

A Letter to My Sister

(to count for all the words left unsaid)

By

Zuha Siddiqui

My dear Zuni,

Can you hear me? It is my twenty-eighth birthday today and I am baking banana bread, your recipe, tried and tested. I am pre-heating the oven to 175 Celsius, greasing your loaf pan well – the one you bought from Habitt three years ago – and setting it aside. The recipe you left behind doesn't mention whether the pan must be lined with baking paper, and I don't know whom to ask.

You know that I cannot thrive in the kitchen – it was always your kingdom. You whisked eggs into soft peaks with skill I will never possess, twisted a gloopy concoction of flour, butter, eggs and sugar into the softest cinnamon buns.

And yet, three weeks into the month of Ramzan this year, I found myself waking up at 4 am in the morning, rousing our parents from their slumber (you know that their alarms ring, but they never *work*), whipping an omelet for our father, a boiled egg each for our mother and younger brother. The omelet was usually overcooked, the egg under. Or vice versa. Sometimes I forgot salt, sometimes the seasoning. There was always something wrong with them – and you know that I'd much rather be in my room, sleeping, or reading, or scrolling mindlessly through Instagram.

The past six months have comprised of lots of mindless scrolling and very little work. Does the class I drag myself to half-heartedly week-after-week count as work? My students stare at me blankly as I try to conjure up arguments from thin air – they know and I know that we are just kidding around, fooling each other into believing we have a grasp over the texts assigned.

What about the stories I have written? The ones I don't care to share on my social media because they are dripping in corporate verbiage, and I am ashamed because I have been trained to write *hard-bitting* pieces – emphasis on the *hard-bitting* – with narrative arcs and compelling characters (but my professors in journalism school did not account for grief that derails you and makes you question the

purpose of your existence, they did not teach me how to smile and laugh while my heart is gasping for air underneath a pile of bricks).

On the last day of Ramzan, over a plate of overcooked eggs, our father brought up your absence – he broke the silence. The little dance we were doing around each other, avoiding mentioning your name, pretending you were on vacation and not in a place far beyond our reach.

“You are trying to take her place,” he said. I choked back my tears, busied myself with the dishes piled up in the sink, pretended I had not heard him.

But no one can replace you.

I am reading through your recipe now, and I notice the notes you have left in the margins.

Mash five overripe medium bananas (the riper the banana, the sweeter it is!!) with a potato masher or a fork. Add coconut oil and sugar. Mix. Then add vanilla extract. Mix again. Add in the plant-based milk of your choice (I use oat milk!) and whisk again until just well combined. Do not over mix.

Ever since you left us, I have been constantly telling myself; this is just one year – one year of lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, wondering why I am still here while you are not. One year of stagnation. One year of making very little money. It will pass, and then there will be others, better ones; years with awards and a thriving career and my name in big-name publications that I have aspired towards for most of my twenties, and years that I will look back towards and tell myself, I really did something *meaningful*. I repeat these words until they turn into a mantra – one year, just one year. I tell myself; I will stitch myself together. I will not let grief consume me. But there are days when I want to throw myself off a mountain.

There was a time when I thought the biggest feat I could accomplish was making it to the top of a mountain – and I did, in my junior year of college. Trekking for four hours and when I saw the white peak of the Nanga Parbat glistening in the distance, all I could do was stare in rapture.

Now, I would like reach to the top and throw myself off into the abyss below. Perhaps it will take me nearer to where you are now, and we can spend hours talking – about everything and nothing. I have so many questions to ask, and so much to tell. What are you doing up there? Is your hair still blue? Have you made friends? Do you bake for them? Did you meet anyone we know? A few nights ago, I walked into my room and felt the scent of tea tree and citrus – your smell – wafting towards me. Was that you, paying us a visit? Or was it just grief, messing with my head per usual?

Grief shows up on my doorstep daily, and mostly unannounced; in the library, when I stumble across a copy of *Tuesdays With Morrie*, or at the supermarket, when I pass by an aisle containing your favorite snacks, or when I am sitting at a café – the one with the tacky Ava Gardener poster in the bathroom that you laughed at – missing you, wishing you were sitting across me, hiding my tear-streaked face behind my laptop (how pathetic) as the couple seated at the table across the room stares at me with morbid curiosity.

As voices fade away, they are replaced with a dull pounding in my ears. My lungs constrict. Grief makes me want to sink my fingers inside my chest and rip my heart out. Puncture it, pound it, till it stops beating.

The hardest part was not laying you to rest. That, I realize now, was the easiest part. It was the aftermath that destroyed me. The void. The pain. The emptiness. The knowledge that you are gone and never coming back. And the shame, in admitting that I am weak, vulnerable, lost, without you.

In a separate bowl, sift the flour, cinnamon, and nutmeg until well combined. Add in the ground flaxseeds, baking soda and salt. Combine all the dry ingredients gently with a spatula. Use the 'Cut and Fold' method. Slowly, start spooning the dry ingredients into the wet ingredients. You MUST combine with a spatula first to prevent the flour from exploding everywhere.

You always wrote your recipes down meticulously, almost as if you knew you wouldn't be around to give me instructions, standing over my shoulder, laughing at my clumsiness, my inability to crack an egg without creating a mess. The **MUST** has been bolded, underlined – because you know I take shortcuts when I venture into the kitchen, skip the *dum* on the biryani, the coriander garnish for the *nihari*, freeze leftover parmesan to use later (a travesty, you said), substitute self-rising flour with *aata*. *Who cares anyway*, is what I would say to you when you berated me for skipping instructions in your meticulously organized kitchen where you baked and cooked, with an armful of measuring cups and spoons and two food scales ensuring that each recipe was executed with scientific precision. *I care*, you said.

I remember the first time I saw you bake – I had recently moved back from New York, our cousins from Canada were staying over and you said you were going to bake an apple pie. I thought you didn't know what you were doing (we didn't talk much back then) and then, magic began to pour through your fingers. As you ferried the dough between the fridge and the kitchen countertop (it was summer, and butter was liquifying in seconds) I watched. I noticed your brow furrow as you tasted spoonful after spoonful of pie filling (maple, apples, brown sugar, vanilla, a hint of freshly ground cinnamon) straight off the stove. I noticed beads of sweat gathering on your forehead as you kneaded the dough smooth, saving just enough for the lattice to go on top (which you measured out with a ruler). I noticed you looking at me (twisting your fingers in trepidation) as I took the first bite. The crust was flaky and crisp – it melted in my mouth. And I wish I could tell you now, that your trepidation was unwarranted. That everything you did was perfection. That you were perfection. You were glorious. One of a kind. There will never be another like you. I think we took our time with you for granted.

After both wet and dry ingredients have been mixed, whisk them together for another 40-50 seconds. Do not over mix or the bread will turn out doughy and dense. Transfer the batter

evenly into your greased loaf tin. Top the batter with chopped banana pieces and gently sprinkle with brown sugar with the help of a sieve.

Since you left, some things have changed. After years of avoidance, I have started reading poetry now. Emily Dickinson, Ada Limón, Mary Oliver, Lucille Clifton. The greats. The ones you loved. I read their words, and they bring me closer to you.

I think a lot about Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. And Rhoda, reluctant to be perceived (I am alluding to your poem; published posthumously, six months after your death. I wish you were here to see your name in print for the first time). When Rhoda said, "The world is entire, and I am outside of it, crying," I thought of you. And how you smiled, always (even though the voices in your head were deafening) and how you gave so much of yourself to a world that was so cruel to you.

I am gentler now, with myself, and with others. My gait is softer. I smile at people I see on the street. And it is all for you.

Bake for 40 minutes. Remember to turn the tin around after 20 minutes so that bread bakes evenly. Take out the banana bread after 40 minutes and cover it with aluminum foil. Pop the tin back into the oven for another 15 minutes. You'll know the bread is ready when a toothpick comes out clean with just a few crumbs on it when inserted. Take out the bread from the oven and allow it to cool for 20 minutes before taking it out of the loaf tin.

Serve, however you like.

I take the banana bread out of the oven. The brown sugar has caramelized, the chunks of banana are a lovely golden brown. It smells warm and wonderful. For a split second, it is almost as though you are here.

I speak of grief the way one would speak of a ghoul or a bitter spirit, but the truth is that – despite being ashamed of my vulnerability and my life veering off course – I am holding on to grief it for dear life. I am holding on to it because it keeps me close to you. You. The memory of you. It is still fresh. I close my eyes

and I can feel your hand in mine. I can feel whisps of your blue hair tickling my nose. I can hear the sound of your voice, your liling laugh.

I hope the breeze is always cool, where you are. I hope the skies are always blue, and the sea is always calm. I hope the sun always shines. I hope you are surrounded by cats and dogs that nuzzle their noses against yours and lick your forehead. I hope you are baking and singing and writing poetry and living the life you always dreamed of living. I hope you are happy.

I love you, with all my heart, with every fiber of my being.

Yours always.

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