

Laura Bernstein-Machlay

DANCE

Graveyard

A couple miles from the condo where I grew up, there's this pretty little cemetery. Concealed like a wink in the crook of an old neighborhood of brick and stucco Tudors and colonials, it grows high with hundred-year oaks and opulent maples, a hodgepodge of evergreens, a magnolia tree that blossoms like starlight in late spring, then drops all its petals in an afternoon, a white shroud rising on the ground.

As a lonely tween, I'd often trade one silence for another, escape my dirty house and walk to this graveyard to hang out and dream among the grave markers, some of them well over two hundred years old. The oldest of these stones, the ones located at the back, were little more than nubs leaning at odd angles to earth, their names and dates blurred to smudge by decades of rainstorms and snowstorms. Compare these to the markers that came a little later, the marble and granite behemoths, late-Victorian obelisks and globes, angels reaching supplicating hands toward heaven. *Overkill*, I'd say to myself. I preferred the old graves, and sometimes liked to wander among them in the more unkempt portion of the grounds. I'd step through knee-high grasses, brushing aside milkweed and Queen Anne's lace, and bend down to the old stones to see if I could make out anything of the inscriptions. *Joe. Good Husband to Ellen*, one read. *Sweet Daughter. Two Years. No More*, stated another.

Truthfully, I felt little connection to the inhabitants of the cemetery, or to the dead in general. I'd been raised faithless save for my Zaidy's Torah-stories, which focused more on the *meshugganah tsuris* of life on God's green earth as opposed to what might come after. What losses I'd accumulated by the time I wandered my graveyard were a different sort—a father who faded out of town like a bruise during my early childhood, a mom who disappeared into her own life before I woke most mornings, who returned tired in the evenings, full of other people's stories. Death was far away, a blink over a horizon on the other side of the world. I'd only seriously considered it once, a long time ago, then I shoved it like a faded receipt into a far pocket of my mind.

Boys

Sometimes when I visited the cemetery, I'd bring a book, something science-fiction by Ray Bradbury or Isaac Asimov. Pocket-sized paperbacks from the 50s and 60s jammed with tiny, barely-readable print, all loaned to me by my Zaidy from the big shelf in his bedroom. Often the books frayed apart in my hands, the brittle pages crumbling to dust or shedding whole from the spines like autumn leaves.

Other times I'd grunt and huff through the main gate, two miles from my house to graveyard being a longish walk in my opinion. I'd flop down by one of the closer, newer graves—a certain Mr. Smith, *Loving Husband and Father. You Will Be Remembered*—that rounded nicely against my back, and curl like a koala against its cool marble. I'd unwrap my bologna sandwich, two slices of white bread, dollop of mustard, one slice of meat, unpack a notebook from whichever of my mother's abandoned purses I'd grabbed that day, and write terrible poetry.

A couple years later, as I graduated from tween to teen, I started bringing along boys—to smoke pot and make out in peace. Sometimes I tell this to people nowadays, that as a matter of course I used to kiss boys in a graveyard, and they cringe a little at my teenage drama, but really, my reasons were mostly practical. In my Detroit suburb, young people had limited options about where to hang out. Or at least this was the case with guys I dated, ones without hefty allowances, without reliably-running cars or access to country clubs. Of course, unlike other high school girls I knew, I could have brought boys home since my mother usually had hot dates of her own most weekends. But who wants to be stuck home on a Saturday night? Instead, I created curfews and fussy, fretful parents to call from payphones along my date-routes—like a magician, I'd palm the quarters, speak animatedly to the dial tone while waving reassuringly to the boy waiting in the car.

If I actually liked the boy, I'd invent an extension on my bogus curfew and bring him to my cemetery, which most of the boys handled with surprising equanimity. The lonely darkness expanded romantic possibilities after all. But a graveyard can still dampen the libidos of even the horniest teenage boys. Ben Barner for instance—*Lambada Ben*—once got a little too grabby when I wasn't feeling it. When his hands dug under my skirt, reached hot over my thighs, the graveyard came to my rescue.

"Baby, just let me," said Ben, his beer-breath mingling with fog creeping through the car's cracked windows. "Just let me, please," his voice a desperate hum at my ear that echoed the insistent press of his hands as he pushed me flat to the sweaty vinyl seat.

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But, “What’s that sound? I heard something, a footstep,” I said.

And Ben, “No way, baby. It’s just the wind.”

“Just go look, just to be safe.” And Ben rezipped his stonewashed jeans, *whooshed* me home for the false curfew I’d missed an hour ago. Anything to avoid opening the car door and taking a good peek around a graveyard at midnight.

Dancing on Gravestones

It’s maybe a year after Ben that *Dancing on Gravestones* comes into its limited existence. I’ve recently dyed my hair the color of smoke with yellow highlights. I’ve discovered new wave music and punk bands, and I rarely bother with pretend curfews any longer.

I still don’t invite boys to my house, however. So to my cemetery I bring this glamorous, nameless boy I met at Perry’s Drugstore the day before. Some preppy boy who drives a blue corvette that gleams electric in the moonlight when he comes to get me. I remember sitting beside him in the front seat of that car, swishing my hair like water over my shoulders because I liked how it felt. Crossing and uncrossing my sequined legs, Doc Martin boots rap tap tapping against the floor mats. Perfect.

And nothing. No chemistry. Not a single, goddamned tingle to be found. The boy in his Chinos and Docksidors is similarly bored—doesn’t even make a move on me.

“Why do you come to this place, anyway?” he asks, looking out his side window at the murky outlines of grave markers. “Are you one of those creepy girls who gets her kicks talking about doom and gloom and death?”

Startled by this frontal assault, I look down at myself: I’m wearing all black, sparkly leggings, skirt, artfully torn T-shirt. “Maybe I am,” I say.

Which should have been the end of it—I should have made Corvette-boy *zoom-zoom* me home then and there. But I had half a joint in my purse. A bottle of fizzy wine in its brown paper sack still squatted between us, daring us to consume it. And, really, I hate to think of myself as a quitter.

I call my new friend Clara the next day.

“How was your date with Pretty Boy?” she asks.

“I danced on a gravestone last night.”

“Ah,” says Clara. “Good date, then.”

“Nope. Not so much.” I describe to her the slippery feeling of losing control over my personality, my eyes crossing in horror from watching my lips form words that won’t quit coming, waving my arms to maintain balance as my legs kick away atop a gravestone—even as my brain frantically shrieks, *Quit it. For the love of God, stop.*

“I blame my people-pleasing tendencies,” I say. “He thought I was odd, so I had to become as freakish as possible to live up to his expectations.”

Clara laughs like a tambourine. “Dancing on gravestones,” she says. Then, “Let’s start a trend. Let’s drop it into conversations. Eventually people all over will use the phrase, but only we’ll know how it began.”

Nadja

Sometimes all these years later, Clara calls my cellphone and starts her conversation with, “Damn. I danced on gravestones at work today...” But sadly, the expression never catches on beyond us, a loss to the world’s vocabulary, I’m sure.

Still, I give it an honest try. In conversation with Vera, the third leg to my and Clara’s tripod, I casually mention dancing on gravestones but she just rolls her eyes and goes on talking—I think she feels sorry for me. I bring it up to people in line at the bank, to my mother’s boyfriends, to Bubby and Zaidy who immediately understand exactly what I mean, no explanation necessary. But they don’t go anywhere or see anyone so that’s a dead end.

I’m persistent though. Even when I transfer to the college of my dreams, I casually reference dancing on gravestones to Nadja, my beautiful roommate. But I don’t have high hopes here, either; Nadja’s not the sort of person to lose control of herself, ever. She’s measured to my muddled, her skin flawless as metal, her mouth precise as wax. Her hand gestures are careful, practiced, while I’m forever knocking something over. Daughter of a Lithuanian mother and Ukrainian father, Nadja speaks with an undefined accent. She has a voice you could dive into, swim in that sadness for hours. More than once I watch as men and women, total strangers, listen to that voice and approach her, softly. “What’s your country of origin?” they ask. “America,” Nadja answers with her little close-mouthed smile.

When I look at Nadja, I don’t know what I’m seeing, so I miss everything. I miss it for years—how lightly she walked on this planet. I miss the scars on her wrists, and I enter her life in between bouts of anorexia. Otherwise I wouldn’t have done it, wouldn’t have even considered it, tugging her along with me to the old Ann Arbor cemetery near campus, the one bordering the arboretum.

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“They have the best leaves there,” I say when she tells me she likes autumn for its changing colors. “Come along for a walk and we’ll kick the leaves into piles and look for the prettiest ones. We’ll bring them back to our house, iron them between sheets of wax paper like my Bubby used to do.”

And Nadja doesn’t hesitate. “We’ll make them into Christmas ornaments,” she says. “Or Hanukah ornaments,” she adds, because she’s careful like that. I’ve told her what a bad Jew I am, but she refuses to believe me, attempts to teach me a couple words of the Hebrew she’s been learning, just for the hell of it, in her spare time.

That winter, along with some classmates, we build snow-families in the same cemetery. The fathers with their jaunty snow-hats, the mothers with their jaunty snow-boobs. It’s Nadja’s idea to build snow-graves. After rolling the huge bodies of the snowmen, two little graves take no time at all. With numb fingers we carve our names, our dates of birth. I stop there. I make Nadja stop there.

And really, she doesn’t finish what she started for a long time, not until years after graduation, years after I’ve moved on and disappeared into my own life.

PBS

I’m seven or so. It’s past eleven at night—I know because I look at my Star Trek watch that I always keep wound. I’d fallen asleep downstairs in front of the TV, woken with a start from my recurring dream of bugs, beetles the size of fists, wasps dive-bombing at my ears, their buzz malicious and red, an undulating carpet of fat black ants rolling inexorably towards me. I roll off the couch, listen for my mother moving upstairs, but other than the low murmur of a news anchorman on TV, the house is still, contained as a birdcage covered for the night. Not even cars passing outside or one of our enormous cats lumbering chair to floor to food bowl.

I teeter toward the TV, switch channels and get caught up by images, colors—green for grass, red for the growing-child’s shirt—the opening sequence of some program. There’s the swing arcing back and forth, back and forth, a baby in the seat, then a toddler, a boy, a teen, a man, an old man. All the while the narrator’s voice uncoils like ribbon in the background. “We are all simply travelers,” it says. “We are all simply temporary.”

Seven year-old me stands there in front of the TV in the dark, the voice sinking into my veins like rainwater in Zaidy’s garden—the swing coming down in its final curve, empty.

Prior to this, I'd lost a great grandmother who smelled of cigarettes and dog piss, but she was on my father's side and I barely knew her. By the time I come around, my mother's family—the only family that matters—has already dwindled like stars in a morning sky due to divorce or crappy hearts. There's a couple handfuls, maybe a dozen of us, remaining and everyone will go on breathing awhile. I'd buried some cats, quickly replaced them with kittens claw-hooking their shiny presence into curtains and pant legs. And once, the death of a baby bird I tried to save—but neglected to feed—devastated me for a few days. That's it.

Unlike my own daughter, I wasn't precocious. I suppose I just never thought about it.

It turns out the PBS program was conjecturing about life after death, as I learn when I stumble across it years later during a pledge week, but I don't watch either time. In fact, the younger me reaches out and shuts the TV off entirely, then just stands there, listens to the ringing that sometimes comes with abrupt silence.

It doesn't occur to me to wake my mother, to watch her fluttering hands, her eyes that won't—I know it—meet mine. For a moment I want to call Bubby and Zaidy. I know they don't sleep, so they'll answer the phone. But that's no good either—like the old man in the swing, they're one frame away from empty air. Instead, I find a book filled with Peanuts' comics that my mother recently bought at a garage sale and I read about Charlie Brown and Linus and Snoopy into the morning hours, but I skip the panels where Lucy pulls away the football before Charlie can kick it because those make me too sad.

Change

For a short while in my childhood, my mother becomes entranced with everything paranormal. She buys books on palm reading, assembles a small pyramid in our living room that promises better health and good luck if we lounge beneath it for an hour a day. She joins the Theosophical Society and attends workshops. One evening, she comes home from a meeting clutching a deck of tarot cards and I immediately fall in love with them, how they feel, slippery and portentous, in my hands. When I plead with her, Mom does a card reading for me, having me cut the deck, spread the cards on the carpet in a T shape.

I wish I could remember what she predicted for my future once she turned over the individual cards, but I can't. I remember The Fool hanging there upside down with a stupid grin on his face, and skeletal Death looming atop his white horse.

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My mother refused to ever do another tarot reading for me, but years later, when I ask a friend who knows of such things, she tells me the Death card indicates change rather than physical mortality. That it's good, not to be feared.

I agree and I don't. But mostly I do. Everything changes, after all. It's the opposite of what I tell my own daughter to comfort her when she's little—that everything under the sun will stay the same, that Mama and Daddy will always be here with her. I don't even cringe as I speak the lie. Even as atoms twitch, molecules shift and shimmy, the child grows an inch overnight, the chair collapses without so much as a creak as warning. Like all things under the sun, change is a blessing and a curse.

Blessings

Recently, I went looking for Bubby and Zaidy at Machpelah Cemetery, something I haven't done for decades. Not since their burials a decade apart, the unveilings where we placed stones on the brand-new graves to remember, to honor and bless, them.

Machpelah, like other graveyards I've explored, is a pretty place, though newer, less lush than my first cemetery or the Ann Arbor one. I stop at the front office to get directions to my Bubby, to my Zaidy, then immediately get lost among the indistinguishable markers. Due to a payment screw-up that occurred at some point between Bubby's death and Zaidy's, my grandparents aren't buried beside each other, but are separated by several other gravesites. I wander in circles for a good hour, unable to find either of them. I can no longer see my car, no longer see the busy Woodward Avenue. Whenever my Doc Martin boots kick up a rock that might sit well on the graves, I stop to pick it up and right now I'm lugging so many I'm walking stooped and at an angle. When I put them down so I can call the office and get better directions, I discover my phone has died.

So I pick up my rocks again and move on, stumbling gravestone to identical gravestone, reading inscriptions. When I'm just about ready to give it up, check the sun in the sky to find west, the way out, I get lucky. There he is at my feet, my Zaidy. And up ahead and to the right, Bubby.

But they're not here, not really. Since my phone's not working, I'm unsure of the time, but it's probably later than it ought to be. Since I'm due to pick up my daughter, I divide my rocks evenly between Bubby and Zaidy and don't stay to chat. What's the point? I think about them all the time anyway, especially now that I've been writing about them. These days, I'm always thinking about all the people I've lost. The ones I'm in the process of losing, right this second, even as I write these words.

I think about Nadja and she's mostly in shades of sepia. She chuckles a little in that low, honey voice of hers, tells me to get over it already. But I've never been very good at that.

I think about my past self, how desperate she sometimes was, how clueless, and I mostly feel tenderness toward her. And if I could go back and tell her anything at all, I guess I'd say this—that things change, that it's a blessing and a curse. But mostly a blessing.

And I'd hold her in my arms because everyone needs a hug. I'd sway back and forth, back and forth, and I'd tell her, "Don't fret, baby. Just wait for it. It's all going to turn out exactly, exactly, the way it's supposed to."