

Louis Barrett

Jerome Robbins Award for Non-Fiction

### The Shovel

I'm wearing my only suit. A smart, brand new, dark blue jacket and matching pants. Light blue, felt shoes with light blue laces hug my feet. A white shirt stretches tightly across my chest and back. I did not know what to wear today. Nothing felt right, nothing felt comfortable.

Sweat drapes over my body. It glues my suit jacket, shirt and bare back together. I can feel it dripping down my face, threatening to send my glasses tumbling off my nose. Streaming across my arms, in my palms, in my shoes, soaking my socks. I want a shower. I don't want to be here. But the sweat, the suit, they lock me up, preventing me from running away. When my mind can't process what I am seeing, they force me to acknowledge that I am here. That this is now. That the shovel in my hand is real and the six-foot-deep grave where my great-grandfather lies needs to be filled in...

Firm, deeply worn hands and a white beard with flecks of grey. A smile that could break thunder clouds and send rainstorms running. The smell of warm, succulent pancakes and steaming vegetable soup. He bore no brand, no tattoo, no mark of his suffering, everything internal, everything contained in his iron body and steely heart. He lived in a small apartment in Brooklyn. I never wanted to make the drive to visit my great grandparents, but every time their front door opened, warmth enveloped me. My great-grandfather always kissed me. The bristles on his beard scratched my face, making me want to pull away and at the same time pull him closer. It was the most uncomfortable feeling. It was priceless.

I grip the shovel tighter. I want to scream, vomit, sob. I want to run away from this empty, green field in New Jersey. This is not where it is supposed to end. His story cannot be over. My knuckles are white, my hands strain and my muscles pull. I want to break the shovel, break what it represents. Rewrite this story. My grandfather, cousins, aunts, and uncles stand behind and next to me. I am surrounded by love and loss. Tears and closure. But I feel none of this. I feel sweat. I feel minute grains of wood. I feel the weight of the thick, metal shovel head. I am breaking apart.

I step forward with the shovel and plunge it into the pile of dirt near the grave. I carry the pile of dirt to the grave and tip the shovel letting gravity take control of what I could never do on my own. The dirt hits his body, his shell, my Alter-Zaide...

It's a frighteningly dark night in the Warsaw Cemetery. Wind blasts my face and moves its way under my coat, burrowing its way past layers of shirts and sweatshirts. After four days of traveling through Poland and visiting concentration camps and mass graves with my Yeshiva, a numbness has settled in my bones and my heart. But an ember flares to life in my chest, expelling the cold, the numb. My great-grandfather was here in 1944. He buried Jews here, in darker darkness and colder cold. He created burial places where room simply did not exist. He kept them from the fate of mass graves and crematoriums. If nothing else, my great-grandfather provided a final, peaceful resting place for untold numbers of Jews in the Warsaw Cemetery. In the darkness, in the sadness, the glow in my chest grows.

I step back from the grave and drag my shovel behind me. I should have cried by now, but instead: nothing. The second shovelful, the second pile of dirt. The sweat, the ever-present

sweat, rolls off my forehead, tickles my eyebrows, coalesces on the tip of my nose, and hovers for a second before plunging towards the ground, towards the grave as my next pile of dirt falls back towards the earth...

The stroke took away the apartment, took his mobility, placed him in an old age home in Brooklyn. A dreary, sad place with mushy food and a sickening smell of disinfectant. Grey linoleum floors with nauseating light green walls and rooms that looked better suited for a hospital. We still came to visit the iron man with the resolute heart. He had blue eyes. Unfathomably deep blue eyes. The stroke stole his words, stole one of his well-worn hands, but it did not matter. Not when we hugged and kissed him, and his eyes lit up. When he cradled his other rugged hand in yours and you could stare at those blue eyes and see how much he loved you. How words did not matter. How much he never wanted you to leave. The pride he felt when you told him about your grades in school and the new friends you made.

The shovel breaks through the dirt a third time. At this point my uncles and cousins join me and the pile of dirt at the side of the grave steadily decreases in size. I am a pile of reflexes now. I don't dictate my actions; my movements are preordained. My great-grandfather wrapped in a simple white cloth slowly sinks below the dirt, white disappearing under blackish brown. The sweat breaks through my shirt, through the first layer of my jacket, and sprouts out the back. The sun presses down on me, a headache starts to build, none of it matters. The shovel in my hands, the hole at my feet, that matters. I force my shovel into the pile of dirt for the fourth and final time...

Pneumonia came last. He left the home and transferred to a hospital, ironically a better smelling, much brighter place. We thought he would pass quickly, but my Altar-Zaide was a fighter. A fighter in Auschwitz, a fighter in America. Pneumonia did not know who it picked a fight with. The apartment long since gone, the old age home faded into the past. Both hands had quit working and his wonderful, expressive blue eyes had closed, but he pressed forward. I visited him then. Sunlight glinted through the windows of his bedroom, making it seem so much cheerier than it should. A hole in his throat helped him to breath and pillows supported every side of him. He had the chance to leave at any time, to give up and fade away, but he refused. He wasn't going to leave this world, not yet.

The hole has been filled. The shovel falls from my hands, landing softly in the grass by the side of my great-grandfather's grave. I walk back to my grandparent's parked car, picking at the splinters the shovel left in my hand. I leave that too light, too quiet cemetery in a field in New Jersey. My eyes close and I am back in Brooklyn. I ring the doorbell to his apartment. He opens the door and cups my face in his weathered hands. He kisses my cheek with his prickly beard and uncontrollable smile. My tears, my newly present tears, run over my face. Nothing feels right, nothing feels comfortable.