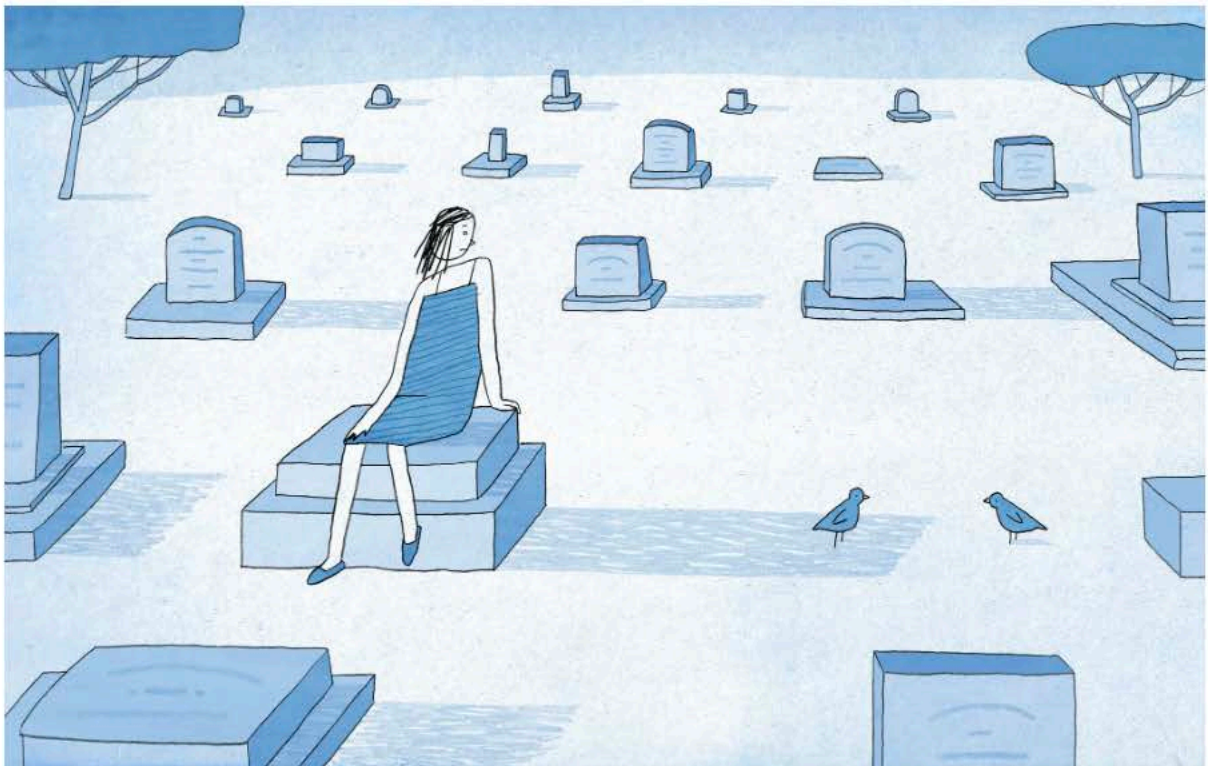


MODERN LOVE

Here Lie the Bickersons, Side-by-Side for All Eternity

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

 Give this article  



Brian Rea

By Robin Eileen Bernstein

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Recently I came across the deed to two cemetery plots I own on Long Island. One is the final resting place of my late husband, Mark. The other, next to it, is vacant but was never meant for me. I bought it for his grieving girlfriend.

Twelve years ago, Mark and I 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 to this day. She meant one plot for Mark and one for his girlfriend. “It would be a lovely gesture.”

I looked at her, bewildered. Mark’s girlfriend was several years younger than him. Surely she would meet someone else in due time.

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.”

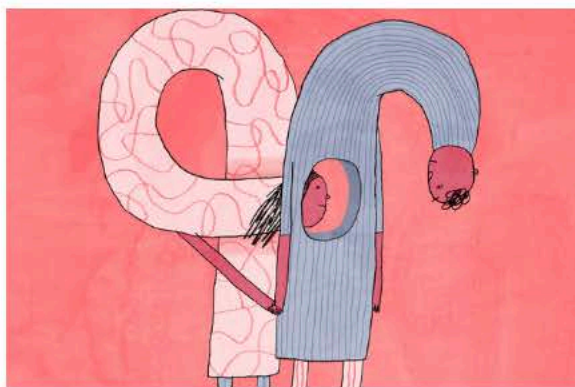
“You have to be Jewish to be buried here,” the sales rep said. “This is a Jewish cemetery.”

“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.

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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.” I pictured curious passers-by trying to read between those two lines.

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After making 36 monthly payments, I received the deed from the cemetery. By then, Mark’s girlfriend and I had mostly lost touch. We had never discussed the burial plot again, and I didn’t know if she had converted. 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 was divorcing? I called the cemetery to ask about

This left me with a plot I didn't want. Why be buried alongside someone I was divorcing? I called the cemetery to ask about selling it, relieved there was no his-and-her headstone to deal with, given that Mark and I instead opted for his-and-her divorce attorneys. 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 gnawed 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 Brooklyn kitchen, I casually mentioned my dilemma and said, "What about you? Do you and your ex have plots together?"

I immediately wondered if maybe this wasn't an appropriate conversation to have first thing in the morning. Or ever.

They didn't, he said, and anyway he would want to be cremated.

Also, it's not just whom I'm buried with, but where. I 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.

"Up to you," my son said.

My daughter was more pragmatic. "It would be a lot easier for us to visit if you were next to Dad."

But would they visit? We don't visit now.

I asked her about keeping my ashes in an urn. No need for separate cemeteries. "You could share me," I said. "Half for you, half for your brother."

Her response was a blunt: “No thanks.”

“What about having me composted? I could be dead and environmental at the same time.”

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“Cool idea,” she said. “But I’d like you in one piece.”

I traced my thumb across the deed’s raised seal. What was I holding on to? Why weren’t two years of settlement negotiations enough to sever our frayed marital bond and why, if our marriage was so rocky, was our split so drama-free?

I had pushed for a friendly, collaborative divorce, but nothing much happened. For two years, we led separate lives without rocking the boat. We finally relaxed around each other, free of the anger fueled by long-unmet spousal expectations. It was like being half-asleep, under the blankets, before waking to the blinding reality that you’re on your own.

Cemeteries aren't just for the dead; they're for surviving family, whether they visit or not. If I prioritize my role as a mother, which I do, it's clear who should occupy that burial plot. What's less clear is why I felt more connected to Mark after he died than I did during our life together.

Death has a way of softening things, as if my marriage was an old, damaged photo and, without realizing it, I kept cropping out the ugly stuff and retouching the blemishes. I had to bury my identity as his ex so I could be his widow. Perhaps buying a plot for his girlfriend was just a way of pretending it wasn't really for me.

I tried to envision my single headstone next to his, with a mirror-image inscription — “Caring Wife. Beloved Companion” — adding yet more fuel for those curious passers-by.

“Were these two married?” they would wonder. “To each other?”

Splitting up is hard. Sometimes it never ends. I picture Mark and me buried side-by-side, bickering for all eternity. Maybe I could add one more line at the bottom of my headstone, an extra clue: “I Wasn't Supposed to End Up Here.”

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