone around her was trying to cheer her up: “You're going to be okay. It's going to be fine. Thank God you caught it in time. You should be grateful—you survived.”

And it just made her friend feel even worse. Even more alone in her experience. Because yes, she was alive—but she’d also lost a part of herself. She had suffered deeply and needed space to feel her grief, her anger, her pain. It needed recognition, not dismissal.

So instead of empty encouragement, the psychiatrist said to her friend plainly:

“How shitty. Something really horrible happened to you. You're allowed to feel exactly how you feel about it. If you went through all that and immediately jumped up saying, '*Oh yay, I’m alive, everything’s wonderful,*' THAT would be weird. Feel what you feel first. Your pain is legitimate.”

Huh, I thought.

Maybe I *was* broken and that *wasn’t* wrong right now. Maybe I was feeling everything exactly as it should be felt.

The Weight of Normal

Going to the supermarket felt like a dystopian movie set. All these people, moving through the aisles, picking up tomatoes, checking yogurt prices… and me—standing there with my cart, trying to remember what normal people buy when the world isn't ending.

My list said “milk, bread, something for dinner.” But what I read was: *How do you feed children when children are starving in tunnels?*

I looked around me and saw a reflection of my pain in each face. We're all walking around like this now, I realized. All of us carrying the weight of before and after. October 6th Israelis, and October 8th Israelis. Living in the same bodies, shopping for the same groceries, but fundamentally different.

The teenager at the register—couldn't be more than seventeen—had the look of someone far beyond his age, grew up too fast. He looked like he was somewhere else entirely.

“Shalom,” I greeted him, and he looked up, startled, as if he'd forgotten other people existed.

“Ah, s-slicha,” he stuttered, embarrassed, and started moving my produce along. He said “sorry,” and I wanted to hug him. This kid who should be worrying about his matriculation exams and whether some girl texts him back. Instead, he probably lies awake wondering if his friends in the army who graduated last year are still alive.

I got to my car and sat there, groceries in the backseat, keys in my lap—cars and people and the everyday choreography of living. And suddenly I was furious.

How dare they look so normal? How dare the world keep spinning like nothing happened? Don’t they know our people were stolen from their beds and dragged away? How could the world not stop in its tracks until they were home? How.

But then wasn't I doing the same thing? Wasn't I here buying milk and bread, playing house, pretending any of this mattered when babies were still in tunnels? BABIES. When mothers were still waiting by their phones for news that will either be the best or worst of their lives?

This is survivor's guilt's evil twin, I thought. This is the guilt of carrying on with life before the bleeding stopped. To continue to exist, when others didn’t.

Great, now I'm losing it in the Shufersal, (supermarket) I thought.

I called my mom.

“Everyone's just... buying groceries. Like it's Tuesday. Like Tuesday still means the same thing it used to mean.”

“What would you have them do? Drop everything and sit in the dark?” she said gently.

“No—but how can we just shop when—”

“When what? When other people can't? When other people are suffering?” and I could picture her face, that expression she gets when she's about to parent me. “You know what happens when you stop eating? Your kids notice. You know what happens when your kids notice their mom has forgotten how to take care of herself? They learn that survival is optional.”

I sat there watching a woman load her car with balloons. Cake mix. Those little plastic cups with the cartoon characters. Someone's having a birthday party.

My brain went: *Good.* That kid deserves to turn seven, or four, or whatever like regular seven or four-year-olds, even if the world is broken. *Especially* because the world is broken.

But my heart went: *How is that good?* How is celebrating anything good right now?

“I don't know how to do this,” I whispered, my voice breaking, feeling just like a little girl waiting for mom to have the answer.

“Do what?” she asked, extra gently.

“Live. Like this. With all of this... THIS, Ima (Mom), how is this the world??”

I heard her take a deep breath, and I thought I already knew what she was gonna say—what she always said about my existential musings. But she didn’t. She went with something even more annoying instead: “I think you should ask The Writer.”

The Writer. I'd almost forgotten she existed.

“Daiii Ima, Dai” (Stoppp, Mom, stop it) I grumbled, annoyed at her for saying it, because The Writer had all but abandoned me, and why did my mom think I could just summon her whenever I wanted to?

“Just try.”

Since I was little she’s always said there was a writer in me, and she meant it as “a part of who I am” but when I was little I just imagined The Writer as a little Thumbelina-type figure, living inside my mind; someone separate from me who knew how to write words. Because I didn’t believe that *I* could. She's been so quiet lately, scared maybe, or just exhausted. I hadn’t heard from her in years.

I hung up with my mom and drove home with groceries that would feed my children, to a house where they were safe, and they could sleep in their own beds, protected and warm. My mind unwillingly wandered for a minute to the unthinkable alternative and I shuddered,

immediately pushing the thought out of my brain. The weight of it all settled on my shoulders—of loving them so much I couldn't breathe. The weight of knowing that love is not protection, that all my careful tending of their innocence is just borrowed time. The terrible ache of loving people who could be taken from you. The unbearable privilege of tucking them in safely while other children slept in tunnels or didn't sleep at all, because they were dead.

This is *weltschmerz* in its purest form, I realized. Not just sadness about the gap between how life is and how it should be, but the aching recognition that closing that gap is impossible. That the world will always contain both birthday parties and massacres, lullabies and sirens, the fierce protection of a mother and the failure of love to be enough to keep them safe.

And then for the first time in weeks, I didn't just feel guilt. I also felt *grateful*. I started to cry wild tears of gratitude and heartbreak, all at once.

I stepped into the house, where life demanded its ordinary attentions, where I would make dinner, where my children would eat and fight, and laugh and exist in their beautiful, ordinary way. Creating the illusion of safety through the repetition of ordinary care. Where I would keep going, not because it made sense, but because the luxury of stopping was not a thing when you're a mom.

So tomorrow I would make dinner again. Pack lunches. Take them to school and worry about math tests and friendship drama and all the small concerns that used to feel so important. I would tend to their world with the same careful attention, knowing now how fragile it all was.

Not because I found peace with any of it, not because it hurt less, but because the alternative—letting love make me too afraid to live—was its own kind of death. And us Jews.. we have to live.

Live. We live. Am Israel Chai, right?

And with that thought, just like that, there she was—I felt that old familiar twinge of unrelenting words becoming sentences stirring in a corner of my mind, just a little, but unmistakenly there.

It was as if my mom had conjured her up from the dead. I opened the door wide and let her in. I had been waiting for her, wishing and hoping she'd come. That itch in the fingers, the words spilling out. That feeling that something needs to be written down. She had something to say about all this.

But she was such a flight risk that I practically ran down the stairs to grab my laptop, created a new document and began to type. There she was, kinda smug, but she felt like home:

The Writer.

Flaky, nocturnal, indecisive and wonderful. I loved her because she knew me. I hated her for leaving me alone for so long.

Our love-hate relationship had turned sour over the years, because you see, she wasn't always like this. She's been with me ever since the first grade–my first old friend. When we were young, her and I could communicate all the time. She was always there, and we did everything together.

When we got a little older, she had less time for me, but she at least still came and went as she pleased, and I knew I could always trust her to come back if I really needed her. And I did.

And then somehow with the years—because adults are deteriorated children—she stopped coming by so often, and then when she did it was sporadically and her visits then became so far in between that I forgot what she felt like.

Some years, I was convinced I made her up completely, but then right when I started to convince myself she was my Mr, Snuffleupagus, she would show up again, like an ex begging you to take them back even though they messed up again and again, but I didn't care—I was always happy to see her, she was a chunk of me. She would sometimes visit when I had a drink, or four, sometimes at 3am when I had to wake up early the next day… and other times she just popped her head in real quick at random moments as if to say *I EXIST,* don't forget about me, and then just leave again.

So there we were, The Writer and I. She knew I would never turn her away. So I cut my nails shorter for her so she could get the thoughts out on the keyboard more quickly, and in return she somehow soothed my hurt and stroked my broken heart and told me that it would be okay, that she could help. I wanted to believe her, I did. Afterall, flimsy or not, she was always there for me when I needed her most, she would show up.

I said *listen, please don't go quickly this time*. And she said simply, *you can trust me.* And with that, words poured out of me as she used my hands to fill the page with a jumble of thoughts, a chaotic attempt to process a world that made no sense, to reconcile the ordinary life I was expected to live with the suffering and despair I couldn't unsee.

As she wrote, I realized how much I missed her, and how lonely I'd been without my oldest friend. Because essentially, she was in fact the very part of me that eased pain, made sense of life, and gave this entire process some coherence.

She told me she'd actually been with me the whole time, she never even left, I just couldn't see her. And that she'd been waiting for the right time to tell me that allowing myself to mourn was the only way to live in a world where tragedy and normalcy walked side by side in this upside-down where victims were blamed for being attacked. She said I wasn't crazy for needing to sit with the grief of the atrocities that happened to my people. And that maybe in this situation, to deeply feel the horror, the loss, before you arrive at gratitude and hope–was exactly the human thing to do.
And then she said *I'm sorry, I don't think I'm strong enough to heal this particular pain, but I can try to express it if you'll let me.*

And so… this is her trying.