there is a life and there is a death

by lester_sheehan

Summary

Cicero's dealings with grief.

Notes

wow this was ... a sad one ... also the title is from a quote by albert camus

He had known many kinds of grief in his life, and never had it felt the same. With each new sorrow, the pain was born anew, and his soul had to be repaired entirely once more; it grew harder every time, as though the pieces of the puzzle grew smaller and more intricate, shards of glass splintering further, until barely recognisable as anything material, anything from this earth, anymore.

I.

When he lost his mother, the pain was soft. It was tainted with guilt and remorse and the horrible feeling that he should be more upset than he felt. He was only young, so very unaware of what the world entailed, and as he stared down at his mother lying cold in her bed, his eyes watered and his lips quivered and he thought that it was the most awful thing that he had ever seen.

Later that month, he sat on the end of Quintus’ bed—who, at this point, was even younger than he, and Cicero was not entirely sure whether his brother understood the true implications of death—and said, “Do you miss her?”
Quintus looked up from the toy figures in his hands. “Yes,” he frowned. “Why are you asking me this?”

Averting his eyes to the other side of the room, watching the gentle flutter of the curtain against the window’s edge, Cicero said, “No reason.” He smiled at his brother, small and thoughtful. “Get some sleep.”

And then he pushed himself up from the bed and hurried out of the room, down the hall, and into the garden, praying to all of the gods above that no slave would hear his quickened footsteps. In the fresh, purified air of the Arpinum night, his thoughts seemed clearer, more easily construed, and the smile was now far from his face.

He slumped down onto the edge of a marble fountain, ignoring the slight dampness beneath his tunic, and decided that, yes, he missed her, too. And, yes, he was sad, this he knew for certain. This, he could recognise. But what he could also recognise, and what he truly despised, was the feeling that he was finally free.

No longer must he cower before his mother’s glare, or her harsh, reprimanding words. No longer must he fear her disappointment, or cover his ears at the sound of slaves being whipped. No longer must he fear any of this. No longer must he fear.

So why did he still feel such terror?

II.

When he fought in Sulla’s war, under the command of Pompeius Strabo, the grief was often and plentiful. Each shriek, groan, murmur, cry pierced him through to his own beating heart, as though their life had transferred into his, their lost days settling within him and adding weight to his chest.

But it did not make him feel alive—no, it had quite the opposite effect. His stomach churned, and the pallor of his brow was clear for all to see, sweat dripping from his forehead, not from the heat, but from the sheer horror of what he was forced to witness, day in and day out, a tireless stream.

He did not fight; he did not think that he could. But that did not mean that he was oblivious to the actions going on around him.

I hate it here, he wrote to Atticus one day. The air is filled with death, the ground is drenched in blood, and all the men do is congratulate each other, as though some wonderful feat has been undertaken. Perhaps that is what they must do in order to continue fighting. But, my friend, this place is not a place for me. This place is a harbinger of gloom and death and sorrow. This is a place where grief is born.

III.

The death of his cousin Lucius had felt like a thousand Argive spears. He blamed himself. Him and his desperate quest for fame and righteousness and conviction of the wealthy few that took advantage of the rest.

“Did I push him too hard?” he said to Atticus, eyes refusing to look up from the letter in his hand, informing him of the calamity. “He was in Sicily for so long. I knew that he was unwell.” His voice dropped to a whisper, trembling as it so often did back when he was a youth. “He was so good and kind and trusting.”

“And that is why, if he had to die, I am sure he would have chosen no other way than this,” Atticus
said, face serious, voice filled with reason. “He died helping others. An entire province. And perhaps many more that would have followed.”

Cicero did not reply instantly, but the darkness in his face seemed to recede for just a moment, as though somewhere in his mind he could see each individual person, smiling with gratitude, for generations to come. “I shall make sure they know,” he said, “that it was he who did so much.”

Atticus nodded and leaned back in his chair, gaze never once leaving his friend. His own heart was filled with mourning, too.

But at the funeral that soon came to pass, Atticus did his utmost to hide his own despair. The night was cold and crisp and deep; the moon shone brighter than it ever had; and beneath its light, silver and divinely specked, Cicero’s tears seemed eternal, glistening like the stars above their heads.

VI.

To feel such sorrow over a slave was unbecoming, they had said.

When Cicero had heard the news, he’d accepted it with a grimace and a sad smile, waving his right hand in dismissal with a quiet, “Thank you.” He had been calm, collected, and shown the correct level of respect, but as soon as the door had closed, his expression fell and his head dropped into his hands.

And there he sat, at his desk, staring at the ingrained pattern of the wood, until twilight arrived. At this point, Terentia swept in—Cicero looked up with tired eyes and a small red mark on the side of his head where his hand had been resting—and carefully seated herself in the chair opposite his. “Marcus, please tell me, are you quite all right?”

“I am fine, my dear,” he said. “I just did not expect it.”

She made a hum of agreement. “None of us did.” Leaning forward, she clasped his hands within her own, grounding him to this very moment, her presence emitting enough strength for the both of them, and said, “But there is nothing that we could have done.”

Cicero said, “There never is,” and averted his gaze to the window, watching the leaves rattling against the oncoming winds.

V.

His exile had killed a part of him that he thought could never be lost. As the days passed, slowly and so very endlessly, he remained in his chair, food left untouched on the table beside him, and stared at the opposing wall. His eyes were tired and his hair was longer than it had ever been. (Tiro constantly tried to insist that perhaps it would be wise to get it trimmed, but all that he received in response were blank glances and a dry, “My friend, there is little point now.”)

Sometimes, when the others could convince him—often after days of attempting to do so—Cicero would step outside, wander along the shoreline with another letter from Atticus in his hand. He would then watch the sea with such intensity that Tiro almost feared he would endeavour to enter it.

“How can I face my family now?” he whispered one evening, over a plate still full, and a glass still filled. “How can they ever take me back?”

Tiro watched him carefully. “You think they have even contemplated not doing so?”

“My daughter,” Cicero whispered, as though Tiro had not spoken. “My darling Tulliola. I have
failed her, and my son, and my wife, and my friends.”

“Atticus tells me that they are campaigning heavily to bring you home.”

Cicero’s eyes shot up at this, bloodshot but dry nonetheless. “Then they are fools,” he whispered, and his voice cracked on the last word.

VI.

He could not say that he was surprised to hear of Pompey’s death, but something in his chest grew heavy at the thought.

“It is hard,” he said, resting his chin upon his hand, “to know what to do now.”

Tiro worried the letter he held in his lap. “Do you truly think that Caesar will pardon you?”

“I do.”

“So then why—”

Cicero sighed. “He goes against all that I believe in, Tiro.” A pause, and then: “I am growing old. I had sincerely believed that there was still some hope of reconciliation.”

Remaining silent, Tiro dropped his gaze.

Cicero said, “Mark Antony will no doubt try to intervene, but we are left with no other choice.” He sat up straighter, then leant back in his chair. “We are going home.”

VII.

He knew that it had to happen—that Caesar had to die, couldn’t be allowed to stay—and yet, on that night, all that Cicero could think of was the man who had thrown his head back and laughed at his jokes, smiled at him broadly when he entered the room, and discussed literature with him until the early hours of the morning, moonlight shifting to sunlight before their very eyes.

A man of mythic proportions. A would-be King.

As he sat before the fire, tears prickling his eyes as he thought of all that had passed, Cicero said, “He was just a man in the end. Nothing more.”

Atticus shifted in his seat, leaning forwards, hands clasped together on his lap. “His manner of death was… truly something else. He was not allowed to die with dignity. I cannot say that I agree with this at all.”

“It is unspeakable,” Cicero said. The light from the embers danced across his face. “We are all so easily removed.”

VIII.

His divorce had felt like a grief long-coming. It was quiet and melancholy, expected and yet a loss nonetheless. His life felt emptier now, as though everything was slowly drawing to a close. The end was fast approaching, and the sound of finality seemed to ring infinitely throughout his ears.

Everything was—still.

One morning, during a rather heated philosophical debate, Cicero slipped up, small and sudden.
“Well, Tiro,” he said, the corner of his lip curved into a smile, “I believe that Terentia would have quite a lot to say about that. Why do not you fetch her?"

The conversation halted. Tiro, instead of laughing, paused awkwardly, eyebrows drawn, and Cicero quickly realised his mistake. He laughed, with a wave of his hand, but the sound was hollow and false. “Oh Tiro, do remove that worry from your face. Of course, I am joking. Those times are long gone,” he said.

And to his merit, it was a quick recovery, but his mind still seemed to be elsewhere. Drawing circles upon his desk with his finger, he whispered, “And, oh, what times they were.”

IX.

Hollow. It is the only word that could ever describe how he felt on that day. How he would continue to feel for the rest of his life.

For weeks upon weeks, he would wander the forests surrounding his country villa, like a lost shade. His hair was long and his face was haggard and his clothing lay unpressed and creased around his thin frame. He would sit under the trees—on a log one day, on the grass the next—and simply stare at the world around him. He watched it transform from a frost-bitten landscape to a spring meadow, flowers trying their hardest to break through the soil.

He plucked them, gathering them in his hands. In his mind, as far gone as it was, he thought about how Tullia used to collect them herself, presenting them in the home. He thought about how, perhaps, he may give them to her.

Yes, he was sure that she would like them.

He was sure.

X.

When his own death came, he felt no melancholy towards his own position; instead, the grief was finally replaced, and a certain kind of relief took its place. He had come full circle now. He had endured, and he was done.

Initially, he had tried to flee—of course he had, for the instinct to live is often far too strong to ignore. But fate had not been kind, and after multiple mishaps, and numerous delays, Cicero seemed to come to the most sombre conclusion that there was nothing more to be done. There was no more prevarication left to be had.

As he travelled in his carriage, horribly alone now, Cicero found that he could not stop his hands from shaking. “Tiro,” he said, and his old friend glanced up from his written attempts at an escape route. “Tiro, Tiro, Tiro. You have been most dear to me.” His voice was frail, weak, harking back to younger, to older, days. “Please, cease this work now. There is no need.”

“But if I can just—”

“No more,” Cicero said, and it was so resolute that Tiro placed the tablet down. “Let us just talk, hm? As we always have done.”

Tiro worried the fabric of his tunic. “About what?”

“Anything. You may choose, for once,” Cicero said, with a half-hearted wink. Tiro opened his mouth, and then closed it again. His eyes were watering. With a small nod, Cicero continued, turning
his head to stare out at the passing view. “Very well, then. I shall decide.” They sat in silence for a moment longer. “What has been your happiest memory so far?”

Tiro seemed to balk a little at this, thrown off by the question. “I don’t know. I would have to think.”

“I shall tell you mine,” Cicero said, gaze unmoving. “It was dear Tulliola’s birthday. All of us were there. You, Atticus, Terentia, Marcus, Quintus, Lucius. I can recall that I made quite a spectacle of it. I was so determined that she would enjoy herself.”

A small smile graced Cicero’s lips, and Tiro’s heart seemed to collapse inwards. “I remember the day,” he said. “She came up to me that evening, showing me her new bracelet and books. She offered to share them with me, and when I politely declined, attempted to bribe me with all of the food you had prepared.” He laughed at the memory, but stopped almost as quickly at the sight of Cicero’s cheeks stained wet with tears.

“No, please,” Cicero said. “Continue.”

And so Tiro did. He spent the entire journey recalling past instances of joy—a particularly exciting Saturnalia, wherein Quintus Jr had hidden under the table with an entire cake; a witty joke of Cicero’s that had had Tullia giggling behind her sleeve at Terentia’s reprimands; the night they dined on the roof beneath the stars, talking of aspirations and wishes and consulships and family—right up until the very moment that their carriage was stopped.

And when the blade struck Cicero’s neck, he thought of each and every moment, and the fear that filled his heart was gone.

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