

The rise of Christianity put the brakes on the practice. Around A.D., around the time that Emperor Constantine made Christianity the Empire’s official religion, Rome outlawed cremation. The theological reason for the ban was related to the idea of the body whole or in one place. Through the Reformation, Christianity prohibited cremation, though it was used for public burials. Jewish law also banned the practice. By the 5th century, cremation disappeared from Europe.



percent. This is how cremation actually works, and the story of what happens to a culture when its attitudes about memorializing the dead undergo a revolution.

By [Caren Chesler](#) Mar 1, 2018

9.3k



Rosehill Cemetery in Linden, New Jersey, is awash in small-town trappings: tree-lined roads, rolling lawns, and street signs at every corner. On this Wednesday midsummer morning, the familiar routine of loss plays out across the acres. A yellow taxi waits at the end of a row of graves for someone paying their respects. Men and women clad in church clothes line up their cars along the curb and make their way to a grave site.



This is the textbook way we treat our dead. Someone passes, they're buried, a headstone marks their place out among the rows in the borough of the departed. But today I'm bound for a different part of the cemetery, one fewer people see—though that fact is rapidly changing.

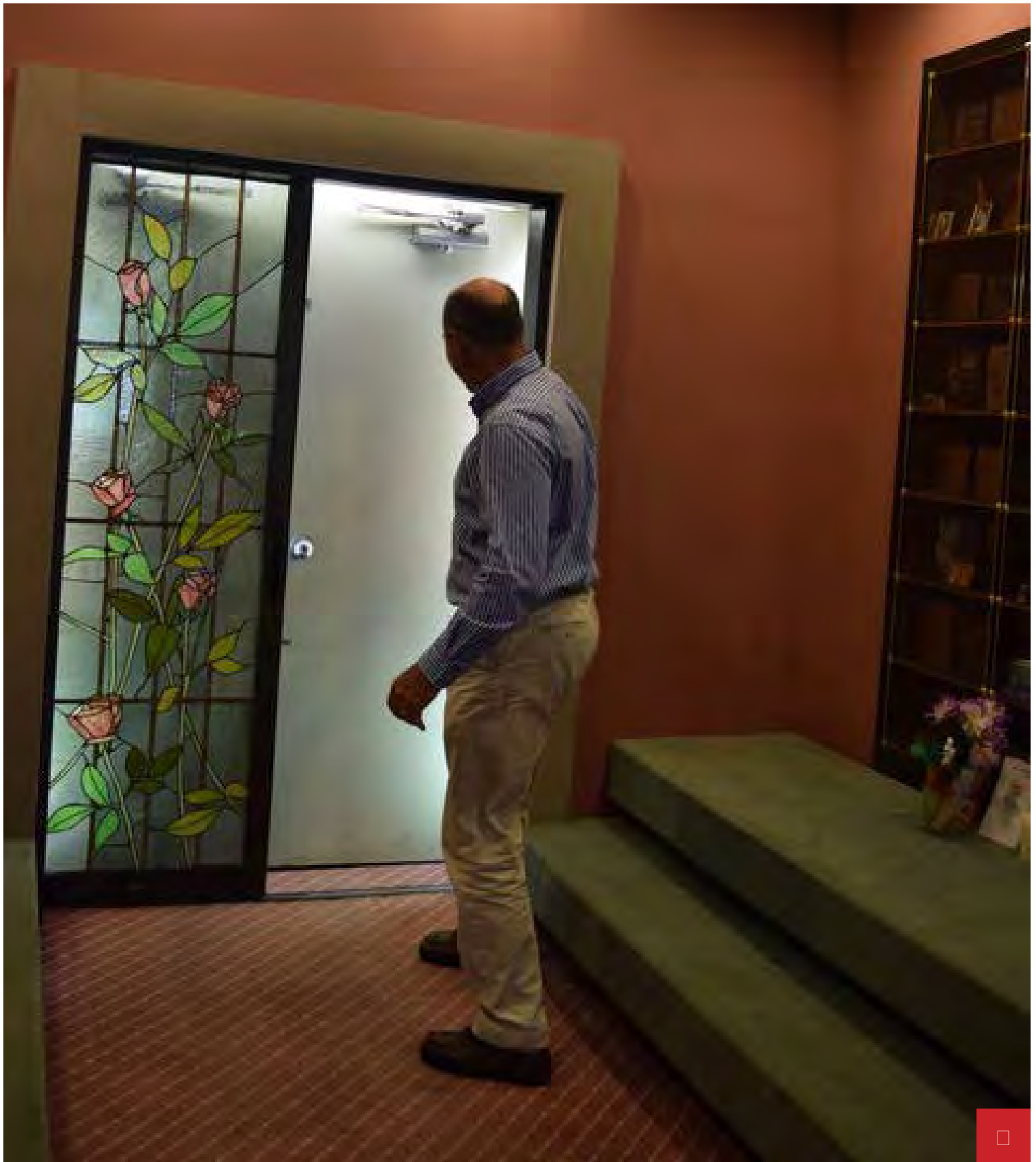
This place is called the columbarium, and at first, the very existence of this vast chamber full of urns can come as a surprise. In the movie version of life and death, a cremated person's remains sit up on the shelf at home, or friends scatter their ashes in the wind over a sacred locale. In the real world, many cremated people stay in the cemetery, just like their buried counterparts.

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THERE ARE CERTAIN WORDS YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO SAY IN A CREMATORIUM.

Rose-colored carpeting covers the floors here. The whirl of a vacuum cleaner punctures the silence. Cubby holes or niches line the walls, and the varying sizes and styles of urns within them marks the passing of the eras. Older urns are ornate; one is topped by an eternal flame, while another is shaped like a Bible. One inscribed "Henrietta Leiber, 1866-1933" is shaped like an acorn. Next to it leans a photo of Henrietta, who's standing behind a chair in a sleeveless white dress and long pearls, her hair fashioned in a bob like a flapper.

More contemporary urns are boxier and cleaner in style. They're also larger, and not for vanity's sake. The cremation process recovers a lot more of the human body than it used to. Some families have packed their niche with flowers, family photos, or pictures of Jesus. Others skipped the niche entirely and entombed the cremated remains behind a marble plaque. It is a curious thing, as if the body was broken down into its smallest organic parts, then surrounded with stone to protect them.



The doors at the back of the Rose Room.

GETTY IMAGES / CAREN CHESLER

We are seeing a fundamental shift in how we approach death and what comes after. Compared to just a few decades ago, vastly more Americans are foregoing the old-fashioned burial and turning to the alternative of cremation. This is what brought me here to Rosehill, and now my tour with Jim Koslovski, president of the Rosehill and Rosedale Cemetery, is about to go deeper into his world to see how cemeteries are dealing with America's after-death revolution.

As I follow him deeper inside the columbarium, we pass through the Rose Room. Urns here are not hidden in niches behind glass, but instead are on display in the open air. I prefer it this way. The glass cases remind me of the razors at the drug store—the ones you can only access by notifying a salesperson with a key. Deeper still, at the very rear of the room, lies a set of stained glass doors. Koslovski slides them open to reveal a hidden set of spy-movie doors, these made of metal. They are solid for a reason: Behind them lies the crematorium itself.

The doors open, and we stroll onto what looks like the floor of a factory, but one dedicated to a certain kind of deconstruction.

SOCIALLY ACCEPTABLE



The Nimtala Burning Ghat (Funeral rites) is the oldest and the most famous cremation ground of Kolkata. It is

situated in Central Kolkata.

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Back in 1980, less than 5 percent of Americans were cremated when they died. That figure now stands at about 50 percent, according to the National Cremation Association of North America. Changing cultural and religious standards are at play here, for sure. But if you want to see one event that accelerated the change, look no further than the Great Recession.

“We saw a big uptick in cremation when there was the economic downturn in 2008, when people were losing their jobs. Cremation is a less expensive alternative,” Koslovski says.

“Less expensive alternative” may be putting it lightly. Rosehill charges just \$180 to cremate a body, although the urn, flowers, and service are extra. A grave, by contrast, can cost \$2,500, plus an additional \$1,500 to open the ground with a backhoe.

Rosehill, located about a half-hour from Manhattan, now cremates about 25 bodies per day and has been expanding its facility to meet the growing demand. It already had three cremation machines, but bought an additional unit in 2013, another in 2016, and expects to have a sixth up and running by the end of the year.

THE CREMATOR’S RULE OF THUMB: 100 LBS. OF HUMAN FAT IS THE EQUIVALENT OF 17 GALLONS OF KEROSENE

Of course, burning the dead isn’t a new concept—it was around long, long before the recession forced Americans to start pinching their pennies. Cremation began in the Stone Age, and it was common though not universal in Ancient Greece and Rome. In certain religions such as Hinduism and Jainism, cremation was not only permitted, but preferred.

The rise of Christianity put the brakes on the practice in the West. As early as 330 A.D., around the time that Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the Roman Empire’s official religion, Rome outlawed cremation as a pagan practice. The theological reason for the ban was related to the resurrection—it was good to keep the body whole or in one place. Through the Reformation, the Catholic church frowned on or prohibited cremation, though it was used for punishment and hygiene reasons. Jewish law also banned the practice. By the 5th century, cremation had all but disappeared from Europe.



Garinis cremation furnace, Milan, Italy, illustration from Lllustration, Journal Universel, No 1965, Volume LXXVI, October 23, 1880

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The practice saw a resurgence in Europe in the 1870s, mostly because of public health concerns about curbing the spread of disease. The first modern crematory was built in the U.S. in 1876. A second came eight years later. By 1900, there were 20. The practice got another boost in 1963, when the Catholic Church reversed its opinion on cremation during the Vatican II reforms and said cremation was permitted (though ash scattering was not).

Today, there are more than 2,100 crematories around the United States, and the cremation resurgence isn't just about cost. There are other factors including fewer religious prohibitions on the practice and changing consumer preferences, such as the desire for simpler, less ritualized funerals. Our increasingly mobile way of life plays a part, too, says Robert Biggins of Magoun-Biggins Funeral Home in Rockland, Massachusetts "People aren't growing up in Mayberry RFD and staying there their whole lives, We're much more mobile. Generation X and Millennials, they stay in a job on average five to seven years." Americans don't want to be sedentary in death, either.

Simply put, cremation has become socially acceptable. Acceptance varies by state and ethnicity, according to a report by the National Funeral Directors Association, but in places like California, Oregon, and Southern Florida, 60 to 80 percent of the dead are now cremated, while the number is much lower in the Bible Belt and among certain cultures, including Catholics and African-Americans.

And there's one more force pushing cremation as an alternative: Cemeteries are running out of space, Koslovski says. He estimates Rosehill has only 15 years before it's out of room. It's no wonder, then, that a lot of cemeteries have applied to build crematoriums—though there's often opposition, particularly if they're in a residential area.

"There's a stigma," Koslovski says. "There's still a segment of society that see cremation as gruesome or ghoulish, and they don't want it in their backyard."

HOW CREMATION WORKS



Rosehill Crematorium

CAREN CHESLER

Koslovski and I pass through the double doors. As we stand on the floor of the crematorium, a bell rings out.

“What’s that for?” I ask.

“That indicates that there’s a hearse probably backing up to the door,” he says. “So when the guys are in here operating, if they’re doing something and they hear the bell, they know someone is coming.”

The bodies arrive in caskets, occasionally made of wood but more commonly cardboard. They remain in these containers during the entire stay. There are health reasons for this, such as protecting the technicians from infectious diseases. There are moral reasons—“the family would want them in something,” Koslovski says. There are logistical reasons, too. “It would be extremely difficult to load a set of human remains without a casket. Just think of a body, and trying to put it into a cremation unit.”

The caskets go into the crematorium’s walk-in cooler, which is lined with shelves of them. One casket has a label on it from Delta Airlines that says, “Human Remains,” and under it, “Delta Cares.” Bodies typically

remain a day or two in the cooler, because most states require a 24-hour waiting period between when someone dies and cremation can occur. When something is so final, you want to take a pause.

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Five large cremation units occupy the floor, each covered in diamond-plated aluminum like you might see on a fire truck or a high-end tool box. It's called a cremation unit, by the way, not an "oven." And don't call the process incineration, even though it is. There are certain words you're not supposed to say in a crematorium.



Ovens in the crematorium of 'Barrack X' at the site of the former Dachau Nazi concentration camp in Bavaria, Germany.

GETTY IMAGES / RICHARD BLANCHARD

“With ovens, you think of Auschwitz, and that definitely has negative connotations, so people shy away from that nomenclature,” says Brian Gamage, director of marketing at U.S. Cremation Equipment in Altamonte Springs, Florida.

When a body is ready to be cremated, it is removed from cold storage and placed on a retractable table that looks like a gurney, then wheeled over to one of the machines. Cremation is the kind of business where an error would be catastrophic, unforgiveable, and so Rosehill actually uses two forms of ID to make sure the family gets back the right remains. A copy of the receipt is attached to the outside of the cremation unit, and a metal ID tag, similar to a dog tag, accompanies the deceased inside the unit.

While the door can open about 30 to 35 inches wide, most operators open it only a foot or so, enough to accommodate the width of the body. Any more than that will let out too much heat, exposing the operator and the room to fiery temperatures. The body slides in, pushed with a tool or by hand. There are rollers on the gurney and sometimes on the floor of the cremation unit so the casket can slide with ease.

A cremation unit has two chambers: the primary chamber, where the body goes, and the secondary or “after” chamber, where the gases generated are burned off.

“CREMATED REMAINS ARE TYPICALLY BONE FRAGMENTS AND CASKET ASH. REMEMBER, WE’RE 75 PERCENT WATER.”

The primary chamber has brick-lined walls, and a floor and roof made of high heat refractory concrete. A burner descends from the roof and heats the chamber to about 1,200 degrees Fahrenheit, enough to break down a body into gas and bone fragments.

The resulting gases and particulates travel into the after-chamber, a 30-foot maze designed to retain the gases for about two seconds. The after-chamber subjects the gases to a temperature of 1,700 degrees F to make sure the particles and odor are negligible before everything goes up the stack and out into the atmosphere. Gamage says you can think of the secondary chamber like the catalytic converter on an old car, which neutralizes the emissions of the exhaust system.

“Any solid will turn to gas if heated to the right point. That’s essentially what happens to the body, when the tissue is heated to the point where it’s combustible and turns to gas,” Gamage says. “But just like in any combustion device, whether it’s a car or a backyard grill, when you burn something, there’s going to be emissions generated. The key is to design equipment that consumes most of the emissions so that they fall within the state environmental regulations.”

The particulates emitted must be less than 0.1 grains per dry standard cubic foot, according to environmental agencies in most states. Problems arise when gases build up in the secondary chamber and begin to overflow. That can happen if the machine isn’t designed properly or if the operator overloads the primary chamber, which can happen for surprising reasons. For example, putting an obese person in the unit at the wrong time of day.

As macabre as it may sound, weight is something crematorium operators must worry about. The machine doesn’t know the difference between a person who weighs 150 pounds and a person who weighs 400. It just does its job. The cremator’s rule of thumb is that 100 pounds of human fat is the equivalent of 17 gallons of kerosene. If you have a body that weighs 400 pounds, at least 200 of it will be fat that will burn rapidly. If you put that person into a very hot machine, as the cremation unit tends to be at the end of the day when it’s been running for hours, the chamber may emit smoke and odor out of the stack.

“It’s just too much gas for the machine to handle,” Gamage says. “Most experienced operators will do those larger cases as the first cremation of the day, when the machine is colder.”



Screens on the Rosehill units.

CAREN CHESLER

Inside the Rosehill crematorium, I'm staring at a computer monitor that reduces this ritual into raw data. The body inside is a male, it's the second case of the day, it's in a cardboard container weighing 201 to 350 lbs, and it has already been there for an hour and 20 minutes. A diagram on the screen shows the machine's various chambers. Three little blue flames are illuminated under one of the chambers, indicating that "hearth air" is now being blown in to the chamber to help cool it down. It's currently between 910 and 1150 degrees inside, but moments earlier, the temperature had been 1600 to 1800 degrees.

Altogether, it takes about an hour and a half to cremate a body, though that varies depending on the person's weight and the type of casket they're in. The time-consuming nature limits the number of bodies each can cremate. During my visit, all five of Rosehill's machines were in various states of operation just to keep up with demand. Each needs to get five bodies done in eight hours. Rosehill's cremation units run six days a week, standing idle only on Sundays.

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“For religious reasons?” I ask Koslovski.

“No,” he says. “we just need a day off.”

CLOSE TO HOME



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When Lisa Tomasello was growing up in a large Italian Catholic family, the death of a relative was just the

beginning of a grueling two or three days. Visitors would sign the guest book in the outer room, and form a line to get to the casket. People would sit in front of the body of the deceased, kneeling and praying and making the sign of the cross, before kissing them on the hand, face or lips. “The closer the relation, the closer to the lips,” she says.

The immediate family sat in the front row receiving visitors in front of the dead body. Tearful outbursts and cries in Italian were commonplace. During the breaks in the wake, the family would go out for dinner and laugh and tell stories before returning to the funeral home for several more hours of crying. And all that was all before the funeral, which would start at a funeral home, resume at a church, and culminate at a cemetery before everyone was invited back for lunch.

But once the body was buried and the headstone placed, then what? Tomasello, who I knew growing up, says it’s a question that nagged at her after every cycle of mourning. Maybe you visit the deceased a few times during the first few years. Maybe you don’t visit them again until another family member is buried in that plot. “My grandparents’ graves haven’t been visited in 30 years,” she says.

When Tomasello grew up and her own parents passed away, she wanted something different. She and her siblings decided to have a small service and to cremate their mother’s body when she died. When her father followed a few years later, they dispensed with the formal service and made a toast to him with a shot of Jack Daniels, then had him cremated and divvied up the ashes.

“I have my parents in my bedroom and I am comforted with them there,” she says. “There is no pressure or guilt of having to visit them in a cemetery, and they will stay with me until the end of my time.”

“MY GRANDPARENTS’ GRAVES HAVEN’T BEEN VISITED IN 30 YEARS.”

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It's hard to let people go. We want them in an urn, to keep them near, sometimes even anthropomorphizing these objects as a way of bringing our loved ones back to life. The urn doesn't contain mom's ashes. The urn is mom.

I bought a bench on the boardwalk in my town to memorialize my father. Now that bench *is* my father. When I watch the sunrise and see the bench's silhouette, he is watching it with me.

WHAT IS LEFT BEHIND





CAREN CHESLER

There is no easy way to say it: The physical attributes you picture when you envision a loved one—the eyes, the skin, the hair—disappear during the cremation process. Even after all we’ve been through—our experiences and memories, pain and suffering, tests taken, facts learned—one of the biggest parts of our cremated remains is the coffin. “Cremated remains are typically bone fragments and casket ash,” Koslovski says. “Remember, we’re 75 percent water.”

Once the heating is over, cremated remains are put onto what looks like a silver baking tray. A technician runs a magnet over them to remove all of the ferrous materials that did not combust during the cremation process. These often come from a person’s staples, screws, hinges, and prosthetic joints. Someone then has to clean by hand any material the magnet missed—say, the bits of glass left behind because someone wanted their father cremated with a bottle of scotch. Those pieces are buried somewhere on the cemetery grounds.

“What is that?” I ask, pointing to one of the silver trays of remains.

“That’s a bone fragment. Probably a disc vertebrae,” Koslovski says, adding, “You can learn anatomy here.”

“These are green,” I say.

“I don’t know why. It could be something the person was treated with. It’s hard to say. It could have been cancer.”

The crematorium puts the bones and ash that remain into a pulverizer, not unlike a food processor. The remains are then put through a sieve and into a container for the family—but not always. Some Asian cultures want to be able to pick through the unpulverized remains to take bone fragments. A skull or hip bone is prized. They don't want the bone fragments processed at all.



CAREN CHESLER

Hindus often want the eldest son to commence the cremation process as a rite of passage, so he's allowed down on the crematorium floor to turn on the machine. Other families just want to observe the process—about a dozen make that request each week. Rosehill allows them to do so, from an observation deck. To Koslovski, it's about making sure people understand the process, that they're not afraid or skeptical of cremation because of misinformation or rumor.

"[Some people think] you're cremating multiple people together. You're reselling caskets. It can be anything. People watch the news."

I press him on the stories, the urban legends about crematoriums. Is any of it true? Do cremated remains from one person ever wind up getting mixed in with another? He explains that everyone is cremated separately and the units are swept thoroughly after every cremation.

However, I remember Barbara Kemmis, the spokesperson for the [Cremation Association of North America](#), telling me that while machines are swept or vacuumed between cremations—and that while operators do their best to remove recoverable remains—it's possible that minute amounts could get caught in tiny wells and divots in the brick walls or concrete floor of the machinery and inadvertently wind up in another person's cremated remains. Another part of the process that's perhaps best not to think about.

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THE THINGS WE CANNOT BURY



Cardboard caskets

CAREN CHESLER

Cremation, like death, is final. But that doesn't mean you won't have second thoughts. Susan Skiles Luke, a marketing consultant in Columbia, Missouri, had her mother cremated and buried in a family plot. Now, she wishes it was her mother's body and not just the cremated remains that was in the grave.

"When I go there, which isn't often, I want to feel like her body is under ground, right alongside my grandparents and beloved great aunt, all dressed up in their Sunday best, not some heavy shoebox of something that looks like cigarette ashes," she said.

When her older brother, with whom she was very close, died tragically of a drug overdose 13 months later, skipping the old-fashioned burial in favor of cremation was a godsend. It allowed her to skip the whole public ordeal of a funeral. "If you're still pissed—maybe they checked out like my bro did—you don't have to go through the public drama of a casket, dealing with the body, to display it not, discussing the circumstances of his death," she says. "[You can] deal with the logistics of 'the body' when you're ready."

That's one of the advantages of cremation: You can address your emotional issues with the dead on your own terms. The disadvantage? Now you're left with the remains, this tangible object impressed with memories. After Luke's brother passed away, she picked up his ashes on the way home from work, as if it were just another weekday errand. The funeral home was on the way home, after all. "I was too stupid to ask someone else to pick (my brother) up, and had never done it before. I wasn't prepared for how personal it would feel," she said. "I threw my brother's ashes in the trunk with a thump and cried all the way home."

A few years later, when her stepfather passed, she couldn't even bring herself to pick up the ashes, even as the funeral home kept calling. "I never spoke to them. I listened to one voicemail, politely reminding me to 'come get your dad,' It was the phrase, coupled with the fact 'my dad' was a bunch of ashes stuffed in a box, that just reminded me of that afternoon I picked up (my brother) Tom," she said.

One day, she returned home to find her dad's ashes sitting on her doorstep.

She now has two boxes of their remains in storage somewhere, though she doesn't know exactly where. She asked her husband to hide them somewhere so she didn't have to look at them. "Not the healthiest reaction," she admits.

Ellen Herman, who sells digital advertising in Los Angeles, is in a similar situation. About nine years ago, her parents died about a year apart and were cremated. She went to a mausoleum in Florida, where her parents lived before they died, to see if there was a place she could put them in a drawer and honor them with some nice words.

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She meant to, anyway. She never followed through.



Ellen Herman hung onto the remains of her parents. They're in the bags marked "Neptune Society."

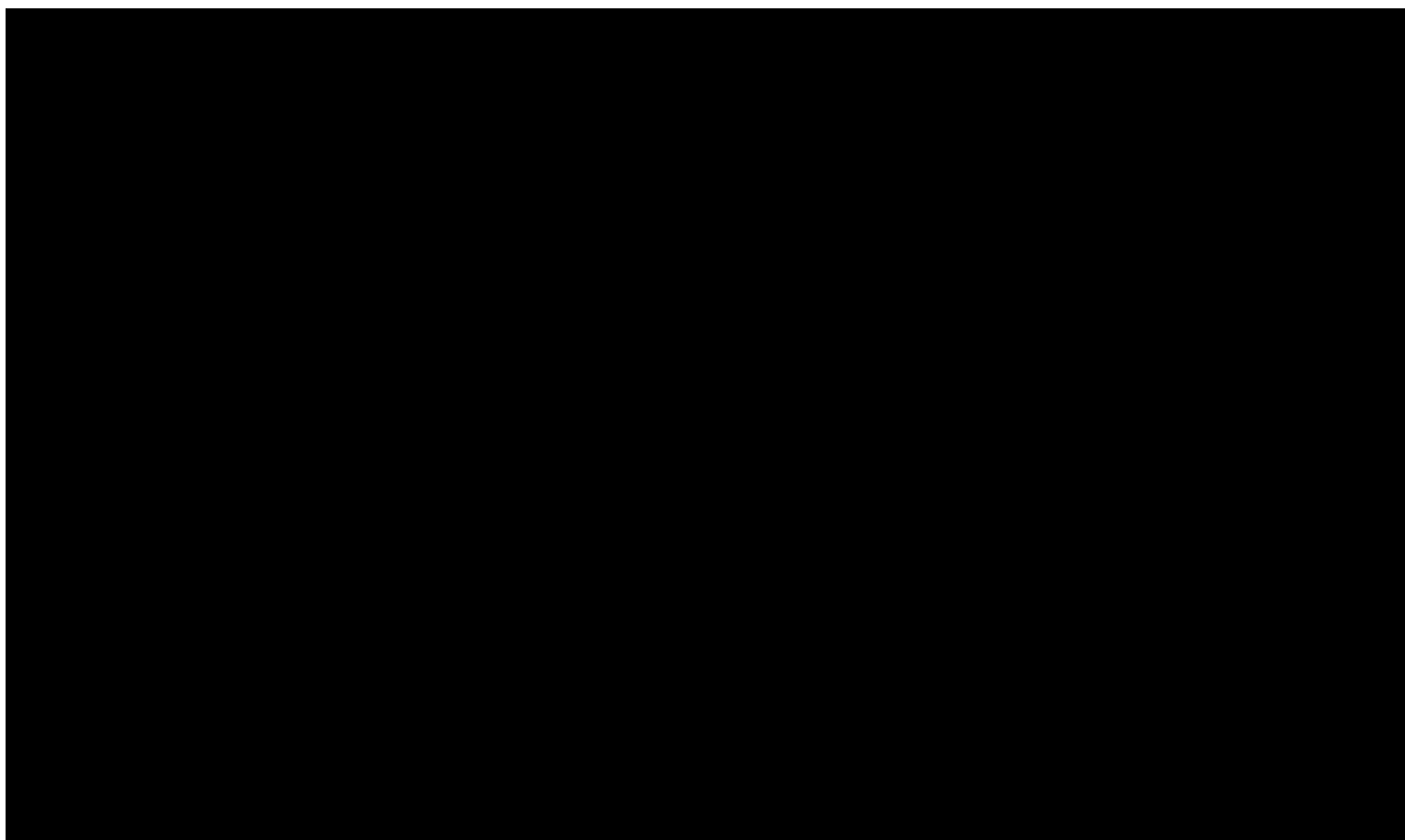
ELLEN HERMAN

"They are in my house. Actually, in my bedroom! In boxes, under a bunch of other shit," she says. "I had them in the garage for a little while, but that felt wrong too."

Some of their ashes were scattered in various places, individually and combined, and her dad's brother has a bit of her dad, but the bulk are in the box in her house. "Neither of my brothers wanted the stuff in their homes, and I didn't feel right scattering all of them," she says. "I suppose the fact that families don't live as close together as they once did lessens the significance of a burial plot to visit, but I still find the remains sitting in a box in my bedroom less than ideal and respectful."

Sometimes, instead of burying people in the ground, we bury them among our stuff. We lose them among the emotionally charged paraphernalia of our lives. It is just too hard.

BACK TO THE EARTH



We come from the Earth, we return to the Earth. That may be true, but the way we return to the Earth matters on more than an emotional level. It's an environmental concern. As cremation continues to replace burial as a go-to way of dealing with the dead, the emissions that come along with this process are becoming a serious worry—so much so that people are starting to consider some wild-sounding

alternatives for disposing of human remains.

There is now a water-based process called alkaline hydrolysis, which is being marketed as a more environmentally friendly postmortem option because it produces less carbon monoxide and pollution. Alkaline hydrolysis involves placing a body in a chamber that is then filled with water and potassium hydroxide and heated to about 320 degrees F at high pressure. After three hours, the body becomes a green-brown tinted liquid and bones are soft enough to be crushed. The bones can be returned to the family, while the liquid can be sent into the sewer system.

If this sounds rather dystopian to you, it's partly because the process was invented as a way to dispose of animals infected with mad cow disease. When farmers in Europe had to put down herds of cattle infected by mad cow disease, their initial answer was to dig trenches, pour gasoline, and set the animal carcasses on fire. When alkaline hydrolysis was introduced in the 1990s, manufacturers made stainless steel vats about 20 feet across into which the carcasses could be thrown. The pressure of the alkaline hydrolysis process would kill the prion—the protein particles in the animal's brain that are believed to have caused the disease.

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**"PEOPLE THINK, WOW, YOU DISSOLVED MOM,
AND YOU'RE PUTTING HER IN THE SEWER."**

In the years since them, some companies have proposed alkaline hydrolysis as a more environmentally friendly solution for human remains. "They took the technology and tried to apply it to the cremation side," says Gamage of US Cremation Equipment. "It's capitalism at its finest."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this process has taken off as a popular post-mortem solution for people. It's

slower. The technology is more expensive: A stainless steel pressurized unit can cost from \$175,000 for a basic unit to \$500,000 for a high end unit, while a cremation unit costs about \$80,000 to \$100,000. There are legal issues, too, because the process is prohibited unless a state passes legislation specifically allowing for it.

And then there is the “ick” factor: We’re talking about reducing a human body to a soupy mess that goes into the sewer. That may hold some allure for people put off by the idea of burning a body into nothing but bone and ash, but most people haven’t come around to the way byproducts are disposed after alkaline hydrolysis.

Koslovski, ever the pragmatist about dealing with death, sees it another way.

“People think, wow, you dissolved mom, and you’re putting her in the sewer. I understand that. But my thought is, with embalming, the fluids from your mother are being put in the sewer system as well. It’s the same thing.”

THE MISSING MARKERS



Mexican musicians play next to a columbarium during the Day of the Dead celebration on November 02, 2014

in Morelia, Mexico.

GETTY IMAGES / JAN SOCHOR

In the movies, characters are always scattering the ashes of a loved one over the side of a boat or off the top of a mountain. In reality, cremation rarely ends that way. The Cremation Association of North America estimates that 60 to 80 percent of cremated remains go home with people who intend to place them in a cemetery or scatter them at a future date. But while that may be their intent, scattering is not as popular as people think.

“Based on recent media coverage of people seeking to recover cremated remains lost in fires, floods and mudslides, I suspect a high percentage of remains are in homes,” Kemmis says.

There are actually laws dictating where ashes can be spread. In Massachusetts, for instance, the law says cremated remains may be “scattered with candor.” “What does that mean? It means you can’t just run down Main Street and throw them in the air or sprinkle them in your neighbor’s driveway. But there’s nothing to say you can’t sprinkle them in the golf course where your dad hit golf balls for 40 years,” says Biggins of Magoun-Biggins Funeral Home in Massachusetts.

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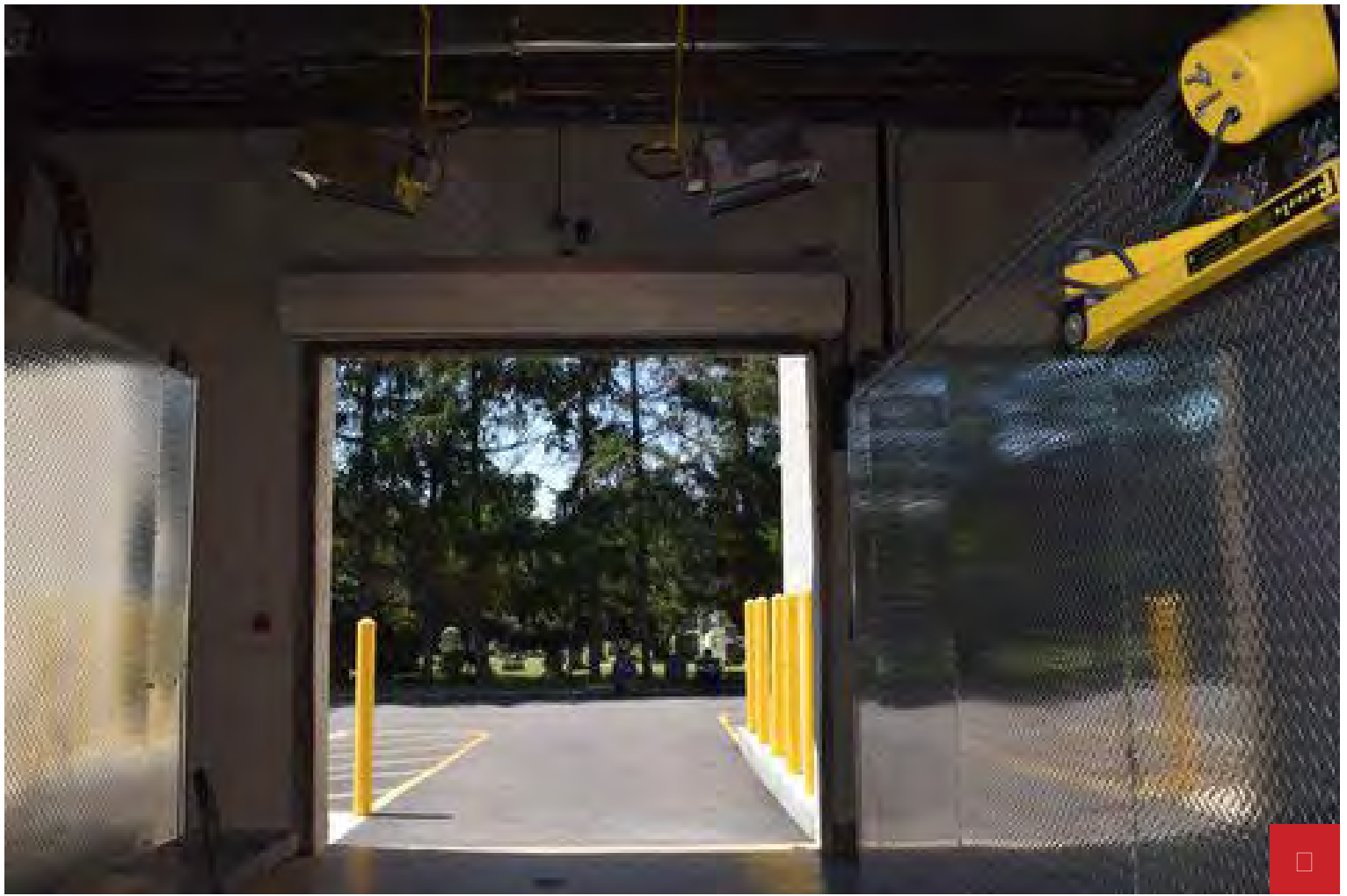
While scattering ashes seems romantic, there’s something to be said about keeping your loved one in one place, and then marking that place with a name.

“We mark the graves of our loved ones with a headstone to memorialize them, so we don’t forget them,” Biggins says. He lost his wife tragically when she was 57, and he visits her grave frequently and finds comfort in just seeing her name. “And when I see how many people remember her, they may leave a pebble or a coin, for me to go there on a weekly basis and see dozens of pebbles and coins, it’s heartwarming to see that people remember her.”

THE LAW SAYS CREMATED REMAINS MAY BE “SCATTERED WITH CANDOR.”

As I leave Rosehill cemetery, I decide to stop by the grave of my friend, David, who grew up in Harlem and was dealt a bad set of cards. His mother was an alcoholic. His father had left. And while he had a mother and grandparents, he still wound up in the child welfare services system. He was sent to a city-funded boarding school outside New York and managed to graduate with a football scholarship to the State University of New York at Cortland, but he lasted just one semester before landing back in Harlem. And like something out of a bad movie, he met a girl, was introduced to crack cocaine, lost his job, wound up with HIV and ultimately developed kidney issues that landed him on dialysis for well over a decade. He was on the kidney donor list and was near the top when he died of heart failure in 2015.

I'd gone to his funeral, but hadn't made it out to the cemetery—the one in which I now found myself. I decided to visit his grave. I followed the directions I was given, to Section 48, Row 24, Grave 83. It was a large cemetery, but when I finally found the section, it was easy to find the grave. I was surprised to see nothing marking the spot where he was buried. It was just a patch of dirt with a number “83” handwritten in concrete. There were big marble headstones on one side of him and on the other side, a pile of plastic flowers, bits of light blue ribbon and raffia, styrofoam crosses that said, “I Love You,” and a deflated white balloon, all contained in a little wire fence, as if there was a party in the neighboring grave site the night before, and David hadn't been invited.



CAREN CHESLER

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The lack of fanfare for my friend seemed unfair. He'd been so generous, to me, to his addict girlfriend, to his niece in Florida to whom he would send money despite having so little, himself. Without a headstone, no one would even know he was under there – or for that matter, that he'd been up here.

Whether it’s a burial or a cremation, the hard part is letting a loved one just float off into obscurity. We need that physical marker, a headstone, a bench, an urn, to show that the person existed, that they once walked this Earth.

I went to my car and found a trophy my son had found in the garbage and thrown on the floor of the back seat. It was a football player. I took a black Sharpie from the glove compartment and wrote on the front of the trophy, “David, April 23, 1954 to April 23, 2015.” I walked over to Grave 83 and placed the trophy at the top of the patch of dirt where a headstone might go. I then left a pebble, as people sometimes do, and walked back to my car.

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