

The River At Varnasi

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Rachel, my partner of 39 years, asked me the night before to put the roof rack on the car, and to load up the kayak for tomorrow. It was her last night of sixteen in Minnesota, before flying back to Sitka.

I complain a bit. It's cold. The kayak is heavy. My back hurts. Who in their right mind goes kayaking on the Mississippi at dawn in the dead of January?

But I do it. Rachel just returned from a trip to India, where she had the experience of casting some of the ashes of our daughter Daniele into the Ganges River at Varnasi. While she was doing this, a wise man advised her to return to

Minnesota and get rid of the ashes still in the house.

To leave such a thing in the home was like a curse, he said. Our daughter's ghostly presence had been weighing on us the entire six years she has been dead, he told us. It was insane and obscene that we would permit such a thing. No wonder our marriage was stuck.

So I load up the plastic kayak, and trundle six pieces of loaded luggage from the house – because as soon as we disperse the ashes, she needs to catch a flight for a three-month stay in Alaska, doing primary care.

We drive the icy roads to Hidden Falls, by the old Ford Plant.

There's a boat launch there. I carry the kayak on my hip down to the water, put it in, and give the kayak a push with Rachel in it.

I am fearful of this moment. She is wearing a PDF life vest, but if she tips over she will not last more than a few minutes. I can't see myself diving into freezing water to save her. I would die even faster.

I hand her the urn, which I had not seen in years. It's open, and I can see the material inside. Rachel paddles gracefully onto the eddying waters, a picture of a loving mother seeking to save both of us from the grief that has stuck to us like plaster.

She may be muttering some Hindu phrases to herself, then she raises the urn and slowly tips it.

Nothing happens. She shakes the urn, to dislodge the ashes.
Nothing.

"It's stuck!" she calls to me.

"Bang it on the side of the boat!" I call back. She does. Strange clunking sounds.

"I think all the particles fused together in the closet," she says.
"Can you find a stick to stir it?"

This changes the tenor of the event. I look in the snow for a stirring stick, handing it to her as she paddles back to the launch.

“It’s not breaking up,” she says, vexed.

We look at each other. Our sacred moment was becoming comical.

“I have an idea,” she says, paddling back to the middle of the river. She dumps the loosened ashes into the steaming waters, then drops the entire urn in, making a sploosh as it sinks.

She stares at the momentary hole she has made in the Mississippi, then paddles back to the launch. I draw her out, and load the kayak back onto the car. We still have a few minutes to catch her plane.

"Maybe this will give us a fresh start," she says, staring ahead of her in the car.

"I hope so," I say, "but I'm not sure. I've been sleeping in the same room as those ashes for six years, and I never felt haunted by them."

We get to the departures curb and I drag out all the luggage for the sky cap. This was it. I look at my beautiful bride, who took on so much with Daniele's death – who traveled to India to find a psychological or spiritual attitude to have.

She came back with "It's fate."

In the eastern religions, she said, people don't think it's up to them

to make great choices, and they will be all right. Things happen because they were always going to happen. We can't second-guess ourselves. This was always going to happen to us.

She touches my cheek with her open palm. "I'm so sorry," she says.

We embrace one final time, and away she goes for three months. When she gets back, in April, she will spend a week with me, then on to Nepal, on a medical mission.

We still love one another, I think, despite all that has happened. She doesn't help much, however, when she asks philosophically, "Love – what is love anyway?"

On the way home I drive down to the boat launch, and let the dog run. The sun is visible now, behind us, peeking over the cliffs.

I stare out at the churning waters. I come to this spot nearly every day with the dog, and now I will be unable to look out on the river without picturing the urn, resting in the cold mud at the river's bottom, the ashes dislodged and heading downstream.

I remember asking Daniele, years ago, what it felt like to be her, suffering from panic attacks and high anxiety almost every day of her life.

She gave me the most intense look you could imagine, and said:

“Always drowning.”

