

The Urn 2
By
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There's something about death that always makes me a little bit nervous. I've delivered numerous eulogies, and I've stood before hundreds of people doing so, but it's the whole mess of choosing whether it's burial or cremation. So, when I got the call from the mortician that my grandmother Leona had died, I was relieved that she had already made the decision for me, even though it meant a five hundred mile drive to collect the ashes.

My wife and I drove to Grants Pass, Oregon, the following week, booking a room at the Riverside Inn. It was one of our favorite places to stay if we weren't staying in Ashland, because all the rooms looked out at the Rogue River. Plus, I had spent many days of my youth playing along the Rogue like I was Huck Finn when Leona owned a ten acre chicken ranch off Leonard Road.

"Leona did not want an obituary in the paper, she did not want her ashes buried in the cemetery, she didn't want a fancy urn, and she left no specific instructions for you. She assumed you would know what to do," Mr. Taylor said, handing me the red cardboard urn.

"Is there any money owed for this?" I asked.

"Not a penny. Leona was one of the most organized business people I know. She bought insurance thirty years ago and left these instructions that were her wishes."

"So I just need to figure out what she would want," I said.

"That's the gist of it," he said, a small smile curling at the right side of his mouth. He extended a meaty hand and as we shook and he added, "Good luck to you. The death certificate should be mailed to you in another week so you can close up her affairs."

I was amazed at the weight of the cardboard urn as we walked back to the car. I opened the trunk and gently placed it next to my suitcase.

"What do you think?" Linda asked.

"About what?"

"About the ashes? We're not taking them back to California are we?"

"I don't know. We could take them back and have them spread off Bodega Bay," I said.

"But didn't she live in Oregon most of her life?"

"True, so I suppose her ashes should be spread here."

"It just seems like the right thing to do," Linda said.

We checked into the hotel and got the suitcases and the urn loaded into the room. Standing on our second story balcony, gazing out at the river, I was hit with an inspiration.

"The river!"

"What?" Linda asked

"that's what Leona would want me to do. She loved fishing, panning for gold, boating, and she lived along the river for years. That's what she would want."

"But where?"

"I think we're looking at it," I said, pointing across the river to Riverside Park.

"That is a pretty location," Linda agreed.

I picked up the urn and was determined to get the deed done with speed. We walked back to the car, and drove across the bridge to Riverside Park. It was already late afternoon so there weren't many people there, just a family with a couple of small kids playing catch with a big orange plastic ball about the size of a basketball.

"this is perfect. Leona loved coming to this park, because of the ducks and just being near the river."

Linda and I approached the riverbank, and as we did, ducks and geese starting approaching the shore. Suddenly, it look like fleet week as a flotilla of ducks and geese were heading towards us.

"Honk! Honk ! Honk,Honk! Quack! Quack! Quack!

I hadn't even opened the urn yet and we were being swarmed.

"Oh my god," Linda said, pointing at the ground near the water's edge. It was covered in goose feces. "That's disgusting. You can't spread her ashes here."

"You're right," I said, "that would be very wrong. We better go back."

By this time, geese were starting to charge up the bank, certain we had something to feed them. They flapped their big wings honking even more loudly as they advanced. We retreated to the safety of our car.

As we crossed the bridge back to the hotel, I saw a planter that overlooked the dock and the water. "Hey, that looks promising," I said pointing to the left. "Let's check it out. We might end up with a river view spot and that would be just as good." We parked and made our way through the tunnel that led down toward the boat docks. We looked around to see if anyone was watching and walked along the planter. It was about waist high, so dispersing the ashes would be fairly simple. At about midway along the cement edge, I turned to see what the view of the river looked like.

Suddenly, Linda's hand gripped my wrist. "Oh my god, you can't do it here," she said, pointing to a calico cat, digging and then squatting over a hole it dug in the planter. "It would be like a burial in a cat box."

Then, I looked at at the way the boat dock extended out into the river for the jet boats to dock. "Let's just take a walk down there I said," pointing at the landing. We got to the end and the river was moving swiftly and looked very clean. As I started to kneel, Linda tapped me on the back. "I don't think so," she said pointing to a sign on a post. It said: This area is under camera surveillance.

"yuck, who would've thought it would be this hard to disperse some ashes. Let's head back to the room and think this over," I said.

Upon getting back to building three, where our room was located, we climbed the stairs a bit defeated. However, that didn't stop me from opening a bottle of Chandon Blanc de Noir we had in our ice chest. We carried our glasses out on the deck that overlooked

the river. Our part of the riverbank was covered in blackberry brambles for the most part, but beyond the blackberries was the rushing Rogue.

"We're almost there. Maybe we should drive over to the Applegate River where she panned for gold sometimes. "

"Wait a minute, look at that sandbar over there," Linda said pointing. There was a tiny patch that the river curved around just barely rising above the waterline.

"that does look promising I agreed.

We placed our champagne glasses on the table and I quickly retrieved the cardboard urn. As soon as we got to the end of the building and turned toward the pathway the led to the sandbar, Linda gripped my wrist again.

"I can't do it," she said.

"What? Why?"

"I see poison oak along the path. I'm so allergic to it I can't go down that path. How about I watch you from the deck?"

"Sure, I said, "I always figured this going to be my solitary moment anyhow."

Linda released my wrist and turned back toward the room, while I made certain to stay in the middle of the path avoiding the crimson leaves that created a maze to the riverbank. Finally, I thought, I can release Leona's ashes to be one with the world again. I opened the urn and saw that the plastic bag inside had a white zip tie, the kind you usually use scissors or a knife to cut. Great, I thought, nothing's been easy about this. I dug into my pocket for my car keys. I figured I could cut the plastic bag with my ignition key and started digging into the plastic. Once I had the top completely opened, I started to kneel next to the water.

Vrooom! A jet boat with about thirty people on board came whipping around the bend and did a three-sixty, sending a wave of water over me. People were laughing and shrieking. Some of them had gotten wet too. The boat sat there idling about fifteen feet from shore where I was kneeling with the cardboard urn cradled in my arms. Damn it, I thought, can't anything be easy about this?

I waited a few minutes until the boat moved under the bridge to the boat dock. Slowly, I leaned over releasing the contents, the gray ash quickly making a swirl in the water, some of it drifting downward and some of it becoming a fine spray of particles that continued downstream. "Go with the salmon and the gold, Leona," I said, "Love you."

I carried the empty urn back up the pathway, made my way back to the room, Linda, and my champagne. I had one final task, to call my mother in L.A. And let her know what I had done. Since it was my father's mother, she didn't feel as obligated to accompany us on the trek.

"Mom, it's Eddie"

"Did you get Leona's ashes?"

"Yes, and I spread them on the Rogue."

"Oh my god, why would you?"

"I think that's what she would've wanted."

"I just can't stand the idea of big trucks running over her."

"Mom, it was the Rogue, the Rogue River.""

Laughter on the other end. "Oh my god, I just had these horrible visions of how her ashes were being run over... The river was the right thing, yes."

I hung up the phone after a bit more small talk. I turned to Linda, picked up my glass of sparkling wine, and said, "I guess we better leave directions for anyone who survives us. Cheers to her memory."