

# Mourner's Kaddish

## Ezra Barany

**W**alking down the isolated street on my way to the car, I wiggled loose my tie, cradled the cell phone to my ear, and broke the news to my wife of three years. “Just left the health food store, but couldn’t get your gluten-free bread and beeswax because the clerk left his job figuring he’d make more money working at Mac-Donald’s.”

“Cute. What really happened?”

“I forgot that they take cash only, and I don’t have any cash on me. Sorry.”

“That’s fine, Nathan. I can get my stuff tomorrow. Come on home. I know how much you’re looking forward to watching CSI.”

I checked my watch. “What is it? About a half hour before it starts? I should make it in time.”

I got off the phone with Nancy. There went another useless conversation, just like all the others I had with her every evening after work. It wasn’t just the conversations that bugged me. It was my job. Not Nancy’s fault. My job had me doing the same computer programming in the same area the same hours the same days of the week. Sometimes I wondered what it was all for. The more I thought about the banality of my existence, the more I wanted to punch someone in the face.

A short man in a hoodie and ripped jeans stood ahead of me on the sidewalk. He was probably just hanging out, but something about him seemed like all his attention was on me. Maybe it was the way he was the only one around on Clifton Street. Maybe it was the way his shoulders slumped and how he stood there as if his feet were stuck to the sidewalk. I chucked it up to end-of-the-day paranoia, and continued toward him to get to my car.

Was that a glance? It looked like he glanced at me.

As I approached him, I noticed his repeated glances toward me. He stepped in front of me holding a knife. What the hell was he thinking? I’d never been mugged before, but just because this was the city

of Oakland, Crime Capital of California, didn't mean I was ready to start a life of victimization.

"Give me your wallet." He wagged his hand as if I needed to pay more attention to his knife.

"No, you give me your wallet." I shoved him to the ground.

He dropped the knife, placing his hands behind himself to break his fall, and he lay there stunned.

I bent over and grabbed his collar. "Come on, give it to me!"

He fumbled for his wallet. The flat leather fold floundered in his hands and fell to the sidewalk.

"Get out of here." I pushed his shoulders. "Get out of here now!"

He scrambled to his feet, darted off, and disappeared around the corner.

Relieved he was gone, I paced back and forth ridding myself of the adrenaline that pulsated through me. I picked up the wallet, pocketed the cash – looked to be about thirty dollars – and tossed the wallet in a nearby garbage can.

**After buying the bread** and beeswax at the health food store on College Avenue with my newly acquired cash, I strolled back to Clifton Street and checked my watch. Ten minutes before the hour. I could still make it in time.

That's when I saw Hoodie at his favorite spot with two of his buddies. All holding knives.

Terrific. No doubt he wanted his wallet back. By the sneer on his face and the white-knuckled grip on his knife, I could tell he also wanted blood.

The three of them faced me, waiting for me to pass, all of them looking keyed up at the idea of painting the sidewalk with my insides. I glanced behind me and considered walking back to College Avenue, taking the long way to the car by going around the block, but I saw two other kids in jeans and scruffy jackets walking toward me from College Avenue. Probably Hoodie's friends. They had their hands in their coat pockets, fists around their own knives, no doubt.

Three ahead of me. Two behind.

I should've had Nancy tape the show.

Time to assess. Ahead of me, my car was parked on Clifton Street past the three predators. Behind me, College Avenue, the major cross street, still busy at this time of night.

*Don't let emotion cloud your strategy.*

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Fighting five guys at once would be suicide. Hell, fighting two guys at once was problematic enough for me. Last time I got into a serious fight with someone I was in the third grade. And even then, I got my butt kicked. She was a frickin' one-girl army.

Sure could use her, now.

I looked at the three ahead of me. Young, probably in high school. I was at least twenty years older than them. Hoodie and another of the three were average build and height, and the third one was a tall guy. They stood their ground at about fifty feet away from me.

The two high school kids behind me were also standing still, waiting for me to make my move. They were about a hundred feet away. It seemed their only function was to stop me from running to College Avenue. One was average height, the other a little shorter.

My best bet was to fight the two guys behind me, hope they couldn't aim their knife thrusts, then somehow get past them to make a run for College Avenue, all before the other three caught up to help their friends slaughter me and empty my entrails on the cement. What the hell am I going to do?

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Hoodie's smile widened. He enjoyed watching me squirm.

Throwing punches would be ineffective. I'd be able to only get in a few strikes, so when my hits landed, they had better land hard. The bigger the mass, the bigger the impact force. What did I have that was small but heavy? My groceries of bread and beeswax? Nope. Setting down the bag of groceries, I pulled out a set of keys from my pocket. A lot of keys – work, home, gym locker, car, storage, and several I couldn't identify. All on one keychain.

That would do.

Would it? If I threw my keys at one of them, I'd lose my keys and

the other guy would stab me.

This was impossible.

It sounded like one of the three ahead of me said something to his buddies. Probably something like, “Let’s get him,” because they started walking toward me. *Think, dammit! Think!*

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

The keys had to hit hard, so they had to hit with a lot of speed. If I threw a punch with the keys in my hand, I could keep my arm extended to get a lot of torque, like a pitcher, but that still wouldn’t be enough. And I’d just get my fingers thrashed. How could I extend my radius?

The three boys were thirty feet away from me now, and speeding up.

I unbuckled my belt and yanked it out of the belt loops. I tried to get the keys attached to my belt buckle, but the key ring wasn’t cooperating. I dug my fingernail between the metal ring’s coil, but my fingernail slipped out. I tried a second time, but couldn’t keep the key ring open long enough to slide it onto the belt buckle.

The three boys were about twenty feet away from me.

*Come on!*

Finally the key ring slid onto the belt buckle. I whipped the belt against the ground. The keys struck with a satisfying clamor.

The three boys stopped. I spun to the two that were behind me and ran at them screaming, my groceries in one hand, and my belt of keys in the other. A stunned deer-in-the-headlights look flashed on their faces. I struck the ground with the belt of keys again and advanced. I don’t know why, but I started yelling a prayer I had heard my mother recite regularly after Dad died.

*“Yitgadal v’yitkadash sh’may rabbah!”*

One guy backed up slowly as the other crouched and held out his knife, preparing for whatever blizzard came his way.

*“B’alma di vra chir’utei v’yamlich malchutei!”* I didn’t know what the words meant, but the boys didn’t look too happy about it. When I got ten feet away from them, the boy who backed up turned tail and

ran. I directed my next whip of the belt at the crouching boy's face. He held his arms up to block the keys, but not before getting a hefty hit on his left cheek.

He cried out.

I positioned myself to the side of him and kicked his shoulder so he'd fall to the ground. "*B'chayeichon uvyomeichon!*"

He adopted a fetal position, keeping his palms up above his face, whimpering.

Checking behind me, I spotted the other three sprinting toward me. I escaped to College Avenue's busy street that held a promise of safety and kept on running. I ran down one block. Then two. Avoided bumping into pedestrians. When I felt well-distanced, I slowed my run to a walk, stopped and bent over hyperventilating, holding on to my knees for support.

I was going to be fine. It was over.

I detached the keys from my belt and threaded the belt through the loops of my pants. My cell phone rang. Caller ID revealed who it was.

"Hey, Nancy," I answered.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"I'm gonna be late. Some kid tried to mug me, I took his wallet, he didn't take too kindly to that so he and four of his friends attacked me with knives, but I'm fine now."

"Cute. Did you get cash and get the gluten-free bread and bees-wax?"

I wouldn't have believed it, either. "Yeah, I got it."

"Well come home, then. You missed CSI, but you can always watch one of the tapes we have."

We had a whole stockpile of taped shows I missed, but somehow I could never bring myself to watch any of them. Something stale about a show once it was taped. "Listen, Nancy."

"What's wrong?"

"Have you ever had a turning point in your life, something that's probably going to be the biggest thing that will ever happen to you, and you know it's going to affect you in a major way but you just don't know how, yet?"

“You weren’t kidding about getting mugged, were you? Should I call the police?” Her voice wavered.

“No. I’m fine.” I examined the tree next to me. Its tired leaves and bowing branches. It had been here for years, in the same pathetic place, with the same pathetic surroundings, never knowing a different life.

“Nancy, I need some time to figure out what just happened to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know, yet. I just...”

“Well, come home soon, okay?”

“I will.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” The lie slipped from my lips before I could stop it.

I stepped into a diner and didn’t wait to be seated. Just snuck into a booth and sat there, my hands flat against the cold table. I had the bizarre experience of seeing everything. No. Not seeing. Feeling. Feeling the yellow age of the table and its dead metal rim. Feeling the plastic lamination of the menus, with an occasional strand of plastic sticking out like a forgotten detail. Feeling the colorized photos of desserts begging for consumption in stand-up displays, desserts like the ice cream sundae with raspberry topping crying down its side. And it all felt empty, flat, dead. Everything reflected back to me my meaningless existence, but what difference could I make?

I needed time. Time to figure this all out.

I never did go back home that evening. I stayed at a motel instead and turned off my cell phone. Getting mugged woke me up inside, and the only way I could figure out how to honor that awakening was to change my life on the outside. I thought surviving those kids would be the biggest moment of my meager existence. I thought it would be the biggest life-changing event I’d ever have.

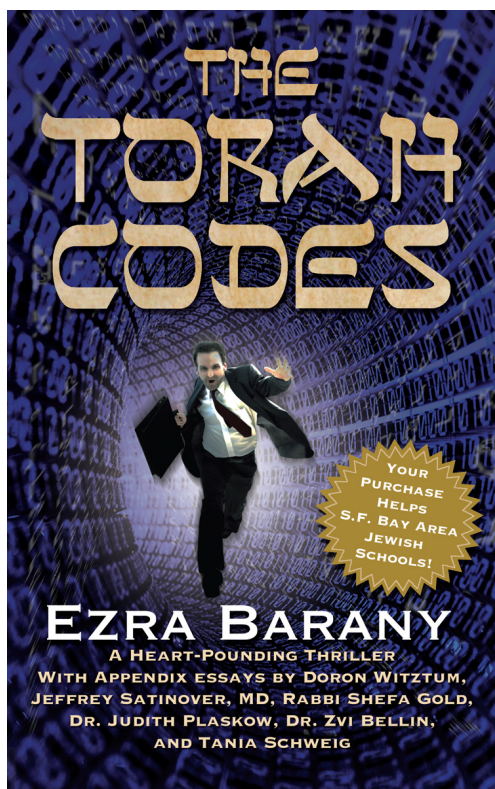
I was wrong.

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