

SCOTT MINAR

Lunch at Mark Twain's Grave

This is the memory. I cantilever onto my ten-speed bike, ride the leafy Rust Belt streets of Elmira, New York, and through the gates of Woodlawn Cemetery. I alternately pedal and glide over bleached-gray asphalt and winding, fine gravel paths to a pretty, forested hill and a grouping of stones and monuments in the pied shade of oaks, maples, cottonwoods, and sycamores. The wind is light, sounding a mid-range hiss above and around. The canopy of broadleaf limbs and boughs overhead is thick but still letting light through, the air clean, as it always is in the spring or fall of small-town, upstate New York. Jim, not the one from Twain's novel but the librarian at the college where I teach, told me recently about nuclear fallout projection maps he'd seen once. There are a few places, a few strips on those maps, he said, where the fallout wouldn't travel, and Elmira is one of them. So he told me. It feels safe here among the dead and the love of the living expressed in places like this. Of course, eventually there are no relatives or friends alive to be comforted by individual stones and the greensward, so the rest of us have to do that for them. The graves may be different, but the gathered quality of the grass holds them together. This is, at least in part, why I visit cemeteries so often and with such pleasure. In some distant way, I think, in the back of my mind that I am filling the place of those who can no longer be here and would like to be. The silence commands me to do this, and the natural beauty pushes me forward.

Many years ago, when I would take my lunches at Twain's gravesite, my initial reasoning was to get away from school for a while and what was needed there, of and by me. But I think there was also a ghostly lure drawing me to that place. The leaf and pine needle cathedral of a New England cemetery is an interesting hermeneutic, a compelling teacher. I loved it there at the time (What student or teacher of literary history wouldn't?), but I also felt unsettled in the quiet, as if something were missing too. Mark

Twain certainly earned admiration and respect for his writing, even affection perhaps, but he isn't the kind of writer who inspires awe. What I was feeling seemed more like the border between life and death, which is sometimes imagined to be a wall, sometimes a river—like the Mississippi but wider—and always a metaphor, a figure, an idea that needed a physical representation so that we might understand or manage it at all.



My appreciation for graveyards began when I was young. As the grandchild of Sicilian immigrants, I grew up next to one of the largest cemeteries in Cleveland adjacent to the neighborhood where we lived. Because I was nearly a resident of Lake View Cemetery as a child on a bicycle or hiking with a lunch bag towards self-determining imaginary adventures, cemeteries were like cities to me. Lake View is massive. Purchased and built on land from the Erie Plain to the Portage Escarpment not far from the lake in Cleveland: 175 acres of ravines, woodlands, creeks, and streams rising from Cleveland's central plain to a majestic overlook of Lake Erie and the eastern side of the city—which is, despite its reputation, beautiful. The centerpiece of Lake View is the tomb of assassinated President James A. Garfield who was born in nearby Mentor, Ohio. Garfield's tomb is an ornate, impressive structure designed by architect George Keller and built in Byzantine, Gothic, and Romanesque Revival styles in the 19th century. Ohio's President was a Lincoln-era republican who once drove canal-boat teams for a living, something Twain would have appreciated given his interest in waterborne crafts and those who work and live on or with them. Lake View Cemetery is described to this day as a monument to the prosperity of the Gilded Age, a term Mark Twain invented, along with his co-author Charles Dudley Warner. Their novel, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, also fully and passionately satirized that period bearing its new, deliberately ironic name.

A considerable distance from Garfield's monument and at the bottom of the Portage Escarpment near Euclid Avenue, a major thoroughfare in Cleveland, are the grave markers of my grandparents, Salvatore and Filipa Leta, from Mistretta, Sicily. They came to Cleveland in the impressive waves of

immigrants from Italy that occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. My grandfather was a professional gardener, while my grandmother managed the unusually large garden behind their house in the Murray Hill district of Cleveland. Because my grandfather died the year as I was born, I never knew him, but I grew up in my grandmother's garden and under her care when both my parents were working during the day. That garden was prefaced by roses and a greyed wooden fence at front and adjacent to a sizable grape arbor before rows and rows of eggplants, tomatoes, lettuce, fennel, mint, and herbs. It was a magical place. There was a small, dank room in my grandmother's basement near the front of the house that held her dead husband's wine press, cob-webbed and dusty when I knew it standing in a mote of amber sunlight drifting through a high window.

I realized sometime around the age of fifty that, remarkably, I had never visited my grandparents' graves. Where hundreds of people may visit James Garfield's monument every day in the summer, I had never even seen the small granite markers for my grandmother and my grandfather. Some families do not deal well with death, and we were among them. My parents, my brothers and I were like water-striders when it came to graves and funerals. We glided over the surface of things, without really putting a toe in the water. I'm not sure what drove me to finally take the drive down to Lake View's plots and ravines, into the cemetery office off Euclid to inquire about the burial location. I think realizing that I had never been there was probably enough to move me, that and the question like a gadfly regarding why my mother never took me there, why no one in my family had ever shown me those graves.

It turned out that the gravesites were quite close to the cemetery office and to Euclid Avenue, perhaps a half a dozen rows away from the busy Cleveland street separated by stonework and a heavy black iron fence. It is difficult to describe the feeling that held me as I was looking for the first time at their names carved in stone fixed to the grass at my feet. I would describe that moment as a melding of shock and new grief, a guilt that was assuaged or healed almost in the moment it was discovered and understood. It seemed to happen that fast, like a flood running the ravine over and through in one continuous movement. I knew I had to drive home immediately and tell my mother, with whom I had a difficult relationship at

times, about it. To my surprise, when I did that, she told me that she had never been there either. I was so shocked by her statement that I awkwardly asked if she would like me to take her to see her parents' graves, and she said that she would. Within a week we were there together on a sunny pleasant afternoon. When her eyes began loading with tears as we approached, I asked if she would like to have a little time alone. She said yes, so I walked those aisles of stones and flowers, and came back in a little while so we could talk for a few moments about things. What I remember from that conversation is that she said to me, "I loved my mother." I'd never heard her say that before.

I can't say it surprised me exactly, but it was something new. I think the reasons why my family had such a strange relationship with graveyards and the dead are not terribly complicated, even if they are unusual. Both of my parents had difficult relationships with their own mothers and fathers—the aversion to graveyard and funerals may have sprung from those troubles. The miracle as far as I was concerned was how my mother and I shared this experience, when so much that should have been normalized and familial between us often seemed stunted or undernourished. I discovered later in life that I was emotionally compacted too, like a wildly cornered plant caught in a vessel so small its roots can only grow so far before being blocked by the hardened clay surrounding it. During that time, I was more angry with myself than I was with anyone else. Certain family maps should not be followed—but charting your own course into territory that is unfamiliar can be as hard as moving to a new country. We may not know it before our departure, but those trails are also among the best ones we can ever walk because they have the chance to transform our lives in ways that are almost unimaginable. Hard lessons are often our best receipts.



Today, riding my bicycle through another graveyard, the one I live near now in Frankfort, Ohio, I was struck by the thought that I'd spent most of my life looking at cemeteries as sad places, gloomy Sunday processions, tents over an open grave about to be filled, lonely midnights and wind in a place holding

death's endings en masse. My revelation in that moment was that there is another way to see a graveyard. I had been reading the many sweet things written on stones and monuments in this old Ohio, country-road, and small-town cemetery—for the dead who were old and young, soldiers and infants, men and women, brothers and sisters and parents and children, all loved so much that it had to be written in stone and set before the sky and the world as a tribute to, and emblem or signifier of that love. It was as strong a revelation as I hope to receive the rest of my days, and it changed how I will look at cemeteries for the rest of my life, until I am the inhabitant of one.

I wonder if this was what was missing when I sat before the gravesites of Sam, Livy, Langdon, Susie, Clara, and Jean Clemens of Elmira, New York? I was seeing the sorrows in their lives, the deaths of children far too young—one of them an infant—and the sadness of living beyond those endings and through them. Reflected through those thoughts perhaps were my own mistakes and challenges, hurts or wrongs I had committed or suffered because the memories of trouble in one family seem inevitably to lead to another set that belongs to us alone. It took me decades to learn that love is the answer, to paraphrase John Lennon who understood the principle later in his life better than he did at its beginning. Later today, tomorrow, and on many days after, I will get on another bicycle, interestingly the same color as the one I rode decades ago, and ride through the heart of a memorial place, those beautiful trees and green lawns where I stood last fall and watched a bald eagle cross the sky above me, slow-winged and heavy as a bird like that must be, so magnificent it can make you weep.

Before and after my visits to Mark Twain's grave, I've been a traveler in the world of ideas. Moving that way, certain stories leap up at you sometimes. I heard one from an interrogator for the U.S. Army on the television show *Sixty Minutes* years ago. She had been stationed at the prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the one sparking so much debate and criticism by holding terrorists captured on battlefields in Afghanistan and Iraq without trial or timeline. We called it *enhanced interrogation*, but it was clear people were being tortured there. The soldier telling the story had been brought in to relieve other interrogators who had

worked there for a long time. She was assigned a prisoner captured in Iraq who'd been incarcerated for years. She did not believe in, nor did she practice enhanced interrogation. Her goal and her training involved winning the trust of a prisoner by simply talking to and connecting with the human being before her. This was, obviously, an extension of the same "hearts and minds" theme and conclusion about winning that came out of the Vietnam War, the one that states *You can win a war in another country if you don't win the hearts and minds of the people there*. The prisoner never spoke during her sessions with him. This went on for months. One day however he looked up and asked, "Why are you being so kind to me?" Shocked to hear him, she nonetheless answered, "Because my god teaches that we must love even our enemies." At this point, her prisoner began weeping. When she asked why he was crying, he answered, "Because my god teaches the same thing."

Perhaps, in the end, this is all we need to know about life and death. If I've learned anything from graveyards and the many other places I've been—psychically, physically—it is this: sometimes from hopelessness, hope springs. And what comes from hope itself is yet to be seen. But having it, even if we must force ourselves toward that beacon, may be the most important thing—it gives everything and keeps giving, all the way to the end of the line.