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Mom's Final Resting Places—a Cremation Story

By Ellie Kahn



If you are offended either by the idea of cremation or humor about the dead, you may want to stop reading. It's OK.

Maybe you weren't raised (as I was) by a woman who had no short-term memory for several years before she died, but retained a sharp and sick sense of humor -- including about her death.

Mom passed away June 13, 2006.

Over the years, Mom made sure my sister Sue and I knew that she didn't want to be kept alive by artificial means or buried in a casket.

"Make sure I'm cremated," she'd say.

And then the three of us would brainstorm about where to scatter her ashes. We'd get silly and think of ridiculous places and we'd laugh together, not completely accepting the reality of Mom someday being gone.

Mom was, indeed, cremated, and the company that did so divided her ashes into two urns, so that Sue could have Mom there, in North Carolina, and I could have Mom here.

I was going to visit Sue in a few months, so I just took her share of the ashes with me. Although the plane was delayed and the suitcase with Mom's urn almost didn't make it, I finally handed my sister her

share of our mother's remains. I think the container is still in Sue's closet, along with the ashes of five beloved dogs.

Back home, I thought about scattering Mom's ashes along a trail where I hike regularly, thinking that she would have loved the trees. My hiking friends and I laughed about attaching bags of the ashes inside our pants' legs and slowly letting the dust pour out while we hiked, hoping not to be caught performing this illegal act.

Although I always thought it was odd when people selected a cemetery plot, saying, "Oh, Grandma will love the view from here," once my mother died, I understood the idea of finding a place she would enjoy. None of my ideas for Mom's ashes seemed quite right, and they remained in the plastic urn for a year.

The following June, I was swimming laps in our pool and I thought about Mom, who was a great swimmer. I missed her. And I suddenly had an urge to talk with her.

How to start?

I just dove in, so to speak: "Mom, are you there?"

There was a pause and then I heard that familiar voice. "Ellie-bell, I've been waiting to hear from you! How are you, darling?"

Although I was definitely astonished, it also seemed completely natural to talk with my invisible and deceased mother -- like the many years of long-distance phone calls between Ohio and California.

I kept swimming, and my mother asked her usual questions -- "How's Ben?" "How are the dogs?" and "How's that lovely man of yours?"

Mom offered her consistently sound, albeit unsolicited, advice: "Don't you think Ben should....?" "Why don't you try....?" "You're not working too hard, are you?"

We laughed about her worrying.

We were silent for a few moments, and then I heard myself asking, "Where exactly are you, Mom?"

She answered immediately: "Oh, I'm every place I've ever loved!"

It's hard to describe how I felt hearing this: Relieved. Elated. Hopeful.

She apparently had something else to do, because she said we'd talk again and was gone. I felt a mixture of sadness and contentment.

That afternoon, I finally opened the urn, took out some of Mom's ashes and scattered them in my garden. Mom, who was quite the gardener, would have loved it among the pansies and geraniums, her favorite flowers.

A few months later, I was going to Ohio to visit my father with my 16-year-old son, Ben, and my boyfriend. I poured half of Mom's remaining ashes into several Ziplock bags to take with me, since Cleveland was Mom's birthplace.

Even though my parents had been divorced for decades, my father was delighted to accompany us on our expedition to visit all of Mom's homes and leave some of her ashes at each. Dad served as tour guide, reminiscing about his own family and growing up in Cleveland.

Mom's childhood home was the house where Sue and I had spent many happy hours and nights visiting my grandparents. The home sat on a tiny lake where my mother skated in the winter and canoed in the summer. I recalled Mom's favorite story about canoeing there with a boyfriend when she was 16: the canoe suddenly tipped over, the young man swam for his life to the shore, and Mom stood up in knee-deep water and pulled the canoe in. Mom couldn't get through the story, even in later years, without laughing hysterically.

Dad showed us where, in 1943, he and my mother had their first home -- a tiny shack in the woods. Dad barely had time to build a shower, before leaving to serve in the army.

Our last stop was the house where I'd lived until I was 9, when my parents divorced. In that driveway, Mom had used a shovel to remove snow piled on top of her Chevy convertible. We couldn't use the car for the rest of the winter because of the rip she made in the soft-top roof.

The day was wonderful -- showing Ben where I grew up, recalling my own childhood and listening to Dad's stories. It was also another chance to remember and celebrate my mother as I left her ashes in gardens and curbside lawns.

My mother's favorite place in the world was Italy. After her first visit there in 1964, she surrounded herself with all things Italian -- playing operas over and over, taking Italian lessons, purchasing replicas of famous Italian sculptures, and arranging for an Italian exchange student.

As it happened, last October, I went to Italy with a friend. And Mom went with us.

We stayed in Rome for five days, and while at the Forum, the Trevi Fountain and the Spanish Steps, I had a little conversation with Mom about the sights and surreptitiously deposited some of her ashes.

We rented a car and drove to Assisi, one of Mom's favorite Italian cities. She always had a statue of Saint Francis in her garden, to protect the birds and squirrels -- and now Saint Francis has Mom's ashes in the garden outside his church.

Our last stop was Venice, which Mom had adored. Near the apartment we rented, I sat on a tiny dock overlooking the Grand Canal. I thought about my mother, about her singing -- loudly and off-key-- "La Donna e Mobile" from "Rigoletto." I watched the gondolas go by, and thought also about our very complex relationship -- the love, the challenges, the laughter, and the years when our roles were reversed, as she became more dependent and less aware of the world around her. She did still remember me, thank goodness, and never lost her love of Italian operas, which we occasionally sang, off key, together.

I took out the last zip-lock bag of my mother's remains, turned it upside down between the wooden slats, and let the ashes fall to the water below. I sat for a moment, just breathing, listening to the birds, and looking out over the water, thinking about Mom.

Suddenly, from under the dock, came a large gray film of ash, floating on top of the water, out into the canal, alarmingly visible against the dark water.

I held my breath, waiting for someone to notice how I'd polluted the Grand Canal with the last of my dear mother.

Then a gondola approached and the singing gondolier, eyes focused on his passengers and vice versa, scattered my mother's ashes to the fish below.

And my mother was, indeed, in all of the places she most loved.

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