

Paying Respects

I had passed by the iron gate and the long stone stairway behind it many times before, believing it to merely lead to yet another small, bare dog sitting park. After all, the town was filled with these; they were spread out at regular intervals and rarely consisted of more than a small grassy area and a few trees, which either robbed the entire park of sun or were dangerously close to falling over and thus crush the visitors and their dogs underneath them. Not a place I felt like visiting. My decision to cross the road that day and despite it all step towards the gate was due to a yearlong, naïve search for a *real* park; a place where I could get lost on twisting pathways, settle down on benches hidden by vegetation and read literary classics or dream of writing my own. A romantic idea, inspired by places like Central Park in New York and Holland Park in London. I didn't discover the iron gate until long after I had accepted that my own town, lovely though it was, was far too small and compact to possess such treasures.

On the way home from a short walk, I randomly decided to go down the road where the iron gate was squeezed in between two buildings. I stopped, almost involuntarily, when I caught sight of it on the other side of the street. The wind was strong and freezing cold as it tried to pull me along and away, but the sun was shining, and nothing awaited me at home other than a presentation I had promised my study group I would do on a topic I found excruciatingly boring, and a canary bird my ex-boyfriend had left behind a few weeks prior. Before I knew it, I was across the street.

I put both hands on the small gate, and the second before the impact it occurred to me that it might be locked. The staircase and wherever it led could be private area and inaccessible to me, and my journey failed in advance. But the gate slipped open easily and I could step in. The temperature seemed to rise a few degrees now that I was out of wind, and I pulled off my scarf. I took the staircase two low steps at a time.

The sight that met me at the top made my pulse rise in unexpected satisfaction. It was definitely more than a lousy dog sitting park – a cobblestone pathway split in two before me and led in different directions, both of which had their destinations hidden from me by trees and bushes. A map over the area was offered to me by a nearby sign, which I intentionally didn't give closer inspection, but a quick look told me that the place was bigger than I had expected. But it wasn't a park. Alongside the path, some places half-hidden by bushes, stood stones of varying size and shape with cut-out letters lighting up in the sun. I was standing in a cemetery.

I froze mid-step when I realized where I was, and slightly overwhelmed, I clutched my scarf in my hands and turned my head around awkwardly. I wasn't religious, and my solemnity was a lot weaker than any other atheist or agnostic I knew; cemeteries, memorials and funerals had no special meaning to me. No more than supermarkets, statues and birthday parties. They were an inevitable, perhaps even necessary part of any community and a sort of sign of human activity, but appeared to me far too banal to really be possessing the kind of existential meaning people often gave them. However, I knew that many people, also people whom I loved and who loved me, had a different opinion entirely. Luckily, no one was currently in this part of the cemetery, and thus no one was here to witness my blasphemy and lack of respect. I turned towards the sign anyway and carefully read the guidelines before moving along down the pathway.

Not many minutes went by before I had decided that this was a place to which I would regularly return. The cemetery might as well have been the park I had been looking for. Elevated above street level, I was protected from the smog and noise of traffic. The only audible sounds were the wind in the leaves and my slow steps echoing around my feet. The area was gigantic. The tombstones grew only more numerous the further I got, and they stood as soldiers in straight lines, huddled together in messy groups or hid behind each other. After a little while, I could relatively easily date each individual stone without looking at the actual date; like everything else, the tombstones, too, followed the trend of the times. With their height and shape, they created a wave through the centuries on which I could ride along. The largest and most complexly decorated were also the oldest, originating from a time where humility and minimalism were far off into the future. They reached into the sky with arms and the tips of crosses to be closer to God, and with golden letters they indicated that they were bought by "devoted family members", "appreciative community members" and, in the case of a deceased priest, "a grateful congregation", showing that not only the departed, but also the ones they left behind, deserved a spot in Heaven. Small, round stones from around the turn of the century, however, spoke of an outright fear of attention. Surrounded by potted plants, red candles and other, customizable objects, they were indistinguishable from the decorations of a typical middleclass girl's bedroom. The tombstones led me from my great-grandparents' generation to my parents' and back again, and I enjoyed finding patterns and tendencies encoded in the cemetery.

After about an hour, a particularly modern-looking tombstone caught my attention. A thin square, black and brightly polished, stood by the edge of the path. Thin, white letters in a sans serif font de-

clared the departed “beloved husband, beloved father” and told that he had died the year before and was born less than a decade before myself.

I stopped in front of the tombstone and stared at it. A small bouquet of flowers and a plastic toy airplane lay as sacrificial gifts in front of the black slate.

I had a single time gone with my ex-boyfriend to another cemetery far from here to, in his words, visit his father, and had watched him disapprovingly as he led a long, one-sided conversation with the lifeless gravestone.

“Do you want to say anything?” he asked at the end with wet cheeks and a smile.

“Dead ears don’t hear,” I said, and we left the place, silent, holding hands.

And still I found myself standing here in front of the beloved husband and father who was only nine years older than me, clenching my scarf and with a sympathetic look on my face, shaking my head apologetically.

“Wow,” I said, “I’m sorry.”

This became the beginning of a morbid game. After a few seconds of silence, I set out to locate the youngest of the cemetery’s inhabitants; anyone who didn’t live to see half a century. I was driven forward by something I had said half in jest to a friend some days earlier:

“I will never grow old. On my fiftieth birthday, I will throw myself off a building.”

I systematically followed the cemetery’s network of pathways, constantly careful not to violate the privacy of the privately owned gravesites, even if this made my search somewhat more difficult. Now and then, I had to stand on my toes, stretch my neck and squeeze my eyes together to read the dates of the tombstones that were located furthest from the pathways, out of shyness or misanthropy. But I did my best to stop up and inspect every single grave, as if I were there for business. I had never been good with numbers, and did the calculations at least thrice in my head before I felt certain that I had gotten the right age and could move on. As the day grew older, other living beside myself started appearing at the cemetery. Each time I passed someone – a black clad widow, a family dad with kids in tow, a biking teenager – I made sure to look grieving, frowning in built-up pain, my gaze directed either towards my feet or towards the sky, but always towards something otherworldly. Sometimes I even raised my hands in prayer. An absurd notion; I didn’t even know the Lord’s Prayer.

When the shadows started growing long, I had collected the names of eight youthfully departed, although none had been younger than thirty at the time of death. I was tired and sort of emptily content with my harvest, which, though I had no idea what I would use it for, felt strangely meaningful

and remarkable, like a list of crossed-off names of receivers of Christmas cards. I had decided to call it a day and go home when a tombstone in a small enclosure of bushes suddenly had materialized in front of me. The stone itself was new, but banally classic, raw and grey and rounded at the top. The area in front of it, however, was covered in lanterns and figurines, wreaths and flowers, bowls and decorated stones with loving inscriptions. There was a small paperback novel with a title I did not recognize. I subtracted one date from another no less than five times to make sure I had gotten it right. The grave belonged to a fifteen-year-old.

I nodded, wearing the same apologetic face, and added the name to my mental list before walking away on legs I couldn't quite feel. I only got a few metres before I nearly stumbled, stopped, began crying.

The smell of my tears lured in a middle-aged woman; I suddenly felt a caring hand on my shoulder and saw her red jacket light up like an underwater lighthouse.

“Dear, there, there,” she purred and rubbed my back, “After life, only release awaits.”

I murmured something, dried my eyes with my scarf.

“Who did you lose?” she asked gently.

“My boyfriend. He died in a car accident last year,” I lied.

Her gaze fell on the tombstone in front of which I had randomly stopped, whose owner had died a few years after my birth, eighty-seven years old. I saw her expression change.

“He's not here,” I explained hurriedly, “His parents aren't religious and didn't want to bury him. I come here because I—It helps looking at other's—“

She nodded with her eyes closed, understanding. She shushed me quietly and pulled me into an embrace. She smelled faintly like dog.

I slowly walked back through twisting paths and down the stone stairway, one step at a time, and left the cemetery in the light of an early sunset. The wind was blowing just as strong as I went home, and not many people were on the streets in my compact town. On my way home, I passed several small, square dog sitting parks, where a few dog owners stood with stiff shoulders under their jackets. In a botany store I bought a potted plant with red flowers and placed it next to the canary's cage, where I seated myself with my favourite book and cried.