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Office Rules

by Allison Watts

(English 1101)

When I was little, there were many rooms in my first house on Pensacola Beach, Florida that were off limits. To be fair, the reasoning behind those limitations was always sound. The laundry room had all sorts of liquid chemicals that could be drunk and the back-porch led out to open water—there is no seven year old in the world who's a strong enough swimmer to take on the Atlantic Ocean without supervision. Most of these rules, however, were conditional. If mother was there, it was okay to sit at the laundry table and help fold. If mother was there, it was okay to play on the back-porch swing or run out along the beach. But there was one room that was off limits no matter what, and that was what fascinated me so much about my father's office.

My father's office was at the very back of the house and the door was always locked. To my young mind, it was the epitome of mystery. I had gotten glimpses of bookshelves and a hulking desk over the years, but it was never anything substantial. As children are wont to do, my imagination filled in the gaps with great, fantastic things hidden behind that barred door. Obviously, my father would have fifteen gumball machines against one wall—not the sort that needed quarters, but the one like my best friend Annie got for her birthday where she could just turn the crank and a piece of candy rolled out. He would also have a giant television to watch all the really cool adult shows and a VCR just to himself. At some points, I even imagined things like a stable full of ponies, but that was pure fantasy. My father didn't even like horses.

I was curious, and curious children have the tendency to break rules. There was a very unique opportunity when I was seven and three-quarters (every day counts when you're young enough) and that door was left open. It had been left open before, but never when my mother was preoccupied with cooking for guests and my father was off doing something he claimed was important (but was very probably a cover for a few hours of fishing). I was alone, no one was looking for me, and the office door was figuratively calling out for me to take a peek.

At first it was unassuming. The blinds were down, giving the office a dim, shadowed cast. Flipping the light switch evaporated even the slightest bit of mystery. As I had seen in my handful of glimpses, the walls were packed with books and papers. Pictures and the dozen or so art projects I'd given my father as gifts were scattered throughout as well, but it wasn't anything interesting. It felt intimidating, but I moved from the doorway into the room for a proper look. Still, nothing. The bookshelves continued on along the walls, interspersed with artwork and framed family photos hung above a few filing cabinets.

A closet stood to one side, but I ignored it in favor of poking through the drawers. There was still nothing interesting—just more paper and files. What, I asked myself with a considerable amount of disappointment and frustration, was the point in making such a pointless room off limits? There weren't even any sharp corners that needed padding, though I had outgrown the need for such cautions years earlier. I was nearly ready to give it up and admit defeat, years of fantasy falling to pieces in the wake of such harsh reality, when I noticed the closet once again. The door was shut, but that gave me no pause. The office door was the one I wasn't supposed to open, after all, and no one had forbidden opening any of the closets in the house. I didn't even hesitate, turning the handle and yanking it open with all the confidence of a fearless explorer.

The fearlessness didn't last. I screamed, terrified, as a full human skeleton came into view. It was strung up on a stand, all bleached white bone and wire without any of the sardonic cheer that

Halloween decorations have. Instinctively, I slammed the door close and took off running, all the while shouting for my mother. There was a monster in my father's closet, and there wasn't a single person better suited to deal with monsters than her.

She met me halfway down the hall, nearly as panicked as I was. There was a lot of confusion as I tried to explain what I had seen through my hysterics, and while I dreaded her fury for breaking a house rule, my mother only seemed relieved and amused. Once I had calmed down enough to be settled at the kitchen table, she started to explain things to me.

My father was an orthopedic surgeon, for which I had memorized the pronunciation for Career Day the year before. I had already learned this and explained the information to my class, complete with dictionary definitions and a poster board. Still, she insisted on rehashing this information. My impatience must have been obvious. I had never been a subtle child. My mother didn't seem to understand the gravity of the situation, so I explained to her again that there was a horrible skeleton in my father's office closet, and shouldn't we call the police to come take it away?

Apparently not. She told me that the skeleton was for my father's work, and that he used it to help fix the injuries his patients had. This didn't make all that much sense to me, since skeletons weren't helpful—they were scary. But she was insistent that the skeleton wasn't going to come to life and hurt us. I couldn't come up with any reason other than the "deadly skeleton" to make the office off limits, so she very briefly explained that my father kept private information about his patients in the filing cabinets and it wasn't nice of me to go looking through them. In fact, I shouldn't have gone in there at all. While I didn't understand it then, this was the first instance of patient confidentiality I had ever been exposed to.

It seems that having the pants scared off me was punishment enough, so I wasn't in trouble for going into my father's office. Having reassurance that the skeleton wasn't going to come to life was good, I still made her go and lock the office door, warily watching from a distance.

That is the only memory I have of my father's skeleton, but I've been told that shortly after my run-in with it, my father moved it to his office at work, worried that any further interaction with it would scar me permanently. He really shouldn't have bothered, though. I was never going near that office on my own again. Most doctors' offices make me uncomfortable still, and it is very much connected to coming across the skeleton in my father's closet. We laugh about it frequently now, but in the back of my mind I am always just the slightest bit serious about how horrifying the experience was.