



BRIAN STAUFFER

always with” him. I had to read it several times before I understood that Miranda had been a four-legged family member; ornaments from glass beads to princess-cut diamonds can be created for human companions, at prices ranging from \$200 to \$20,000. But I travel a lot and have been known to shed keys and expensive watches, so my sister worried that I might misplace Mom.

Other artisans can incorporate ashes into memorial sculptures, urns and custom-blended inks for tattooed tributes. In New Mexico, designer Justin Crowe creates glazes infused with human ashes to cover ceramic items, including coffee mugs—unintentionally giving new meaning to “grandma’s china.” In interviews, the Netherlands-based artist Mark Sturkenboom expresses his hope to satisfy the desire to maintain an intimate connection with the deceased by crafting “marital aids” containing the ashes of your beloved.

Or you could hire a drone to scatter a loved one’s ashes, mixed with wildflower seeds. Those in the U.K. could turn to Heavenly Stars Fireworks, based in Colchester, which offers an “Ultimate Send-Off” that incorporates “large aerial shell bursts, roman candles, multi-shot barrages and mines.” More contemplative mourners might consider the Tolad, a walking staff designed in the Netherlands that deposits ashes and comes with a tracking app so that memorial walks can be recreated or visited virtually. But buyer beware: It’s a misdemeanor in the U.S. to disperse cremains without permission.

Not that this seems to stop anyone.

The quintessentially American libertarian streak seems to impel us to scatter our loved ones from the redwood forest to the Gulf Stream waters. There are enough accounts of fond farewells to Cubs fans at Wrigley Field to make it sensible to wear a mask there on windy days. Melissa Rivers has proudly attested to leaving smidgens (or is it smudges?) of her mother, the late comedian Joan Rivers, in the lobby of the Ritz in London, among other favorite haunts. And of course, Americans insist on using the Magic Kingdom as a memorial park, as *The Wall Street Journal* reported last year: Visitors to the Disney theme park in Florida are regularly interrupted, everywhere from “Pirates of the Caribbean” to “It’s a Small World,” in the act of what has been unofficially termed a “Code Grandma.”

After almost two years, I got the idea of casting our parents’ ashes into the water at Martha’s Vineyard. My parents had honeymooned there, and I make an annual summer trek to the home of close friends there, so I’d be able to visit the spot every year. My sister agreed to send a small amount of them to me—priority mail, of course.

It was 5:30 a.m., barely light. A lone gull hung in the sky above a wooden plank that stretched 50 feet into the bay, and I began the burial, if not at sea, then at cove. The dull, grayish sandy remains of my mother and father slowly spilled out of their respective Ziploc bag-

gies. Their ashes clouded the surface and soon became indistinguishable from the other particles suspended in the murky green water. And somehow, in performing this simple ceremony, a lingering grief was lessened.

We have yet to decide what to do with the remaining remains. With apologies to Marie Kondo, I can’t say it “sparks joy” to hold the box of my parents’ cremains close, but there is something comforting about visiting with them in my sister’s hall closet. I ritually greet them by saying, “Hi, Mom and Dad” before hanging my coat up. It makes my sister’s rental unit feel like a family home. Still, if you spot me near a body of water clutching large plastic baggies, it’s best not to stand downwind.

*Ms. Gurwitch is an actress and the author, most recently, of “Wherever You Go, There They Are: Stories About My Family You Might Relate To” (Blue Rider Press).*

# Cremation Nation: Our New Way to Go

More and more Americans are skipping burial and asking to have their ashes scattered—or turned into sculptures and fireworks.

In keeping with our parents’ wishes, our original plan had been to spread their ashes off the coast of South Florida, where they’d lived for 40 years. A quick Google search produced options ranging from luxury party boats to fishing trawlers that do double duty performing legal dispersions 3 miles offshore, in keeping with U.S. law.

But when my mother and father died within weeks of one another in 2016, those plans were upended. With so many pressing details to attend to, we had their ashes shipped to my sister in New York City, and they sat in her hall closet while we tried to figure out a plan acceptable to us both for their ultimate destination.

That is when I discovered the multitude of commemorative options now available. Our mother had often felt overshadowed by our charismatic father, so I suggested that she spend eternity as a sparkly gemstone. The websites of “memory stone” jewelers feature testimonials from grateful customers, like the gentleman who attested to “how wonderful” it was “to have Miranda, known for her purity of love and charming personality,

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By ANNABELLE GURWITCH

If only we all had friends like Johnny Depp, who has said that he ponied up some \$5 million to have the ashes of the late writer Hunter S. Thompson blasted from a cannon. Instead, like so many more earthbound Americans, my sister and I found ourselves at a loss about an increasingly common family task: finding a final resting place for our parents’ ashes.

My parents chose to be cremated. Fifty years ago, many Americans would have considered that shocking, but cremation is now the most popular choice for more than half of us. Worldwide, this still puts the U.S. far behind Japan (with a 99.9% cremation rate, according to a 2012 report by the Cremation Society of Great Britain), Switzerland (84.6%) and Thailand (80%), but we’re quickly narrowing the gap. The National Funeral Directors Association estimates we’ll reach 80% by 2035.

There are numerous reasons for the turn toward cremation among Americans. Some worry about the environmental impact of the chemicals used to prepare bodies for burial. Others are concerned about land use: If every American exercised the traditional Western burial option, the U.S. would need an additional 130 square miles of burial ground by midcentury. Developers aren’t eager to allot land for cemeteries, particularly close to our dense and valuable urban hubs, where roughly 80% of the country’s population has migrated. And for many of us, ceremonial visits to gravesites have become an antiquated affectation.

The growing secularization of American society is also a factor. I rarely considered my folks “trendy,” but more than half of American Jews are now leaving behind the traditional Jewish prohibition against cremation. The Catholic Church gave its official permission to cremation in 1963, although Vatican guidelines issued in 2016 state that ashes “may not be separated or scattered” and must be laid to rest in sacred ground, like a church cemetery.

The bottom line is also a consideration. On average, a traditional burial costs three times as much as a “direct cremation.” That’s the clinical term for receiving ashes in a receptacle of your choosing.

But once you have the cremains (yes, that’s a word), then what?