

Skeletons In The Closet

Cheryl Laurent

Oh, dear. I owe my mother-in-law, Mumsy, an apology. She keeps a box of hair in her attic. Not sentimental snips from a baby's first trim, not a lock from an old beau lost in the war, no. We're talking handfuls, ropes, of hair. When each of her five Rapunzel-like daughters decided to go with a shorter style, Mumsy cut off their braids herself before trotting each girl to the beautician for a new 'do. The braids went into a white cardboard gift box, and the box into storage. To the best of my knowledge, Mumsy never opens the box to pet the hair and retell the story of each shearing day. The box is just there. I thought this was weird and said so to her darling son.

Uh-oh. We've been married too long. He knows all my history.

"Tell me again about Mark," he said.

My Arkansan paternal relations were a pretty dour bunch. At a loss for how to entertain his visiting granddaughters, my grandfather once took us to see Mark. Years earlier, a man had been found dead by the side of the road. He had no identification, but his clothes and jewelry made the locals think he must be fairly well off, and that his family would surely come looking for him. The funeral home dubbed him "Mark," embalmed the poor fellow to a fare-thee-well, put a new suit on him, and propped him up in a plywood cabinet with a bare bulb light on a pull switch. I'm not sure what this was meant to illustrate. The mortician's preservative skills? The importance of wearing a name tag? How much better off we were being raised hundreds of miles from the kind of folks who thought this was fine amusement for children?

"On our trip to D.C., you took me to a museum your mother liked," prompted my Beloved.

My mother wanted to be a doctor. Her time and circumstances didn't allow that, but she never gave up her fascination with all things medical. That's how my family ended up going to Walter Reed Army Medical Museum. (It's now the National Museum of Health and Medicine.) Mom led us through the pathology displays, pointing out various diseased organs and naming people we had known with similar conditions. I saw the skeleton of a monkey, Able, that had been in space. I saw bits of Abraham Lincoln's skull. I guess Mom figured the school would take us to the zoo and the art museum, and she'd do the rest.

I emerged from this upbringing relatively unscathed. I have my baby book, with a single fine curl taped inside. I have a puppy tooth shed by a much-loved pet. My husband has made me promise not to keep his ashes around the house should he be the first to go.

My sister, on the other hand, was scarred. There's no other explanation.

I got to wondering recently about my Mississippian maternal grandmother. Grandma had lost her own teeth early in life but she had a set of uncomfortable dentures to wear for special occasions. I got to wondering if one's own funeral counted as a "special occasion." My sister knows all the family gossip. I called her.

"Was Grandma wearing her teeth in the casket?"



"Oh, heavens, no," said my sister, "I have them."

"You what?"

"They're in a box in the closet. Scares the crap out of Larry when he goes lookin' for stuff."

I guess what I'm saying here is you might want to be careful opening things up during spring cleaning. (And I'm sorry, Mumsy!)