

Seda Akman

“...I lost the person who meant the world to me.”

(interview originally conducted in Turkish)

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Interviewee: Anonymous (I)

I's mother passed away when she was thirteen. At the time she was living in Belgium with her parents and her brother, while the rest of her extended family lived in Turkey. After the death of her mother, I's grandmother moved in with them which caused great tension between I and her father. After her father remarried, she began to feel unwelcome in her own home; she was forced to do all the housework and had no time to focus on her studies; twice, I's father verbally kicked her out of her home. Eventually she returned to Istanbul. She felt as if everything was falling apart, as if there was no meaning to anything anymore. After meeting a Sufi master, and following his teachings, she began again to see the beauty in life.

SA - I just want to start out by saying thank you so much for allowing me to conduct this interview and for taking the time to share your thoughts and feelings with me; I really appreciate it. I know that your mother passed away when you were only thirteen years old. Do you mind telling me a bit about that moment you found out, and explaining what was going through your head, and how you were feeling?

I - When I was little my family moved to Brussels, Belgium, and I grew up there. Everyone else in our family was still living in Istanbul, Turkey, so every summer we would go there and spend it at my grandparents' summerhouse. My mother, my brother, and I would go there before my father did because of his work; he would join us later on in the summer for a shorter amount of time.

It was a beautiful summer day; all my cousins, my aunts, and I went to the beach and were enjoying the sunlight and the clear sea. We were all so happy; just being together, for all of us this was such a blessing. The summer time was our favorite time of the year. Suddenly, my mother began to feel ill; we thought it was the heat causing her to have low blood pressure and just went home. We made her lie down and my aunt went to look for a doctor. There weren't any big hospitals around. The doctor just gave her medicine but she was too sick to take it. At some point she lost her consciousness, and wasn't able to see. I wanted to see her so I walked into the room where she was. The door accidentally slammed which made her get back to herself for a while. I gave her a hug and started crying. She said, "Don't worry I'm fine, please don't cry. See, I'm much better!" But she looked confused as to what was happening to her.

During the day she started feeling worse and worse. We called a doctor from the city and when we described the symptoms, he diagnosed it as brain hemorrhage, and immediately sent an ambulance. My aunts stayed with my mother at the hospital that night, and my brother and I were told to stay at home with our other aunt. In the morning by the time we arrived at the hospital my mother had already passed away. We suddenly thought, "What is going to happen to us?" What were we going to do without our mother? She was perfectly healthy 24 hours ago,

and within those 24 hours I had lost the person who meant the world to me. In one day I went from being the happiest person in the world to being the saddest and the most confused person.

I loved my mother very much. Before she passed away I used to have this feeling that I was going to lose her; I always felt like something bad was going to happen to her. I would wake up in the middle of the night, and go to her room to make sure that she was breathing. One day my mother told me, "Don't love me this much; too much love will bring separation fast."

Meanwhile our father was still in Belgium; my aunt called him to give him this terrible news, and he flew from there to Istanbul. At that point there needed to be a series of decisions made, about me and my brother's lives. Our father wanted us to stay in Belgium and continue our education there. I was thirteen and my brother was only eleven, so he decided that his mother would also come back with us to Belgium. My grandmother cared more about my father than us; she would tell us that if we were not in his life, he could start his life all over again. She would cook for us, and would overall take care of us but we never felt loved by her. She wouldn't even let me hang my mother's picture up in my room.

My father wouldn't really communicate with us; in the past he talked to my mother and then she would tell us what he wanted us to do. After she passed away we thought that we would establish a stronger relationship with him; however with my grandmother there, things started to get worse. He would speak to my grandmother, and she would be the messenger. She would decide what we should tell our father, and what we shouldn't, and what we needed and did not need. So when my mother died, my father also died, and I was hopelessly left in the middle of all of this with my younger brother; I tried to be like a mother to him. I would cook for him and help him out with whatever he needed. At that point in my life I turned to Allah; I started to believe that I was going through all of this because Allah wanted me to be stronger, and that if Allah did not care about me, Allah would not want me to get stronger. These thoughts helped me get through the day; and made me realize that there was a bright future ahead.

Three years later my father decided to remarry. My brother and I were beyond excited; this meant that my grandmother would not be living with us anymore. We thought that anyone would be better to live with than her. At that point I was sixteen, and my brother was fourteen. She moved in with us in Belgium. She couldn't speak French so my brother and I were helping her out a lot; we started to get along really well. The next summer when we were in Turkey, my grandmother asked me how we were getting along with her, and I said, "We are getting along pretty well even though we haven't known her for a long time. Of course she can never replace my mom in my heart but I really like her." These words that I said were twisted and changed into, "I hate her; there is no way she can replace my mother," by my grandmother and presented to my stepmother. When I went back to Belgium I saw a very different person. She confronted me about what I apparently said, and told me that I was going to get what I deserve for saying that. Even though I told her that I didn't say that, she refused to believe me.

Meanwhile she had a baby, and I was responsible for taking care of my baby brother. She would make me clean the house, give up my room whenever an overnight guest came over. When my baby brother turned two, my father told me that I was no longer wanted in this house. He presented me with three options: living with his mother in Turkey, living with my

mother's mother in Turkey, or marrying someone whom I did not even know, and moving away.

I was nineteen years old; I wanted to go to college and get an education; it was too early to get married. I told him that he was my father, and that it was his responsibility to make sure that I get a good education, and that he cannot kick me out of the house. He agreed to let me stay as long as I was willing to do everything that my stepmom told me to do. She turned into the definition of the evil stepmother that fairytales portray; she would make me scrub the floors three times a day, would not let me use the washing machine to wash my clothes, so I would have to wash all my clothes by hand. It wouldn't matter if I told them I had an exam and that I needed to study, I was still expected to do everything she wanted me to. On weekends I tried to study but she would tell me to take care of my little brother while she would go shopping with my father and come back really late. At that time I was going to med school, and with a lifestyle like this I could not keep up with the studying that was required of me.

The next summer my father told me again that I was not wanted in the house; I was once again getting kicked out of the place I called home for my entire life. I no longer had any patience to deal with my stepmom's cruelty, and father's careless attitude. So I filled up a suitcase with whatever I could fit in, and flew to Turkey to live with my mother's mother, and my aunt. My aunt was not married at the time and lived with my grandmother. She and I were really close and the thought of living with her and having her by my side gave me strength. However my grandmother did not really like the idea of sharing my aunt with me; my existence was too much of a responsibility for her.

Meanwhile I went to school, and started making new friends. When I moved to Turkey I had left all my friends from back home behind; that was really hard for me. However my life was starting to look good for once; I was making new friends, and I had my aunt by my side. Just when I began to think that everything would fall into its place my aunt decided to get married, and my grandmother did not let me move in with her. So there I was stuck with my grandmother who saw my existence in her house as too big of a responsibility. My other aunt asked me to move in with her. She was married, and had two sons. My cousins were more than just cousins we were like siblings. They all welcomed me with open arms. I started going to school from there, and we all got along really well. Over the weekends I would stay at my other aunt's house. I began to have a stable life.

SA - You really are a strong person! Thank you so much for sharing your story with me. I know you mentioned turning to Allah during your hard times, would you mind telling me a little more about that?

I - When my mom passed away I thought that there was no more meaning to my life anymore. I did not see a point in anything. Especially after my already non-existent relationship with my father completely deteriorated, and seeing how he did not care about the way my stepmother treated me I began to think that all men were like that. I lost all my trust in men. I started believing that if I love someone so much I will lose him or her. I also lost my self-confidence. As a kid I was very self-confident; however going through all of this made me feel like there was no reason for me to be confident. I started to believe that I was meant to fail, and always be the one who gets pushed around. I thought that if I refused to do one thing everybody was going to

start hating me, and that I was going to get kicked out again. It was as if the world was meant to get me tortured.

As I grew older I started making peace with people. Even to this day I cannot trust people fully even though I might look like I do. During this journey I met a Sufi master, who guided me, and helped me get through everything. His teachings helped me answer the questions in my head as to why these things were happening to me. Sufism is the inner mystical dimension of Islam that focuses on the restoration of the heart and turning it away from all else but Allah. He taught me that by trying to see Allah in everything that I look at, I will only see the beauty in everything, and most importantly that if I try hard enough I will see the beauty in me. That helped me appreciate the beauty in everything in life.

Comments:

SA - Hearing about I's thoughts and feelings after her mother passed away was very tough. Overall doing this interview was a very emotional process for both of us. However I am glad that I had the opportunity to conduct this interview, which helped me understand what she went through better. When everything was going normal in her life, very suddenly everything changed and she lost the one person that meant the world to her. However that was just the beginning of a series of hardships that were coming up her way. Her suffering day after day, and her impressive patience resembles what Rahula mentions in *What the Buddha Taught*, "Although there is suffering in life, a Buddhist should not be gloomy over it, should not be angry or impatient at it" (Rahula 28). Going through what she went through is not easy, but she managed to accept the fact that suffering was a part of life, and patiently continued to live her life.

Also she holds a very Stoic point of view when it comes to the question of whether or not fate exists. She believes that the things she has been through were meant to happen to her, and there wasn't anything that she could have done to stop them. However she believes that the little things in life are our free will although they do not directly affect the big outcomes in life. Epictetus once said, "Remove aversion, then, from all things that are not in our control, and transfer it to things contrary to the nature of what is in our control" (Epictetus 61). I believe that this quote fits her circumstances perfectly.