A Eulogy for a Man I Did Not Know



I do not remember his name. I am sure I knew it at the time. I must have heard it at least during the service, but I cannot recall it now.

The call came from the rabbi in the middle of the day. I was in college at the time, and it was Friday, so I did not have class. Or I might have been on school break. The sky was gray, and it was raining. The tree branches were bare. It was either the end of fall or the beginning of spring. It is strange how in memory they seem the same. I did not want to do anything that day, but the rabbi had called.

He began as he always did. "Hey, *bubbe*." I remember the sound of his voice. Soft and sweet, in a voice that persuaded without command. Someone had died, he explained, without family or friends to handle the final arrangements of his life. The rabbi needed me for a *minyan* for the burial service. Just to be a body. I never knew how the rabbi got involved. He gave me an address and a time, and I told him I'd meet him there.

As I drove to the cemetery, I didn't think much about the task asked of me—just something the rabbi needed done. I turned on the radio and flipped between sports radio and the top 40 station. I remember the squeaking of the windshield wipers and made a mental note to fix that. I missed an exit and got lost along the way. I arrived a little late.

When I found the rabbi he was still waiting for a few others. I felt relieved not to be last. The rain was steady, and my wool overcoat was already becoming damp. The cold started to seep through.

Once everyone arrived, we walked together to the hearse. I recognized a few other faces. A few retirees in windbreakers, and refugees from the former Soviet Union. Men with weathered faces and hard brows – the regulars that the rabbi called when he needed extra hands.

The rabbi positioned us around the casket and instructed us to carry it to the gravesite. It was heavy. Very heavy for my slight frame. I struggled to find a secure grip and feared that I would drop it. The other men seemed sturdier than I. But they appeared strained in a different way.

The rabbi muttered incantations as we walked through the cemetery, as if summoning a power from the beyond. Or perhaps ushering one towards it. He prayed softly, hushed, almost as if he did not wish to wake those from eternal rest. We stepped through cold puddles and withered grass. The mud tugged at my shoes, as if something was trying to hold on.

We reached his final resting point. The backhoe's claw hung overhead. We placed the casket onto wooden boards over the grave, and lowered it down. The rabbi monitored every movement. At one point he stepped over the perimeter onto sloping ground. His gait gave way slightly and when he regained his footing a pant leg was covered in mud. If he even noticed, he paid it no mind.

The rabbi delivered a short eulogy, and said the mourner's *kaddish*. I think there was another prayer as well. He must have said his name at some point, but I have forgotten it now. The rabbi took a shovel and with its back dragged heavy dirt into the grave. He instructed us to do the same. I remember the sounds of shovels scraping against stone, and the pounding of heavy dirt against a wooden frame.

When the casket was completely covered we backed away. On the walk back, I noticed misshapen footprints in the mud filling with rainwater. The earth already reclaiming itself from our mark.

When I got to my car I looked out at the field of graves. It seemed to go on forever. I saw the mechanized backhoe empty its claw. The man operating the machine stepped away. It all looked so route. Like just another day at the office.

Then it hit me. How frighteningly temporal it all is. Like a fading flower or passing shade. I spent a few hours with a man whom I never knew, and never will. I am sure in his life he touched someone, maybe many someones. People who brightened at the sound of his voice or the curve of his smile. I wondered if anyone longed to be in his company again. Did they know he was gone, or did they wish they could have been there today to say a last goodbye? Or perhaps our *minyan* are the only ones who remember he even was? His death not just his last, but his only mark on the world.

So I honor him, whoever he was, with this memory I have.