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The Edge of the World

MARCELLA POLAIN

Author's note

The narrative in parts one and two is based on oral history received from my mother. The genocide survival narratives are based on stories my mother overheard her own mother tell, and which she then told my brothers and me. However, it has been necessary to both research and fictionalise a great deal in order to write this. The story of the unnamed, contemporary narrator, who is significant largely in part three, is a fictionalised autobiography.

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Glossary

chettis — criminals
djinn — ghost
effendi — sir
hai — Armenians
hamam — bath-house
medjidia — cents
tonnir — heater

Everywhere I look and sleep

(Perth, present)

Much later, I dreamed I was on a beach with everyone I love. But this was after everything happened, of course. It was also after the girl with the yellow hair returned, even though I thought that, once I had written this, I wouldn't see her again. It was after the man made entirely of shadow also returned, darting as usual from the corners of my eyes into the next room and then the next. And it was after I first heard the demon run up behind me, growling, as I left the supermarket and the hair on my neck stood up and I gasped and swung around, swung my bags of shopping wildly but no-one was there. It was after my child grew up and I lay awake, weeping because I already knew how grey Europe was, like a very old timber door too heavy to open but behind which you know all manner of things happen. It was after the letters stopped coming from Elisabeth in France and from my sister in Sydney. It was after my brother locked the door of his office one morning and didn't answer the telephone and eventually the police had to come and break their way in. And it was after I phoned my sister that same day and she said, *Well, things will never be quite the same*

now, will they, thanks to you. Idiot. As if somehow I was responsible.

And it was after we last saw one another and she told us our mother had been right all along with her stories and predictions about just what would happen to the world, and the price we'd pay for rolling our eyes. And about how nobody — *not a single country*, she would say, wagging her finger at us — did anything when the Turks held each member of our family by a handful of hair and pressed a sword to their throat, saying they could live if they converted. And, *I know what you think; you think you're so clever with your educations*, the three of us not looking at her, our lips pressed together, embarrassed by the blaze of her.

Burning has a particular smell, and it took me a long time to discover that other families have other smells. They might stink too, but they don't all stink like ours. I think my sister must have always understood these things better than I did. I think this because she was right about me. *Idiot*, she said. No-one but our mother had ever before called me that.

When the police broke in, he was sitting at his desk, his dark eyes round and looking at them. He didn't say a thing.

But it's logical. I too would kill the best Armenians first. The most intelligent and respected, the most courageous, the beautiful. And so, I am none of those things; I am an idiot and a liar. Because how can an idiot recognise truth?

And I am also a liar, of course, because I am Armenian. If all I say happened really did happen, wouldn't you already know? And who is likely to be in possession of the truth: the remains of a people, the bits and pieces left of them, who wander the earth, ablaze with visions of an apocalypse —

past and future — or Turkey's emissaries, respectable men in suits and ties, negotiating a way into the European Union?

I listened to my sister. She knows how to stand, to speak, how to be the centre of attention. It occurred to me that she, too, seems to be, if not ablaze, then smouldering. But I would never say that. She was born here and that is that. She's Australian, whatever it takes. In that way, she has kept her head down. When we have spoken, she has spoken only of the future, of the outline of a life: the names of the cities in which she'll some day live, the names of the children she'll some day have. I have always laughed because I know the future is a trick and I've told her. I never mean to make her weep. Sometimes things happen that you just can't control. This is why I listened but didn't look at her. Her voice was clear, and heavy with some kind of menace. She sounded like our mother.

I can tell you this because I've written the remainder. What I can't tell you is the point at which the story begins. The truth is I have to write this story in this way because there is no beginning. We just like to think there is, that we can hold everything neat and complete in our hands, examine it.

My sister would say if I did something useful with my hands instead of writing things I shouldn't, everything would be different. It's as if she believes that writing can actually make things happen. It isn't like that. The facts are the facts, whether we like them or not. And the fictions are awfully like facts. I would tell her writing is dreaming; it has never really raised the dead. But I would also tell her I think there are some things we're born with and they sit there and

sit there, waiting for something, who knows what, and one day that thing arrives and the whole lot just unfolds itself and breathes, a concertina, an intricate fan. It unfolds itself like a creature and stretches, fills its lungs, raises its head and stares back at us with its shining eye.

Each evening, on the television, I find myself watching for blood. It appears: a child's painting, what we imagine blood to be. A woman carves her arm with glass, working as studiously as if she were preparing a menu or an installation. Another woman, in a quick half pirouette toward him and away from her bright sink, stabs her startled husband in his buttery chest. A man breaks open his wife's head with a hammer as she bathes. Her meagre blood sprays one inoffensive trail across his face as a child might from a water pistol.

And then, one evening, a German NATO soldier in Kosovo stammers something like *people were herded in this room, a policeman threw in grenade, finished them with machine gun ... so much blood it ran down walls into basement.*

Today I am at my kitchen table, surrounded by a vase and papers and pens and washing. I am holding on to an open book, a book someone has given me. I am looking through the window, beyond the computer where one day I will write and into the almost-dark, at the newly turned earth at the base of the lemon tree and the white chrysanthemum my son laid there. I remember the first time I saw a basement. I am in Vancouver where, even in summer, the air is sharp with cold and the light shifts all day with the rush of clouds. In Vancouver I felt for the first time that I was on

the edge of something, standing on its very edge as if land were just a platform after all and I was leaning out over that edge much too far northwest and into the teeth of something huge and inhospitable, feeling its teeth pricking my ears and nape. So, I could understand the need for basements: the central heating control unit, the stack of firewood; shelves lined with tinned and bottled food; the ham radio, a water tank. I am visiting the sister of a close family friend, and her husband, both elderly now, putting faces to their names that have circulated in conversations all my life. The skin of their faces and throats and hands is pale and, when they smile, their cheeks fold into deep soft lines. They are pleased I have come, insist I stay the night. She will enjoy the company, she says, because in the evening, she continues, he will excuse himself and disappear. He has people to talk to in Fiji, South Africa, Argentina, England, New Zealand, Poland. His disappearance is not to be taken personally, and am I quite sure that I understand?

I follow them as they slowly ascend the simple concrete steps to their door, their bodies folded, too, into gentle stoops. Later, she makes tea in an elegant pot and we sit by the large windows that overlook their garden, green and moist and soft with July light. And it is here she points out to me something I am having trouble seeing. *Have you ever noticed*, she says, *how the Negro has a prominent forehead?* I look at her. Behind her own head, wind blows her wet trees about and the slant of the sun catches drops of water on so many leaves that, for a moment, there is light enough for it to be as if jewels are falling. Did I nod? Or is it hers, that encouraging nod, the nod of someone grandmotherly, two

generations ahead, that triggers mine — me both unaccustomed and disbelieving, respectfully nodding back? *Well you see, then*, she says. *Like monkeys.*

Should I be afraid?

In the Christmas of 1959, my parents found a photographer whose paper and chemicals were so stable that the colour shots he took remain as reliable as if we were still standing there, my mother Lucine and I. My child hair springs from me like angry copper wire. My eyes look deep into the lens, my gaze direct, if apprehensive. Behind, the Christmas tree is large and furious with lights. I wear long white socks and tiny blue, buckled shoes. I could not be called a beautiful child but there is something intense, something that flushes me now with a quick embarrassment. I stare into the parent's eye, down the long lens of history, and spy something there, moving.

The hair on the back of the photographer's neck rises. The shutter opens. Her cardigan is blue; the pleats in her skirt are small white knives. *Keep very still*, somebody says. And she does, knowing already the harshness of light, what this might mean; knowing the flashes of things in the world — fireworks, the sun on the water, anger, the edges of blades.

For decades I see ghosts. They run and run around the house; they stare in at windows, hold their limbs up to the glass. They like a game. They know just how much to show, for just how long, and how quick to run. They are not the ghosts we meet in books — those elegant, serious figures. They don't stand tall or turn slowly to meet one's gaze. They

are not sad. These ghosts like to hide; they are nimble and young.

They appear, of course, in unexpected places: in the street, walking away; on a passing bus; exiting a bank or cinema. I have learned the ways of ghosts — that they sunbake, drive cars, enjoy parties more than I do, and that they must have access to surveillance equipment. This can be the only explanation as to how they follow me from house to house, suburb to suburb, beach shack to wheatbelt farm, to interstate cities and other continents. They even follow me into dreams, where they smile and pull up a chair, or watch me pass by, leaning easily in open doorways. They say:

Girl, come closer. And I look up. There are men and women. They seem happy to see me. I slow my step; a smile staggers in my mouth.

Girl, what is it?

Nothing, I say.

What is it you want?

Nothing at all.

They turn to each other. Then a short, fat woman with a mild, round face and pale eyes cocks her head a little, like a dog might and, with a small smile, says: *What is it, granddaughter, you want from me?*

I try to smile back; my face feels like a fence. *Nothing,* I say. *No thing, not one single thing. No stone, no tree, no blanket, no book. No word, no touch, no house, no song. No fire or light or star or dawn.*

She looks at me.

Turn away, I say. *Be a statue. Be stone. Turn your back, your*

shawl, your long thick hair, your skirts, your coins, your crucifix. Turn away your arms, your singing arms, your arms once full of bracelets and your bracelets full of song.

But she looks at me.

Leave me. Leave me be. Be a stone. Be a tree. Be a stitch. Be still.

What does she think? That she can turn up now?

Don't look, I say. *Don't look at me. I will take up threads. I will stitch you up. My needle is sharp. My needle is intent. I'll use skin and hair. My wire hair, your plaited hair. I'll use your shawl, its fine black threads. I'll use your home, your voice, your dreams, your arms. My needle is immense, my needle is obliging. My needle offers no resistance or opinion. My dumb needle does my own bidding. Your eyes and lips like three dumb leaves. I'll sew them up, your own dumb song, the dumb leaves of your face.*

When I look again, she is gone. They are all gone. Hovsanna, grandmother, I've seen you always, everywhere I look and sleep. Now I am older and less afraid. I want only to touch your face. Come back to me.

Someone phoned me. He had heard about the story I was hoping to write and he had a book that might interest me. He had found it in his late father's shed. I drove to his home, an old, sprawling stone house by a river. Frogs and cicadas croaked and whirred in the thickly shaded lilies beneath the trees along the bank. He stepped out onto the wide, cool verandah, and handed it to me. I knew it at once: *The Treatment of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire.* I had a library copy at home. I smiled and thanked him. *And don't*

worry, he grinned, *I don't work for the Turkish secret police*. I looked down at the book, searching for something to say. I felt my mouth move, but no sound came. *Believe me, I've thought about that*, I heard myself say at last, not looking at him. Then we smiled and I thanked him again, and all the way home I could think of nothing else.

And here I am at the table. The book is open at page 70, to a letter written by a Mr Rushdouni about what happened in the city of Van in 1915. I don't even know where Van is but it is something someone has said that has stopped me, something Mr Rushdouni reports that a Mr Proudian's wife says: *Show me at least the bones of my dear one*.

Read me slowly, my paper skin is brown and folded. Open me here, and here. I am dry with years and dust. You are breathing me in. Look — I am all over you. Open yourself here. And here. Open your mouth, your hands, your arms, your eyes. Can you smell me? This is my undoing. I am unravelling my skin, my skin thin as paper. Hold me. I am coming apart. For you. Despite you. I am old between your fingers. What will become of me?

Hovsanna, grandmother, I have seen you always. And now my blood is hot beneath my skin. It takes my anger everywhere it goes, rushes ninety-seven times a minute, carries its cargo to the tips of my fingers, the edge of my ears, the beds of my nails. Cells open in my sleep, divide, divide and multiply. My nails become thick, white, curve. The speed of my blood, the speed of time. I am a sudden forest sprouting, my hairs curl black from my skin. I am evening morning evening, a flushed sky. I am bougainvillea,

hibiscus. I am rampant lantana. I am wasp, ambulance, pillar-box red. I am blistered, sunburned, fevered, rashed. I am pandemic; I am volcanic, flood. I am all bridges swept away. I am the tumbling of houses; the floors all slip beneath our feet.

I am Earth split open, Mount Saint Helens, her bare southern face, that great grey scar. I am ash, Krakatoa, a darkness over land. I am a B29, its belly open. I am a plane falling. I am all blood slowing. I am breath and prayer, vapour, space. I am the suffocating chambers of the dead, the Jewelled Lady of Pompeii, fingers curled about her rings, throat packed with dust, mouth forever wide against the avalanche of time.

Slow me, grandmother, my heart, the hurtle of my blood. Give me this: a long cool night, new sheets, crushed ice against my lips; a wide bright bowl glazed blue, its twitching rim of yellow fish. Stand it by my bed, fill it brim full. Let me hear you tear an old white sheet. Fold that soft familiar cloth, let me hear you dip and squeeze it, the soprano trill of water falling. I will imagine fountains, lakes, the rowdy course of water over rocks and into streams, the thundering of rain onto mountains of trees. Let me feel it slide against me, against my skin, my feet slide in the mud as I descend, panting and driven, slipping through a forest like a throat.

Allow me this: beneath this ring of light from the soft bed lamp, meniscus taut and glistening like skin trembling as I shift my weight, this hot, this burning mass of me; that turning, my breath, my bloodied anger, the splitting off of all my cells, will make a mark upon the world, a trail.

And give me this: a day; a beach in the curve of a bay, a

steep cliff at my back; a small, cold stream; a wide blue bowl of fruit. Give me bluster and sun, the broad, gleaming, indifferent sea; time enough to feel my bones long and white against the sand, my quiet unrepentant heart, the patience of my belly.

I return to my Vancouver room. All night, I remember, I struggle to the surface of sleep and run my fingers over my calf to try to find what I know is growing there. In my dream I see it clearly. My leg is pale and undulating as a range of bare dunes and, in the deepening night, it is rising and opening. Each hour finds it more swollen, bulging, and the sore itself deeper and wider. All night my leg aches and finally, at dawn, floundering in the soup of sleep, I recall I once before had such an eruption there — sudden, unexpected — that welled for days and broke and that its breaking filled me with relief and disgust at what can come out of me and what I am able to endure. Its dark scar remains, knotted tight — a spent volcanic core wedged deep into my flesh.

At dawn, beneath the tips of my fingers, my body bewilders me. My leg is no crater or dune. It is smooth and closed, my simple flesh. But for half that day it aches.

If I tell you everything, things I believe and things I don't, if I take you to places that once existed and those that never did and if I make ghosts speak, what then? What will you say if I show you everything? You will say: look what she has done, that woman, look where she has opened, her dissection. She has laid out everything. Look where she lies, that woman, where she lies! Staked herself. Like a pig, like

an old dead pig. Steaming and rotten as an old dead pig. Jesu Christos, what a stink, good for nothing, that woman, that pig, good for nothing but bait.

If I enter my own death, will you sit above me — up in that tree there with your gun? Once there were tigers in my country, sleek pale tigers that came down from the mountains every winter, their paws soft and quick in the snow.