

## Starving Lions Will Eat Anything

Dzia's family tree was more like a shorn and brittle sapling which ended, or began, with her grandfather. Gaspar crowned that short lineage without mother or father, as though he'd been delivered to life not by parents but by angels, set upon Earth fully formed. No brothers or sisters flanked his name and from this lonesome orphan did three generations wander out of massacre into modernity.

Gaspar Azaryan never talked about surviving and everyone knew not to ask.

Everyone except Dzia.

She sat beside her grandpa on the veranda, his hairless dome covered by a Dodgers cap, and the smell of fire and flesh smoked the air. As far as Dzia could recall, manning the grill had always been her grandmother's operation: from skewering the chicken to mashing the luleh, piling the coals and setting them alight. Dzia watched the tiny woman use bits of lavash to slide roasted meat down the blades with searing spitting hisses.

A strange role reversal for Armenians.

"Pap?" asked Dzia.

"Yes, love?" replied Gaspar, those lean eyes tracking the kinetic ballet of his great-grandchildren.

"How come you don't do the khorovatz?"

"I'm not a meat eater."

"Yeah, and I'm not a barber but I'll cut Avik's hair now and then."

"Oh, you can tell," Gaspar said with a quick wink.

"Hey! Be nice."

Gaspar clicked his tongue and twitched his chin up toward the canopy of latticed grape leaves.

"What, Pap, I can't ask?"

"How old are you now, thirty-four?"

"Thirty-five."

"After thirty-five years, now you ask?"

"So what?"

“You want a fat grandpa or a nice, trim grandpa. Who would’ve walked around the block with you on your bike, huh? Not me if I was a fatty.”

“Pap, I’m just curious—”

“Tatik is a master of the khorovatz. That’s why I married her. She was a good catch, and I was the envy of my circle.”

Now Dzia clicked her own tongue, irritated by Gaspar’s mulishness.

But her vexation was soon annulled by her one and only Avik as he emerged from the grill’s smoggy haze imitating James Earl Jones.

“What’s he doing?” Gaspar chuckled.

“Oh, it’s this new movie we took him to earlier, *The Lion King*. He’s already memorized the whole thing.”

“Bag of brains, that kid.”

“Five years old and I’m afraid he might be some kind of genius.”

Avik, not nearly the oldest of the Azaryan sprouts, directed his cousins hither and thither, assigning the roles of hyena, warthog, or meerkat. Tatik tore a paper towel and pressed it inside the back of Avik’s shirt, telling him to be still, quicksilver, be still, *Christ have mercy!* She’d done the same for Dzia at any suggestion of sweat.

“Dziadzan?”

“Yeah, Pap.”

Gaspar swigged his Corona and burped. “You’re sure you don’t want another one?”

“Another beer?”

“Ehhhh.”

Dzia reflexively rolled her eyes and gestured toward her son. “Pap, come on, you can see him, right? He’s perfect but he’s enough, he’s a handful.”

“Avik needs brothers and sisters, he—”

“Avik has cousins.”

“That’s not the same, Dzia jan, cousins don’t—”

“How would you know?”

“Excuse me?”

Dzia always had a fast mouth, her penchant passed to Avik.

“What, I mean— I mean you’re an only child.”

At this, Gaspar made the effort and turned his uncooperative body to Dzia, and there in the craggy lines of her grandfather's face Dzia could read gray rage.

"Because!" Gaspar stated, and had Dzia ever seen him this furious? "I crawled out of a nightmare and had four children, I did my part, and they in turn did their part by having many children, including you, and—"

"—and I don't really get along with Levon or Raffi or Rita, do I?"

He stopped. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Pap, we're not having another kid, that's it."

Gaspar spoke with acute restraint, which seemed to Dzia worse than abandon. His wet dentures bit off each word.

"Then you've failed as Armenians."

"Wow."

"Yes, wow."

Dzia shifted her gaze north to the Verdugo Mountains, radiant in the setting sun against a heavy cape of summer thunderheads. Around that silence, Dzia heard Avik roar and cough and roar.

"Do you ever ask him who he likes more, Dziadzan?"

"Huh?"

"You or Monte."

"No, we never ask that."

Gaspar tried to smile but frowned. "I bet if someone did ask him who he'd pick, he would pick you."

"Oh, without question," Dzia confirmed, the most obvious thing, and Gaspar thumbed the bill of his hat higher as though to better adjudicate.

"No question, I agree. It's only natural. When you get hurt you don't call for Father. Mothers are holy."

Gaspar's sudden tears threatened to bless this uncommon moment but they only glistened there on his thin lashes and did not spill.

"Mothers give life."

A tattoo of goosebumps shivered Dzia's skin and she was about to ask what was wrong when—

“Food’s ready! Sit down, everybody, let’s go!” shouted Tatik, and before Dzia could get another word out, the Azaryans populated the overloaded table. Tatik prayed over the offering, praised God, and bade them begin.

Dzia tucked small pieces of kabob into lavash for Avik, who was still running atop the grass, when Gaspar cleared his throat.

Everything stopped.

He lifted a shot glass brimming with brandy.

“What should I say? I just... this is nice, having all of us together in one place. I see what was lost all those years ago in each of your faces, in the happiness of your offspring. My kids, my grandkids, my great-grandkids.”

Sniffles and exhales all around the table.

“Who knows how many more of these are left for me? Maybe two, maybe three. Not much. Not very much. So thank you, thank you all for being here with me. For making me a family. What should I say?”

Gaspar drained his glass and everyone else drained theirs.

“Avik!” Dzia called. “Come on and eat, baby.”

“It’s too hot still, can you blow on it?”

“I did, honey, it’s ready, now come on.”

Avik jogged over but balked at the kabob as Dzia guided a morsel closer and closer.

“No, no, I don’t want that, it’s poopoo!”

She gave him her most maternal frown. “We do not say that about food, baby, especially food that—”

“It’s poopoo! I want to eat bugs like Timon and Pumbaa. No poopoo!”

The other kids tittered at the naughty word and so encouraged Avik’s squirmy antics.

“Avik, enough, we are all eating this, so—”

“Papik isn’t!”

Dzia glanced at her grandpa, whose face had gone slack. Something cool dripped through her witnessing him like this, afloat between haunted or hunted.

She turned back to her son and pointed.

“Papik isn’t because Papik is a vegetarian and an adult and he can make his own decisions. You are not an adult and so—”

“Dzia jan, let him be,” advised Gaspar. “It’s OK.”

“Yeah, Dzia jan, it’s OK, it’s poopoo!”

“Oof, Avik, we are not doing this today. Open!”

“No, Mama, noooo!”

“Eat!”

Dzia cupped the nape of Avik’s neck and breached his clamped lips with the wrap as soda bottles teetered and fell when Gaspar’s hand slapped the table.

“I said leave that boy alone, Dziadzan.” His voice louder and harsher than she’d ever heard it before, the set of his rigid jaw menacing.

Dzia’s grip went limp and Avik flew free while Gaspar peeled himself up from the chair.

“Are you so blind, girl?”

Dzia flashed back to a Friday night sleepover when there in the very same veranda she slipped her grandpa a hamburger from Conrad’s rather than his requested grilled cheese. He scolded Tatik to no end, blaming her for the mix-up. *I swore I would never eat meat again!* How shitty Dzia felt. She never confessed that trick to anyone, never apologized to Papik or Tatik. Dzia simply wanted to know then, like she wanted to know now.

Why wouldn’t he?

Avik was back at it in the grass while amid the departing shuffle of Gaspar’s slippered feet, the meal resumed with hushed chews and swallows. In between snatches of conversation, siblings and cousins and parents and uncles and aunts all shot criminal looks at Dzia, as if they hadn’t each of them done the very same crap to their own kids, maybe even that morning at breakfast. Dzia fiddled with her eggplant salad and considered calling Avik one more time but her voice was paralyzed at the sight of her son listening to his great-grandfather. When had they cuddled together like that on Gaspar’s armchair? Rare were the instances when Avik sat still, rarer still this bridge between chasms of time. He was actually sitting on the wrinkled man’s lap, nodding his big head eagerly as Gaspar murmured to him.

Ah, fuck it. Avik can eat later.

The feast concluded without further scandal and clean up was quick thanks to the paper plates. As the women swept the remains back and forth and the men yammered about politics, someone screamed.

Dzia swiveled to see Avik by the garage sinking his teeth into a cousin's forearm. She ran in two bounds and ripped him away.

"What are you doing?!"

Avik laughed, and Dzia held back bile at the sight of his red fangs, but when she slapped him, then some bile did bubble up.

"I asked you a question, Avik!"

The boy rubbed his cheek.

"I was playing Papik's story, Mama, don't hit me again."

"Papik's s— I'm sorry, baby. What do you mean 'Papik's story'?"

Dzia flicked her eyes to Gaspar, plunked in his seat, veiny hands shielding a hanging brow as would a wasted royal.

"Was Papik telling you a story just now?"

"A story about lions, Mama! Do you want to hear it?"

It was late summer, but a rolling wind whispered of winter. Dzia felt it in her spine and realized she was sweating. Where was Tatik with her paper towel now? Jesus, she'll be dead soon. Dzia trembled, cold or frightened, she could not say.

Her child began: "Once upon a time, there were and there were not four cubs and a mama. They and all the lions were kicked out of their kingdom when evil jackals took over. These cubs followed their mama all across the land and she saved them so many times. But one day, it was so hot, and they were so tired, and they had no food, so one of the cubs died. The mama told the oldest cub, a boy, that they had to eat the dead cub. For strength."

Dzia accorded to her knees and the pop in her ligament was meaningless.

"So the oldest cub began to eat his sister, and the others joined in. For strength, Mama, so they could go on. And this happened twice times, with the other cubs. The oldest cub ate them up, even though he hated it and it hurt his heart. Then it was just the oldest cub and his mama."

Clouds above cracked open and drops of rain kissed by the spinning sun lit them gold.

Her son continued: "One day, the mama couldn't go on anymore, even though they were so close to a new home. She told her oldest cub that he had to eat her too, that she would be his strength forever, that she would never be far. He cried, he said no, he begged please, but it was already too late. So the cub ate her and found a new home across the ocean, where he had many,

many cubs of his own and named them after his brothers and sister and they all had cubs too and were a big family. That's why I bit Dano, Mama, I was just playing Papik's story."

Dzia's insides were unraveling as she truly understood her grandfather's story. But she wouldn't allow Avik to see that, not on her face, her eyes, not anywhere. She was his Mama.

"O— don't play like that again, OK?"

"But, mmmmmmmmm—"

"Shhh! Go rinse your mouth and apologize to Dano."

"Fine."

She tracked Avik's gallop to the sliding screen door from her knelt confines and Gaspar followed the boy's progress from his armchair. He looked back at Dzia and her grandfather was suddenly a water well stumbled upon and uncovered, deep and black and dry. They were only about twenty feet apart, he inside and she outside, but such a host of horrors separated them. Gaspar nodded at Dzia, that upward twitch of his chin again, the suave gesture that she'd taught herself to emulate. There was a nonchalance in his motion, a spiritual shrug that simultaneously broke and fixed Dzia's soul.

*What should I say?*

She clapped shut her mouth with both palms knuckling white for fear of the screams clambering to escape her burning throat, fear of the grateful, indebted, beholden howls.

Gaspar closed his eyes slowly, one at a time, and allowed his naked head to rest against the World's Best Granddad pillow Dzia and her siblings had gifted him on some faraway Father's Day. So positioned, Gaspar's face tilted up, up, up toward the wall where hung his hand drawn family tree, removed always by him from its maroon frame to add a branch for every birth. Dzia finally knew why there were no names next to Gaspar's, and this revelation released a fresh plague of ridiculous torment. Avik's single name also swung suspended, alone, and Dzia wondered if Gaspar would be around in, oh, maybe a year, to draw a second branch.

Maybe.

Dziadzan's namesake shone overhead, seven colors painting the coal grey sky, a hard promise that she, that her family, that her people, would live forever gnawing on old bones.