

Home	<h1>Henry James among the Headstones</h1>
Autumn/Winter 2011	<p>by Allen Stein</p>
Summer 2010	<p>Milton Panzer stared silently at the headstone that told him both in English and Hebrew that his father, dead now nearly a quarter of a century, had been a loving husband and parent, a good man, a mensch. Milton couldn't disagree, and every so often a face on a canvas or a passage in a book would bring a pang of memory that stirred Milton into missing him.</p>
Spring 2010	
Winter 2010	
Autumn 2009	<p>It was Sunday morning, ten o'clock, and the cemetery was quiet. Milton was tired and hung over. He turned to his wife, who was as tired and hung over as he was. She was shaking her head slightly as she looked around.</p>
Summer 2009	
Spring 2009	<p>"Not like the cemeteries back home, is it, Alice?"</p>
Autumn 2008	<p>"No, I've never seen anything like it. So many dead."</p>
Summer 2008	<p>They sat on a bench.</p>
Spring/Summer 2008	<p>"Yeah, it's a city of the dead," Milton said. "It must be nice for you not to need a map when you go to visit your father's grave, right?"</p>
Winter/Spring 2008	<p>"Well, there's nothing much nice in going there. It rips me up each time. But it is a pretty little spot, and Daddy's easy to find."</p>
Editor's Note	<p>"Ebenezer Church Road, Edgecombe Corner, North Carolina"</p>
Guidelines	<p>"You say that like it's funny."</p>
Contact	<p>"No, not really. It's just that it's so different from this. I mean,</p>
	<p>Edgecombe Corner's a place where you don't say 'my father,' when you're talking about him, but you say 'Daddy.'"</p>
	<p>"And that's funny to you? Okay. I tell you what, though, if 'my father' were lying in the ground here, even as big as this place is I wouldn't need a map to find his headstone when I came here."</p>
	<p>"Look, it's been a while since I was here, okay? We've gotten up to New York, what, just five times in the six years we've been married, right? And I just haven't wanted to drag you out here to Long Island for this when we're up here for some fun, okay? I mean I've been doing you a favor, really. And, after getting in so late last night from the reception, we shouldn't even have thought about driving out here. We could have put it off till next year, you know?"</p>
	<p>"That's what you said the last time, Milton, and you did tell me on the plane that maybe you ought to show your face at your father's grave. For what it's worth, I think you do need to be here every so often. And, besides, I've never been here, and I suppose I ought to be. You know, to pay my respects to my husband's late father, bizarre as that might seem to you. Judy came here with you, didn't she?"</p>

"Yeah, a couple of times, but Judy knew him and liked him. You never met him."

"Well, if living he met the first wife, dead he can meet the second, okay?"

"My, aren't we possessive today?"

She laughed dryly, coughed once, and said, "Yeah, I guess, God knows why. Maybe it's just that seeing you make an ass of yourself with the bride's mother last night makes me cherish you all the more."

He laughed then. "Yeah, well, because my cousin's son was marrying her daughter, you might say we're just about related. What do you guys call it down in Carolina, 'kissin' cousins'? Hell, it was a blow-out Jewish wedding, not like the prim Methodist things you're used to. People fool around. It doesn't mean anything. Just that we drank a little too much and were feeling good. She was a cow. I never saw her before and I'll never see her again. So big fucking deal. And you didn't seem to mind it that much when the guy with the atrocious comb-over kept sliding his hand down to your butt while we were all dancing the hora. You were the smiling little whore of the hora, weren't you?"

She sighed. "I didn't notice where his hand was."

"Yeah, right," he said.

They looked at each other and smiled wearily, "Coupla jerks, aren't we?" he said.

"Aren't we?" she echoed, and they gave each other a quick kiss and hug, Alice giggling as he reached over and stroked her butt while humming the tune to the Hora.

"Okay, enough," she said. "Not here, all right?"

He smiled sheepishly. "All right."

"Even as cemeteries go, this is a depressing place," Milton said. "I mean, look at that gray building with the smokestacks just outside the wall there."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. Waste disposal plant or something, maybe. Every time I've been here, there's been smoke coming out of it, and it always smells of burning garbage. Like I say, depressing."

He looked out over acres filled with Jewish dead. "Thousands and thousands here," he thought, "and just a few scruffy trees scattered around. More money to be made if you don't waste coffin space on landscaping, I guess."

As it did the other times he came here, the building made him think of a Nazi crematorium. "These here were the lucky ones," he said to himself, "just died on their own. Drop in the bucket to Hitler's numbers. Probably almost all of these lost relatives to the ovens. But lucky anyway."

"Okay," he said with a sigh, then picked up two smooth pebbles, gave one to

Alice, stepped over to the grave, and put his pebble on the thin edge of the headstone's pedestal. He motioned for Alice to do the same.

After placing her stone she asked, "What's that for?"

"Jewish tradition. A sign that you've been here to pay your respects. Okay, let's go."

"We haven't been here more than five minutes, Milton."

"It's more like ten," he said. "And it took us nearly ten before that to get the map at the office and another five to find this place."

"Sorry. My mistake. A couple more minutes won't hurt. You probably won't want to come back for at least a couple of years, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, okay, swell." They sat again. "Look, Alice, I loved my dad, no kidding. But he's in the ground. We're on it. Facts are facts. We'll stay a bit longer, but we really need to get out of here soon, all right? I mean I'd like to get back into the city and over to the Met for the Sargent portraits before it gets so damn crowded that I'm looking at the backs of people's heads instead of the paintings."

She sighed. "Sure," she said. Then after a moment, "By the way, did you tell me they have the one he did of James there in the exhibition, the one you showed us the postcard of in the grad class when you taught Portrait?"

"Yeah, I told you that. I've never seen the real thing, and I really want to. He gets at the essence of James in it, shows how well he could read people—you see it in the eyes—and the kind of troubled sympathy he has—and the lips show this little twist that could almost be, what, scorn, maybe, or even a tinge of horror. Like I said, I want to look into those eyes directly and not while I'm getting jostled by some gawking idiots."

He chuckled. "Remember how you and Elizabeth Kelly used to sit beside each other in that grad class and fight for my attention? Both of you trying so hard to impress me with your brains and your boobs?"

"I've heard this song before, Milton, and, as I think I told you more than once, she might have been doing all the slobbering over you. I wasn't."

"Yeah, then how come you were the one who ended up with me?"

"I got lucky, I guess."

Milton grinned. "C'mon. Say it like you mean it."

"I guess I was just better in the sack than she was."

"And that's a song I've heard before. Too damn often. I told you I never went to bed with Elizabeth Kelly. You were the only grad student I ever slept with."

"Then why do you keep bringing her name up?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I guess because I like the memory of smart and good-looking young women being after me. So sue me. It was a while ago."

"Yes, it was."

"Hell, maybe I wish I had gone to bed with her."

Neither spoke for a moment.

A few cars drove up and parked near theirs.

"Seems like there's a crowd gathering, Milton."

"Yeah, and I don't see any fresh grave. Oh, it's probably for an unveiling. See that headstone over there?" And he pointed to one about twenty-five yards from where they were.

"The one with the gauze over the front?"

"Yeah, it's a veil. The Jewish tradition is that a year after the burial, people come out for some prayers as the headstone is unveiled. We're buried without a headstone."

"Why do you do that?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's a way to reinforce the ties, keep the wounds fresh. Doesn't make much sense to me, but I've never thought about it much."

"I think it's a nice tradition."

"Maybe."

They sat there another minute or two, watching people getting out of their cars.

"Okay, Alice, John Singer Sargent awaits. Let's go."

"Okay. Let's just stand at your father's stone for a second more. Then you can say so long, and you can get out of here."

They got up, stood at the stone a moment, and turned to leave. As they did, they heard a scream.

Startled, they turned and saw an old man, leaning on a much younger one, as the two slowly approached the veiled stone. They had apparently been with the group that had just gotten out of their cars, but the rest of the group stood silently and let the pair walk to the stone alone. It was the old man who had screamed, because, as Milton and Alice watched, his bent shoulders rose and he let out another wail. Reaching the stone, still leaning on the younger man, he stared at the veiled inscription and cried out, in a thick Yiddish accent, "My darling, my darling. So much I miss you. You were so good to me."

The younger man stroked his hand and said, "It's all right, Grandpa. Grandma

knows. It's okay."

Patting his grandson's hand in return, the man called toward the headstone, "I got nothing without you, my love. I got no day and I got no night. I got no life. My darling, my darling." Sobbing now, he put his face in his grandson's chest. Tears running down his face, the young man stroked his grandfather's heaving back. The others now slowly came forward to join the pair. A middle-aged man and woman, weeping, their arms about each other's shoulders, were the first to join the pair, the four hugging now as the rest gathered around. A scream, inarticulate except for the word "love," rose from the old man.

Both choked up, Milton and Alice watched silently and then turned toward their car. They said nothing over the fifty yards they crossed to reach it. Getting in, they still didn't speak. Finally, Milton, his voice tight, said with a small smile, "Well, maybe he was a wife beater or something and feels guilty now." Still choked, Alice shook her head slightly and said, "No." Not smiling now, he nodded, muttering, "No."

The two looked at each other for an instant, then straight ahead. Milton shrugged slightly, turned the ignition key, and they drove off to look at the Sargent portraits.

Allen Stein teaches American Literature at North Carolina State University. He is the author of a book on Kate Chopin's short fiction and of one on marriage as presented in *American Literary Realism*. He has also published articles on Hawthorne, Melville, James, Twain, Howells, and Wharton, among other American authors. Turning to fiction recently, he has had stories published in *Aethlon* and *SNReview*.

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