

Daughtered Out*

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When I first saw it, I thought it was a broom. Now that's silly, I thought, who would have a broom carved on their grave marker? Was the deceased a janitor? Or maybe it was a housewife, gone to her final resting place with the one reminder of her existence, a useful tool to keep her busy in that dusty grave.

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A picnic lunch of sandwiches, tuna for me and peanut butter and jelly for my four-year-old. Some potato chips and chocolate chip cookies, a juice box and a can of diet soda. As the years passed, our excursions evolved and would become an anticipated time for both of us. “Don’t forget,” I’d tell a teenage Laurie. “Next Monday is Mother-Daughter Day.” She’d moan, and ask, “Are we having our teeth cleaned again?” But before those treasured days of generational dental hygiene, when she was still excited to spend time with her mommy, we sometimes picnicked in the cemetery.

After I had opened the doors of my genealogical research business, one of my first clients asked me to photograph his ancestors’ headstones at Evergreen Cemetery in Colorado Springs. This would be the ideal mother-daughter outing, I thought. I could begin grooming Laurie, my only child, to become my successor, my mini-genealogist-in-training. Certainly, she had inherited my cemetery gene and, by starting her young, she’d become as enamored with the dead as I was. Of course she’d want to follow in her mother’s footsteps and eventually become heir to the family business. I could already see the sign on the side of the company van:

SHARON AND DAUGHTER
HEADSTONE HUNTERS



Collecting Dead Relatives Since 1986



Not so long ago, family members spent a day each spring weeding and planting flowers around their loved ones’ final resting places. They reminisced about the dead, telling stories and keeping memories of the dearly departed alive. Gone but not forgotten. Picnicking in cemeteries is a cen-

turies-old American tradition, although some folks today find it unusual. People don't like hanging out with the dead the way they used to.



I drove us through Evergreen Cemetery, searching for the oldest section where there'd be a cool spot under a mature cottonwood tree. Here, among those who had passed before us, Laurie and I ate our lunch and eavesdropped on the dead. Well, I ate and eavesdropped. Laurie took a bite of her sandwich or a sip from the plastic straw in the juice box, then off she went to examine the markers, sometimes climbing and perching on them like a magpie, the cemetery her playground.

While I enjoyed the quiet of this silent city, the breeze sweeping my face on that summer day, and the fresh, light scent of evergreens, Laurie ran back to me, out of breath. "Look Mommy!" she pointed. "They're having a picnic, too!"

I stood up to see what she pointed at and spotted people dressed mostly in black, about a dozen of whom sat in folding chairs, the rest standing under a large dark green awning. The guest of honor rested in a gray-shaded casket with polished silver handle bars and corner trim, a spray of lilies on the lid.

"Actually, they're having a funeral. Come on," I said and took her hand, "let's be quiet and go back to our bench."

I explained that these people were here to say goodbye to someone close to them who had died.

"You mean like Pockets?" Laurie asked. That had been her pet hamster.

"Yes, just like Pockets."

Satisfied, she was off to climb even greater tombstones.



I had not thought of cemeteries as outdoor art exhibits until I attended a lecture by an art historian who had studied Victorian funerary art and iconography. As a genealogist, I'd spent more time in graveyards than some of the dead, but I had focused on birth and death dates, not on what the artwork might reveal about a person's life and death. The living selected these gravestone images not for decoration, but because the symbols had meaning to them or their loved ones. Common to every nineteenth-century cemetery are white marble and granite headstones carved with willows, urns, mourning angels, hands clasped in marriage, and forefingers pointing to heaven. I'd even seen one marker with an index finger pointing down—not a good sign.



After our lunch, I looked at the map I'd picked up at the cemetery office to locate the section where my client's ancestors were buried. Then Laurie and I were off on our headstone hunt, like kids searching for Easter eggs, up hills and down vales. Laurie trailed behind me, reciting in sing-song some nursery rhyme or another, probably "Jack and Jill." I was a few rows ahead of her, reading names on the stones, when the chanting stopped.

"Mommy! Help!"

Laurie was on the ground, cradled within a partially sunken grave.

"What are you doing in there?"

Before it became common practice to place coffins inside concrete burial vaults and to use a backhoe to pack the dirt, old graves settled and sank over time, causing uneven ground. Unless you watched your footing, it was easy to twist an ankle or take a tumble. I knew this but hadn't thought to forewarn Laurie. Fortunately, she was still in one piece, and her therapist later predicted that the odds of her leading a normal life were reasonably good.



Before public parks, bike trails, and running paths, Victorian-era cemeteries were designed with nature-preserve features in mind, enhanced with winding avenues, foliage, and benches. People took Sunday strolls, read books, and contemplated life; some even made love in cemeteries.



I found the markers I needed to photograph, with a couple nearby enjoying their own “picnic” in one of the two cars parked to the side of the path. For a city of the dead, this was a lively place. The couple paused from their afternoon nibbles and nervously took note of me and the 35mm camera hanging around my neck. I pointed the lens at the stone and drew Laurie’s attention to the marker. I wasn’t ready to give my four-year-old a lesson on procreation on our first mother-daughter outing. I tried not to notice as the couple re-assembled themselves, or when the man, his head down, got out of the passenger side, then into the driver’s side of his own car. The two departing cars kicked up gravel as if something had risen from the grave and chased after them.

“Were they done with their picnic, Mommy?”

“More or less,” I said.



It’s interesting the stories in stone you find when you stop to cast an eye. One granite marker was carved like a child’s bed, the blankets turned down in waiting. Another small marble marker showed a lamb at rest. I spotted a stone with a sculpture on its top: an empty pair of children’s shoes, one turned on its side. Another marble marker was crowned with a three-dimensional figure of a naked infant, reposed on its side in eternal sleep. All little lambs who left behind clothing, furniture, and their mothers’ broken hearts.



I had never wanted children. Never liked them or had any particular use for them. I was of the W.C. Fields ilk: “Children should neither be seen nor heard from—ever again.” In the same way that some people have an inexplicable aversion to cats, I had an inexplicable aversion to babies and children under the age of about fourteen. Yet ankle-biters seem drawn to me, the way cat haters involuntarily attract feline attention. On more than one occasion, some loose little imp has approached me, chanting its banshee-pitched “Hi!” Because I am female like its beloved mommy, I must be a friendly face. When I don’t return the smile, I watch its baby-toothed grin grow wary, yet the pest still lingers in front of me. “Didn’t your mother ever teach you not to talk to strangers?” I ask, which sends the rug rat scurrying along, whimpering for its mommy. It’s a lesson that needed reinforcement anyway.

When my boyfriend proposed, I told him if he wanted children, not to marry me. But he married me anyway, and one night in December, four years later, we decided to get kinky and leave out the diaphragm. We lived on an Air Force base at the time; all the neighborhood couples were about our age—and having babies. Everyone joked that the military must be putting something in the base water. My husband and I, in what can be labeled as a moment of temporary insanity, found ourselves infected with baby fever. One night sans the diaphragm was all it took—I woke up knowing I was pregnant.



During my field trips to cemeteries near and far, I’d seen variations on the common headstone symbols, plus doves, flowers, crosses, and mourning women. Unlike our colonial forebears’ markers, which drove home messages of mortality and fleeting time with graven images of skulls and crossbones, winged death heads, and hourglasses, Victorians’ tombstone art conveyed feelings of grief, sadness, and loss, as well as hope for the resurrection. Families considered deceased loved ones as being in an eternal sleep, so some headstone motifs imparted the comforts of home: tasseled

drapery, beds, and pillows. But a broom? This one stymied me. It was the most unusual symbol I'd come across.



“What are you hoping for?” people would ask me. I didn't know that the polite, politically correct response was, “Oh, it doesn't matter. As long as it's healthy.” Who in her right mind hopes for an unhealthy baby? And if it's not healthy, what then? You throw it back? If I had to have a baby, and apparently that was my fate now, I wanted a girl. If a boy broke through the amniotic sac, he'd have to find other parents.

Perhaps the only time in my life that I was really religious was when I was pregnant. I prayed every night for a girl. At least I knew what to do with a girl. That I'd had training for. They were like dolls. You put them in cute little dresses, tied frilly bonnets on their heads, and stuck them in a stroller. (I knew enough by then that you weren't supposed to behead a real baby girl like I had done with my dolls in emulation of Wednesday Addams.) But I had no clue what to do with a baby boy—or its thing.

The first time I'd seen a penis was when I was about seven and over at my girlfriend's house. Her mother was bathing her baby brother in the kitchen sink, and that's when I saw it. I certainly didn't have a skin tag like that between my legs. Maybe I had been born with one, too; but, I reasoned, at some point, it must wither and fall off.

With no siblings myself, the only experience I'd had with caring for a little boy was when I babysat one. I was sitting in the living room, minding my own business, buried deep in a novel, when a neighbor came to the door to return the three-year-old I'd been hired to watch. She'd found him running gleefully in her front yard buck naked.

When they had handed out maternal attraction for babies and children, I had cut that class and gone to the mall. All babies gave me the wil-lies—still do. I wasn't fit to be a mother, let alone the mother of a boy. Surely God, who was all knowing and all powerful, understood this.

During my sonogram, the technician asked if I wanted to know the sex of the baby. No, I didn't. If it was a boy, there was no reason to trigger post-partum depression any sooner than necessary.



Men, it seems, suffer from Henry VIII syndrome. I suppose their preference for boys is genetically wired and stems from ancient customs when a male heir was coveted. Men needed someone to carry on their surname, to pass on the torch of their bloodline. Although my husband probably secretly hoped for a boy, he said he was fine with a girl, too. As long as it was healthy.

My need for female progeny was likewise pragmatic and genetically ingrained. Girls, more than boys, provide continuity from one generation to the next. They talk about their mothers. Boy, can they talk about their mothers. I wanted a daughter who would talk about me, who would ensure my feminine bloodline and immortality by passing along not just my DNA but stories about me to her grandchildren, my great-grandchildren. Someone who would carry on family traditions and be Keeper of the Family Artifacts, like my grandmother's sturdy wooden rolling pin. No matter how hot and sudsy the water I used to wash it, a sticky residue from nearly a century of shaping Crisco-laden pie crusts lingered. I also wanted someone I could mould to be just like me, to keep my existence alive. Maybe I wanted a clone.



I examined the marker more closely. The sculptured granite would have made Michelangelo envious. It loomed about three feet above my five-foot-five frame. Half of the stone was deliberately left to look unfinished, symbolizing an unfinished life. At the top center, carved in high relief, was a double-headed eagle, which I later discovered represented the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry. A smooth granite scroll, complete with sculptured rolled ends, rested diagonally across the mid-section of the

monument with a verse from 1 Corinthians 15:55 of the King James Bible: “O death, where is thy sting; O grave, where is thy victory.” And there behind this banner, extending diagonally in the opposite direction from the scroll, was the broom.



“It’s a girl,” the doctor announced.

In my pain-induced stupor (I’d regrettably had “natural” childbirth), I thought he was kidding. He knew how badly I wanted a girl, so he was telling me this so I wouldn’t become hysterical.

“Look around,” I said. “It probably fell off.”



“Not another cemetery,” Laurie moaned, as my husband pulled the car off the highway and onto a rural road. We were on the way home to Colorado after visiting my husband’s grandparents in Missouri. I’d been preparing a slide presentation for a genealogical conference on family history clues offered in tombstone art. Whenever I spotted a cemetery road sign, we pulled off so I could take photographs of headstones to expand my collection. My husband, who didn’t share my passion for genealogy, did like cemeteries, so he indulged the stops. But eight-year-old Laurie was cemetiered out by now and, much to my disappointment, was developing an aversion to them. It wasn’t only because of that time four years earlier when she had fallen into the sunken grave, but a more recent, unfortunate, mother-daughter cemetery experience.

While we were in rural Missouri, we had tracked down an old family graveyard. Granny had forewarned us that it was likely overgrown with weeds, so my husband had borrowed from his grandfather a gas-powered weed whacker. With plastic goggles secured, he blazed a path for us. Then Laurie and I ventured out of the car to look at headstones. She was concerned about snakes, as she probably should have been, so I told her that

snakes have a mortal fear of the sound of hands clapping. As she walked throughout the cemetery, she clapped her hands. I had to admit, it was pretty darn entertaining to watch. It reminded me of the time my husband and I had bought a plastic garden squirrel and attached it to the side of the house. It was Easter, and while Laurie was out in the yard hunting for eggs, we brought the squirrel to her attention. We told her it must have frozen there over the winter. After staring at it for the longest time, Laurie began throwing her plastic Easter eggs at it to try to get it to move. She realized her parents were sniggering, and her dad had the video camera trained on her. This footage would surely win us thousands of dollars on *America's Funniest Home Videos*.

It was probably just as well that we hadn't brought the video camera to the cemetery that day to memorialize the hand-clapping snake alert, as the unfortunate incident was yet to come.



I ran my hand over the broom's bottom. The grittiness of the granite indentations felt like an emery board against my fingertips. It wasn't a push broom or a kitchen sweeper, but one with a ball of bristles.



When we returned to the grandparents' house, Laurie started scratching her arm. I'm no botanist, but I didn't think there was any poison ivy in the cemetery. When I examined her forearm, there was a spot the size of a blackhead pimple. She had a tick. My husband suggested burning it off with a cigarette lighter, which caused Laurie to cry and jump around the house like someone dancing the Tarantella. There's never a tambourine around when you need one. In hindsight, a tambourine would have worked better than applauding for snakes. But Granny intervened. In her Ozarks twang, she said to "pour some o'l on it." She took a bottle of Mazola corn oil from her cupboard and had Laurie hold her arm over the sink while she poured. She told Laurie to wait there while she went to the

bathroom to get a pair of tweezers. In the time it took Granny to do that, the tick had pulled its little head out of Laurie's skin and was gasping for air. Granny pulled it off with her tweezers.

Now we had to do a bug check. Granny told us city slickers that ticks like to burrow in skin creases and get under the elastic of underwear. I brought Laurie into the bedroom and had her strip down. Conducting body searches was not the mother-daughter experience we were used to. Laurie escaped with just that one tick, but that was enough. As we cemetery hopped our way home, she stayed in the car. It was becoming clear to me that she wasn't destined to be one with the dead.



I realized it wasn't a broom. It was a torch, an inverted torch.



As much as we are alike physically—same facial features, same hair, same hips—we are also different. I'm a saver, Laurie isn't.

"Do you want me to send you the wooden rolling pin?" I asked when Laurie was setting up house with her new husband.

"No. I don't want that old one."

"It was your great-grandmother's. Do you know how many pies that rolling pin has made?"

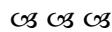
"I'll just give it to Goodwill."

I gasped like a tick doused in corn oil. My heart nearly stopped. Maybe she was joking, getting me back for the plastic squirrel or the snake-clapping episode. I couldn't be sure. But I wasn't going to risk it by giving her the rolling pin, our matrilineal birthright, the icon of our foremothers that for three generations had been held high and proud and burns bright like Lady Liberty's flame lighting the harbor for the next cohort of women. I took up religion again and prayed for a second chance, for a granddaughter. Just as I instinctively knew I was pregnant the morning after,

there was no doubt in my mind. Laurie had abdicated the genealogical throne.



When a torch is held upside down, the flame extinguishes.



Neither of my now ex-husband's two siblings had sons. Each also had an only daughter. My former father-in-law has only one sibling, a sister. There are no males left in this branch to carry on my ex-husband's surname. The Y chromosome of this bloodline will be extinct when my ex-husband and his father die. (My husband's brother died recently.) The paternal line, as we genealogists say, has daughtered out.



The flame extinguished, the family line ends.



Laurie and her husband are trying to spawn grandheirs for me. They want two children, not necessarily at the same time, though. I think they want two to increase their odds of having at least one girl. You see, my greatest fear, which I've made abundantly clear, is Laurie won't have any daughters to carry on the feminine flame. If this happens, I'll lose my chance at immortality. All hope of raising another female generation to be like me will be gone.

Out of seven billion people on earth, Laurie is just one of two female Homo sapiens walking around today who can pass on our branch's mtDNA—the mitochondrial link that has connected our matrilineage umbilically for centuries, from our ancient grandmothers to now. (Of course, Laurie's second cousin, Schelley, might one day have a daughter, but I

want this honor to be Laurie's and Laurie's alone.) Only women can transmit the mtDNA that gives ever-lasting life to a female lineage. Although males inherit mtDNA from their mothers, they lack what it takes to pass it on to the next generation. I can imagine what a weighty responsibility this must be for Laurie, not to let this genetic torch extinguish. The pressure she must feel now to conceive and bear a girl or risk disappointing not only her mother, but generations of her foremothers, is surely unnerving.

If only she had taken the rolling pin. Upside down or right side up, at least that torch would have been lighter to bear.

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