

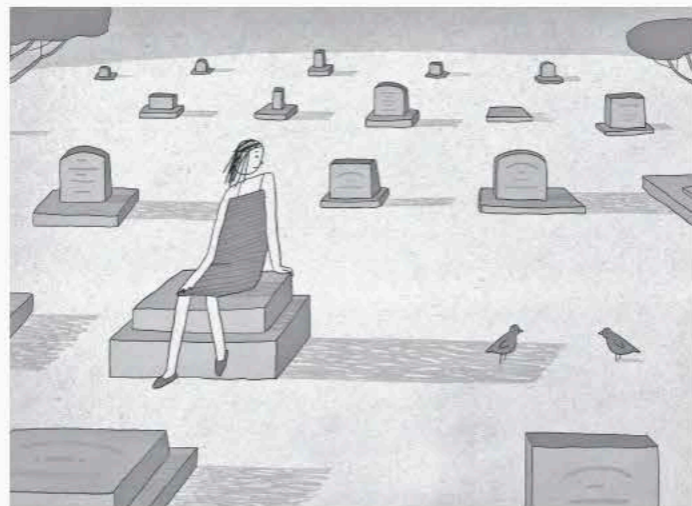
Split in life, but together in death for eternity

When I bought a burial plot for my almost-ex-husband's girlfriend, I never guessed who might end up there

BY ROBIN EILEEN BERNSTEIN Robin Eileen Bernstein, a writer in New York City, is working on a memoir.

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were in the middle of an amicable split, living apart for two years but not yet divorced. The last time I saw him, he asked if he could stop by to see our children, then teenagers. We had a relaxed July afternoon as a family in our backyard, for which I'm grateful. I remember thinking that if it had been like this more often, maybe we would still be together.

Around 4 p.m., I heard him say, "I'm leaving." His words still haunt me.

That evening at his girlfriend's home, where he lived, he had a heart attack and went into cardiac arrest. Paramedics restored his heartbeat but he never

regained consciousness. The prognosis was grim. Five days later, we took him off life support; he was 57.

He and I had never discussed burial arrangements during our nearly 20-year marriage, much less purchased plots. His girlfriend, who had pictured a long, happy future with him, was devastated. I liked her; my whole family did. But as Mark's wife, I was legally in charge. It was my job to buy him a burial plot. Pronto.

"Why don't you buy two?" my sister-in-law said. She was married to Mark's brother and technically was no longer my in-law upon Mark's death, though we

remain close. She meant one plot for Mark and one for his girlfriend. "It would be a lovely gesture."

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Yet my sister-in-law had a point: If the prospect of spending eternity by Mark's side would help her feel included in an awkward situation where she had no legal or familial ties, I figured why not. We were in the intensive care unit by Mark's bedside when I told her. She burst into happy tears.

A few hours before Mark was removed from life support, I drove down Wellwood Avenue, a nearly four-mile stretch lined with so many cemeteries I called it Cemetery Row, to the one where Mark's brother and sister-in-law had plots. I met my brother-in-law there and we were ushered into a sales office, a desk separating us from a salesman.

"I'd like to buy two plots," I said. I told him about my husband's dire medical situation.

"Of course," he said, offering his sympathies. "I assume you'd share a headstone?"

I hesitated. "The other plot isn't

for me. It's for his girlfriend."

His eyebrows shot up. People say eyes are the windows to the soul; I say it's the eyebrows. Leaning forward, he looked to my brother-in-law. Clearly, he was dealing with a crazy wife.

"They were getting divorced," my brother-in-law explained. "Also, my brother's girlfriend isn't Jewish."

"You have to be Jewish to be buried here," the sales rep said. "This is a Jewish cemetery."

"I know," I said. "She told me she's talking to a rabbi about converting."

The sales guy shuffled some papers. If this woman wanted to buy a plot for her not-quite-ex-husband's girlfriend, who might or might not convert, it wasn't his problem.

A shared headstone would have been presumptuous, so I purchased a single monument in Barre gray granite. The inscription said "Caring Husband" near the top and further down, "Beloved Companion," which sounded more dignified than "Beloved Boyfriend."

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More years passed. I heard she had a boyfriend who became her husband. I texted her my best wishes, which she warmly acknowledged. Buying her that plot had been a lovely idea, if an improbable one.

This left me with a plot I didn't want. Why be buried alongside someone I had been divorcing? I called the cemetery to ask about selling it, relieved there was no his-and-her headstone to deal

with.

But I haven't followed up, and I'm not sure what's stopping me. At 64, I'm in excellent health, but a growing awareness of my own mortality makes my procrastination a bit quixotic. And the idea of leaving him there alone gnaws at me.

Our split wasn't ugly, but in marriage we had argued so much that one friend called us "the Bickersons."

For the last eight years I have been in a loving, committed relationship with a wonderful man who has an ex-wife and two children of his own. We rarely bicker. But we're not

married and don't live together, so it's unlikely we would be buried together.

One Saturday over breakfast in his kitchen, I casually mentioned my dilemma and said, "What about you? Do you and your ex have plots together?"

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Also, it's not just whom I'm buried with, but where. I had moved to Long Island for Mark

and spent the next two decades counting the days until I could return to Manhattan, which I did three years after his death, when our youngest child left for college. Now it feels like Mark is dragging me back. This time, forever.

Yet where would I go? My parents, married nearly 59 years, are buried side-by-side in Queens, the borough they raised me in, but there are no neighboring vacancies. There may be room elsewhere in that cemetery, and there are others nearby, but do I want to spend the hereafter alone surrounded by strangers? Never mind that this is precisely how I live now, quite happily — alone in a high-

rise surrounded by strangers. But if you think it's hard to find a decent place in Manhattan to live in, good luck finding one to be dead in.

I asked the two people who presumably would care most about my posthumous whereabouts: my daughter and son, now young adults.

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Modern Love

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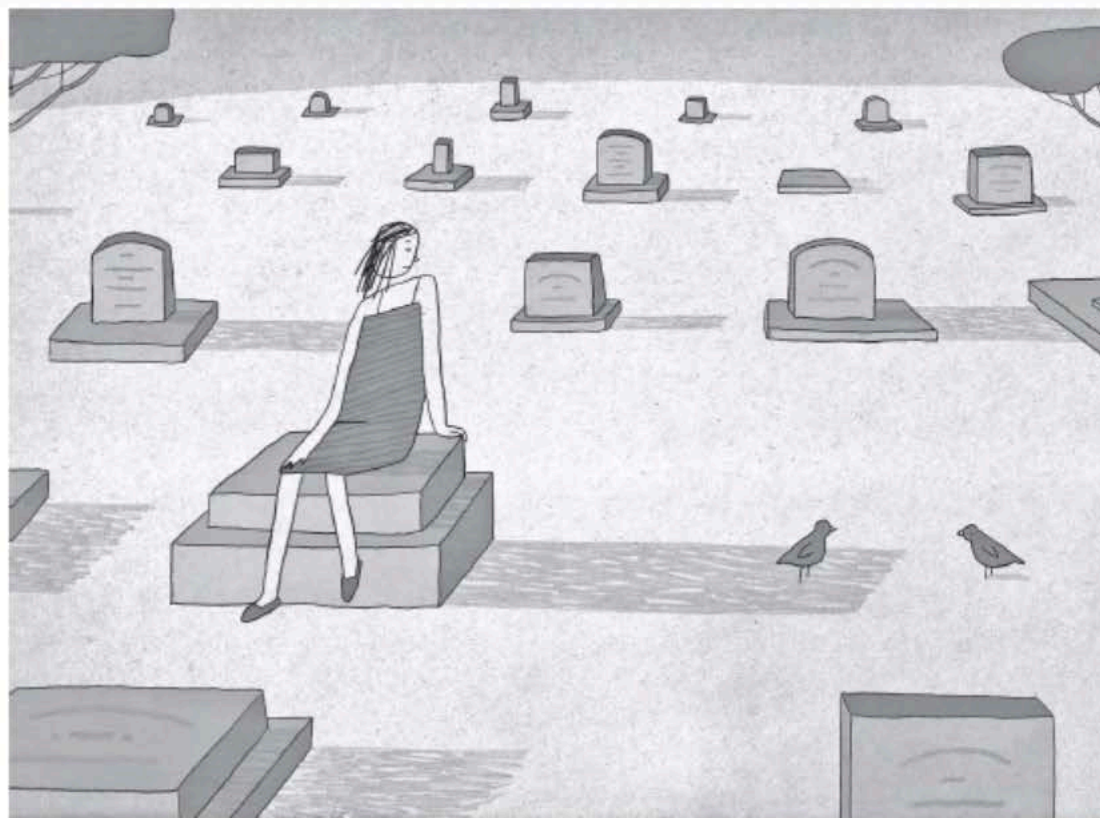
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