

TIES

The Skeleton in My Closet



Giselle Potter

By Robin Eileen Bernstein

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My husband, Mark, was a pack rat. So clearing out his belongings after he died suddenly at 57 was a challenge even for a rabid organizer like me. To complicate matters, my two kids and I were moving from a four-bedroom house in the suburbs to a two-bedroom apartment in Manhattan. Most of what we owned wasn't coming along.

I spent every spare minute making piles: keep, sell, donate, toss. Tucked under the attic eaves were several milk crates of Mark's old Playboys, Sports Illustrateds and National Geographics, dating back to the 1960s. I sold a few at our moving sale, but the rest sit untouched in a cramped storage unit. I'm guessing the unenviable job of selling them will one day fall to my kids.

I also found a trove of sweet handwritten letters from his college girlfriend, a stack of cringe-worthy seminude photos of another old girlfriend, and his wedding album. Not *our* wedding album. It was from his short-lived first marriage. I was wife No. 2 and would've become ex-wife No. 2; we were living apart when he died but you'd never know it from the sheer amount of stuff he left behind, as if all he took when he moved out were a couple of T-shirts and a pair of socks.

But one discovery eclipsed them all. Digging through a rarely used closet one night, I opened a Nike shoe box and came face-to-face with a real human skull.

My first word was “holy” followed by an expletive. Then a hazy memory floated back: My husband, a dentist, was showing me a research skull, the kind dental students use in anatomy class, with metal hinges attaching the lower jaw to each side and two clasps securing the cranium in place. It was the same one I now held. Stamped on the left was a company name — Clay Adams, Parsippany, N.J. — an importer of medical supplies.

Of all the things I inherited after Mark's death, the skull topped a long list I call “I Never Wanted This.” It included cabinets crammed with ancient financial documents, a garage and shed bursting with all manner of cobweb-covered gadgets, and shelves of sweaters not worn since the Reagan administration.

After we separated, I had imagined that eventually I'd move out and he'd move back in, sparing me this overwhelming job. It was even more fraught because I felt an obligation to my kids, who were just teenagers when he died, to preserve his memory. Would they want his old cameras and slides? His favorite faded blue sweatshirt? If they said no, would they wish they had said yes years from now?

Now I felt uneasy. Was it even legal to have this skull in my home? Didn't it belong in a school or museum?

I was angry at Mark for leaving me with it and I wanted to make the skull disappear. I considered burying it in the backyard, the final resting place of my kids' four gerbils. But I pictured the future homeowners discovering it while gardening one fine spring day. “Honey, what's this?” the husband would say to his wife, and in a flash a cop from “CSI: Crime Scene Investigation” would be grilling me about where I buried the rest of the body.

Once we'd moved into our apartment, I hid it in yet another closet, doing my best Scarlett O'Hara: I'll think about it tomorrow. Tomorrow turned into three years and last summer I finally decided that, unlike those old magazines, I didn't want my kids to have to deal with this someday. Keeping it in a closet felt wrong and I wasn't about to display it in my curio cabinet. This skull needed a new home.

But figuring out how to make that happen was trickier than I thought. My research took me down a rabbit hole. Surprisingly, there's no federal law against owning, buying or selling human skulls (except Native American ones), although there's a patchwork of vague and often unenforced state regulations. In 2016, eBay put the kibosh on human skulls but you can find them on Amazon and Instagram, or even your local flea market. Macabre? Perhaps. But not necessarily illegal.

I also found several reputable companies that trade in human bones. Want a male skull with 25 teeth? How about a Caucasian female with 28 teeth, one broken? Those were two of dozens of skulls — male and female, old and young — I found online, available if you're willing to part with about \$2,000.

Roughly 80 percent come from people like me who inherit one, according to Josh Villemarette of Skulls Unlimited, a family business in Oklahoma City founded in 1986 by his dad.

"Typically someone's parents passed away and they're cleaning out their belongings and they find the skeleton in the closet or the skull in the attic," he said, adding that skulls were required for many dental students. "Your husband may have had to purchase it in school for \$200, which was quite affordable at the time."

The skull I had looked smaller than the adult ones online. I went to a mirror and held it next to my head. They were close in size. I sent photos and measurements to Skulls Unlimited. They estimated it was from a 12-year-old, possibly female, likely from India.

India? Why would a young girl there donate her body to American science? My question was well meaning but naïve. Turns out that in the 1970s when my husband was in dental school, most skulls came from India, from families too poor to bury or cremate their dead, or because grave robbers dug up bones for profit. India banned the export of human bones in the mid-1980s and China later followed. The skull market soon dried up and prices skyrocketed.

I was horrified that this skull might have belonged to a child who suffered such a fate. Questions swirled: Who was her family? How did she die? It was entirely possible she and I were born around the same year. I began to feel an odd mix of maternal tenderness and sisterly kinship for this skull, laced with a hefty dose of "there but for the grace of God go I."

Although I couldn't return it to its original resting place — if it ever had one — maybe it would find peace among other bones that, for whatever reason, had landed far from home.

I sold it to Skulls Unlimited and donated the proceeds to a program at Mark's dental school that provides free dental care to low-income kids. It seemed fitting: A child in India reaches across decades to give a disadvantaged child in New York a reason to smile.

I liked knowing that Mark helped make it happen, not because he was a dentist, but because he was a pack rat. Something good emerged from all his clutter. It also feels pretty good to finally have closets in which, as far as I know, there are no more hidden skeletons.

Robin Eileen Bernstein, a writer in New York, is working on a memoir.