

# He's going back to his former wife — sort of

On his deathbed, a husband shares some surprising burial instructions

## Modern Love

BY JUDITH NEWMAN

"There's something I have to tell you," John said.

Do you remember ever wanting to hear the sentence after that one? I don't. "There's something I have to tell you" has never, in the history of man, been followed by "We won the lottery" or "I have discovered a cure for blindness." This is especially true when the person uttering that sentence is your husband, and he is about to die.

I'm not a big believer in deathbed confessions. I intend to keep it all to myself, unless my own "There's something I have to tell you" is "You were always my favorite," to whoever walks in the room.

Everybody should be at my deathbed. You won't regret it.

John and I were lying in the cramped hospital bed that I had installed in my bedroom because I had decided to go full pioneer woman and tend to him myself. I'm still not sure why. Normally I am the queen of outsourcing. Also, I am a terrible nurse.

But my decision to care for him at home was made in an instant. He wanted to be here. Our 16-year-old twin boys desperately wanted him here. And so did I, despite the fact that this was the first time we had lived together in 25 years of marriage. We had always kept separate homes.

A week earlier, we had learned that John had three separate forms of cancer: pancreatic, liver and prostate. A "cancer overachiever," as I told him. I can't remember the Yiddish phrase his doctor used to describe the usefulness of chemo or radiation, but it roughly translated to "pissing in the wind." Solid, barrel-chested, bearded and floppy-haired, John had always looked like a Bugs Bunny cartoon version of the opera singer he was. I adored his looks. Now he was a skeleton.

John spoke with difficulty as he held my hand. "So, there's something I have to tell you," he said. "I made a certain promise to Amy."

Amy was his former wife. She had died of breast cancer about 30 years ago, before John and I met.

"I promised her," he said, "that we would be buried together."

Oh. It turns out that when John said he had kept Amy close, he hadn't been



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speaking metaphorically; she was in his closet at his studio apartment. Could I fetch her? Also, could I find her passport and death certificate? I would need them to carry out his plan.

There was a field in Northern England where John had played as a child. He wanted to be buried there. With Amy. But not scattered. The field still existed, but the area was no longer so rural, and John didn't want to end up blanketing a local parking lot.

So I was to take his box of ashes and Amy's, get a shovel and probably a flashlight, because this was illegal so we'd need to do it at night, the funereal equivalent of a dine-and-dash. Joining me would be John's 90-year-old sister and his nephew, along with our sons, Henry and Gus, who were currently far more focused on the adventure of the illicit burial than on what it all meant.

"I'd always been sure you'd go first," John added, sadly.

The fact that I am 30 years younger had in no way deterred him from this thought. John seemed the grumpiest of men, but in key ways he was an optimist.

"And of course I would have followed your instructions for your own burial," he said. "I would have cremated you and placed you in the mausoleum with your parents. I know you wanted nothing more."

This didn't seem the time to point out that for at least 10 years I had been telling him that I loathed the mausoleum, that I had arranged for my body to be donated to a medical school and that I had put aside money for a big party afterward.

**There was a field in Northern England where John had played as a child. He wanted to be buried there. With Amy. But not scattered.**

John never listened. That, combined with his almost comical frugality (I already had been warned I would need to find the cheapest cremation place in New York) had often threatened to sink our marriage. But I guess I could save that conversation to have with myself, late at night. Plenty of time for that. Not much time for anything else.

We talked and talked. "I was a good husband, wasn't I?" he said. "At least I didn't chase after girls." (No, I thought a little churlishly. Because then you would have had to pay for them.) "You were wonderful," I said. Both thoughts were true.

He wanted to make sure I understood his plan. But about 30 minutes into this conversation, he suddenly looked sheepish, as if it had just occurred to him that his wife of 25 years might not actually be on board to carry out this promise he had made to his former wife more than three decades earlier.

"You don't have to do this right away," he said. "In fact, you could wait until you go, and then have the boys take all three of us. That would be fine, too."

"Um," I said. Amy was Midwestern, blond, aristocratic and gracious, an accomplished equestrian and mezzo-soprano 17 years older than John. Before she got sick, they had worked their way across Europe, singing at all the big opera houses. She was everything I am not.

John and I used to joke that the only thing he and I had in common was a mutual antipathy for fish. Amy and John shared everything. He loved us both, and he made a family with me.

But I never kid myself.

I explained the situation to my friend Hilary over lunch, including the part where I could hold off on the burial until my own demise. "I really don't want to be their ashy third wheel," I grouched.

"Here's what you do," Hilary said. "You put Amy in some sort of suspicious container — something metal that the T.S.A. people can't see through in the screening. Amy looks like a bomb. Oops! The T.S.A. will just have to keep her. Oh, well! You tried."

I could have explained instead of laughing, I suppose. But it's hard, without sounding saccharine. One of the things I loved about my husband was that he kept his promises — even stupid ones that made no difference to anyone but himself. You wanted a light bulb changed? It was going to be changed, exactly at the time he said, and it would be with the 60-watt bulb, not the 100, because... who the hell knows, he had his reasons.

This punctiliousness and attention to detail meant he didn't make promises freely, and he said "No" to life far more often than he said "Yes." But also, this reliability was at the center of his John-ness. He lived small. But he loved deep.

John couldn't quite remember where Amy's papers were, but he knew they were in his apartment, and I did, too, since he threw out nothing. During the search, I found other things I wanted to ask him about. Why did my peace-loving husband have a police summons for disorderly conduct in 2002 that he never mentioned to me? Why were there photos of him happily rowing a

woman I had never heard about in a pond in Central Park, and why was she dressed as a mime?

By the time I decided to ask, he could no longer speak. He had the most beautiful voice, a basso profundo, and I am glad our last conversations did not involve the police or mysterious mimes.

I found the papers in about 30 seconds. He didn't even need to tell me where he put them. I knew my husband.

John died three days later, on his 86th birthday, which, since he was a fan of order and symmetry, seemed purposeful. My son Henry's response, when I broke the news: "Well, the good news is, now you get to be the favorite parent."

In August, Henry, Gus and I will be headed to England. The cremation was super-cheap, and the container is plastic. I have gotten four Newcastle United stickers so that Henry can decorate it with his favorite team. Amy and her papers are with us, too. I will let my sons carry John, and I will carry Amy. I want her to get there safely.

She has been waiting to join John for a long time, though I doubt he ever said to her, "Hey, do you want to be secretly buried in an English field in the middle of nowhere?"

In my life, I have been so lucky. Though I do wonder: Is this my love story? Is it theirs?

Maybe it's ours.

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# Do I have an obligation to a sociopathic sibling?

## The Ethicist

BY KWAME ANTHONY APPIAH

*My sibling, who is my only living relative, is currently incarcerated. The crimes committed were quite serious, involving major breaches of trust but not violence.*

*After having been imprisoned for about a decade, my sibling may be released soon.*

*Because of a substantial difference in our ages, we did not grow up together. As adults, we lived in different cities. Once our parents were gone, we were not part of each other's lives. At the time of the arrest I hadn't seen my sibling in years and learned of what happened from television news accounts.*

*If released, my sibling will be destitute, divorced, childless and most likely without friends. By contrast, I have had a successful career and fulfilling personal relationships. While hugely embarrassing, my sibling's conduct did not affect my own reputation. I am now retired with savings that are sufficient for my needs, but my retirement planning never anticipated support for an unexpected dependent. Any estate remaining upon my death has been pledged to scholarship funds at my undergraduate and graduate school alma maters.*

*I have no positive feelings toward my sibling and I have no interest in begin-*

*ning a relationship now. Experts whom I have consulted have described my sibling as sociopathic. Am I ethically obligated to provide for my sibling upon release? Should the answer depend upon whether assistance is requested? Name Withheld*

**THERE ARE TWO** rather different views about the source of our obligations to our siblings. One is that they derive from the relationships we have with them. The other is that they derive from the mere fact of kinship. (Here, there is a further divide between those who think that it is the biological relationship that matters and those who think that adoptive kin have the same standing as biological kin.) In the standard case of a biological sibling, these views coincide: You have a relationship, typically one of some intimacy, and you have a kin connection, which inscribes you within a family.

In your case, as you describe it, your relationship with your sibling would provide a very thin foundation for obligations. On the first view, then, there'd be little basis for your sibling's calling on you for help. But a sibling is a sibling, relationship or no. So, on the second view, your sibling would have a basis for asking for assistance. Which view is more credible?

The relationship view doesn't fit with some of our intuitions about these things. For one thing, we typically think that close relatives can call on us even if we have terrible relationships with them, so it looks as if the quality of the relationship doesn't matter.



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That's odd. But the other view, where the brute fact of kinship is what matters, has some odd features, too. It appears to saddle us with special obligations to people with whom we have no more social connection than we have with most strangers.

Still, you don't really need to pick your theory here. I'm guessing you wrote to me because you think that your sibling has a prima facie claim on you. I take it that if your sibling had lived an exemplary life, still far away and with little social connection to you, and now needed help because, through no fault of his or her own, your sibling had lost a means of support, you would feel inclined to do something. So, I infer, what matters most in your thinking here is, first, that your sibling is someone whose past behavior you

deplore and, second, that you suspect your sibling of being a sociopath who cannot be trusted.

An argument could be made, in the abstract, that sociopathy is a disability for which someone should be pitied, that sociopathic behavior is a symptom that should be explained rather than a vice someone can be held responsible for. But that's not how our thinking about moral responsibility works. We resent the bad conduct of sociopathic people and blame them for it. That's your attitude toward your sibling. At the same time, you recognize that your sibling is a human being, with needs.

In a society with a serious commitment to reintegrating released offenders, as in much of Western Europe, you could leave it to government institutions to see that your sibling got a chance to spend the rest of his or her life with basic needs met. Your sibling's prospects are probably worse in the United States. Still, there are organizations that aim to help ex-prisoners with life on the outside, and your sibling has as good a shot as most at being able to take advantage of them.

Everyone has reason to hope that those who have, as we say, paid their debt to society will be reintegrated. The fact that this person is your sibling gives you a special, personal reason to hope he or she will be able to work his or her way back into society. But you are not obliged to put your own resources into that effort, and you could reasonably leave your sibling to fend for him- or herself. You haven't had and don't want a relationship. After all these years, maintaining this remove is your right.

But what if your sibling asked for help? That you recognize there is some prima facie claim on you means you would owe it to him or her to meet and discuss the situation. It would then be

your sibling's job to persuade you that more is deserved. And if it were your educated belief that your sibling remained unreformed, you'd have reason to make it plain that, family ties aside, your sibling has lost the right to your assistance.

*I am a professional who has experienced severe job dissatisfaction over the last few years, trying out a few positions only to find myself disappointed. This year, I finally found a job that is a good fit. However, I have recently become suspicious that the boss is billing for services not provided. Can I ethically stay at this job? The suspicion alone has put a damper on my enthusiasm, and I am keeping an eye open for other opportunities, but should I speed up my departure? If I find proof of fraud, does that mean I absolutely cannot stay? Name Withheld*

**PULLING OUT OF** your job because your boss is corrupt does little more than keep your own reputation free of taint by association. The real problem isn't that you may be indirectly associated with wrongdoing; the real problem is that wrongdoing may be going on. If you ever have sufficient evidence to establish this, you could send it to the relevant authorities and try to prompt an investigation, or you could alert the victims. When all you have are suspicions, though, abandoning a job you like in a world where those are hard to come by imposes costs on you without improving the overall situation. The best reason for your decision to keep your eyes open for other opportunities is that you might be happier elsewhere.

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