

The Curator Says... The reader will not know whether to laugh or cry after reading Liz Williams's "Last Wishes." After the death of her husband, she and her children prepare to carry out his last wishes. It will take several years, however, and family members are uncertain about the whole thing.

Last Wishes

Liz Williams

At first I thought he was just joking again. He was known for frequently making funny remarks, and he didn't take much seriously. "Laughing as you go through life is much better than moaning, groaning and complaining" seemed to be his motto. We had just gotten back from a family trip to Niagara Falls, a place he had always wanted to visit.

"I'm serious," Walton, my husband, pronounced. "I've always wanted to go over Niagara Falls, but I'm not dumb enough to try it now. I'd probably get killed. So, after I die, I want to be cremated, stuffed into a Mason jar and dropped into the Niagara River above the Falls so I can safely go over it. I want you to come with me."

I ignored him for several years. But then his 28 years of fighting diabetes began to take its toll. He was treated for heart failure and had to go on dialysis for several months. Then he rallied and was able to do some traveling. His doctor told me to buy a cell phone and keep it with us as we traveled. If he became ill, I was to take him to the nearest hospital and call him.

Walton's wish was to visit all of the contiguous states before he died. He asked me to visit Hawaii after he died and leave a few ashes. We'd already been to Alaska. Each summer we planned an extended vacation to cover the states we needed to visit. We went to New England, the Plains States, out West, and the desert areas. We visited tourist sites such as LL Bean, the Basketball Hall of Fame, the Football Hall of Fame, Mount Rushmore, the Badlands, the Black Hills, Crater Lake, the Redwoods, Yosemite, the Mojave Desert, and the Grand Canyon. He kept repeating that he wanted to be cremated, stuffed in a Mason jar, and dropped into the Niagara River. He always added he would like me to go with him. He said he was sure I would like the ride and he would wait in his urn until I was ready to go with him. Then our ashes could be intermingled and we could enjoy the trip together. I still wasn't sure he was being serious and neither were the children.

Walton's health declined rapidly that last year, and he died in the early morning after our thirty-second wedding anniversary, one of the few times he actually remembered it. He was cremated. My son accompanied me to the mortuary to select an appropriate urn. Walton, Jr., checked out all the urns and reported back to me. "Mom, nothing looks like it will float. There are no boats or arks. I think we'll have to find something to store him in for a while. Do you think he was serious about all of this, Mom?"

"I don't know, but I guess I'll get cremated also, just in case. But I'm abdicating the decision-making. You all will have to decide after I die."

My husband's ashes are in an urn on one of the bookcases in the den. When we evacuated from New Orleans because of Katrina, we took him with us. We didn't put him in

the trunk, but let him ride in the back of the car on the floor. Now he stays home when we go on vacation.

It's been sixteen years since he died. My son has commented that he'd have to figure out how to attach a floatie to the Mason jar so it wouldn't sink but float over the falls. I recently saw a really big Mason-like jar at Target, but I'm not sure I will mention that to the kids.

Liz Williams Says... I was born into a military family and as a child lived in several different states as well as Japan. I graduated from Vanderbilt University and met my independent-thinking engineer husband-to-be. We married, moved about some, and were able to live in Clermont-Ferrand, France, for a year. We finally settled in New Orleans with our three children and found that our new home was a perfect incubator for individuality. I worked at Newcomb College Nursery School and taught several Early Childhood classes at Delgado Community College and Tulane University.