

## What's Left Behind

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*Published in the award winning 2019 Anthology, She's Got This! J. Hartman & MC Hill, Eds.*

Mingus pulls me forward, his 40-pound canine body all muscle and exploding energy as he strains at the leash. His black nose grazes the earth and he makes his snuffling sound, a sure sign that the hound in him has picked up a mesmerizing scent and he's in full tracking mode. I wrap his leash around my wrist twice, fearing that one day he's going to launch himself into the air above the trail and be gone. Rufus, my smaller dog, will never run away from me. He trots along just a few feet behind me, head high, as though he is proud of keeping up with Mingus's breakneck pace. We are a three-animal parade, out for our daily walk along the trail that runs through Hopkins, a Minneapolis suburb.

We haven't always walked here. After we adopted Mingus as a puppy and realized that he would never settle down at night unless he had serious exercise during the day, we tried the dog park, and then the no-sidewalk streets of a neighborhood full of grand houses and families I know. This wasn't right; I felt too exposed, too envious of those families with their living children and their trauma free lives. Finally, I discovered the crushed gravel trail that runs through the residential heart of Hopkins. I load the dogs into the back of my Forester and we drive to the start of the trail, Mingus howling in anticipation.

The trail is just the right length for a one-hour walk, with ancient oaks and maples overhanging the path as it winds through neighborhoods of small cottages, bungalows, and

ramblers. Over time, we've carved out a regular route that takes us across town, up the steep hill of a park where children rarely play, through some quiet side streets, then back on the trail to our starting point.

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It was January 2, 2012, the day after our 23-year-old son Benjamin died. Rabbi Kravitz would be coming back to our home that morning to help us plan his funeral. I got out of our bed, where my husband, my younger son, and I had clung to each other all night, unable to sleep. We were all in shock, our bodies ringing with the trauma of the day before. I knew that we had many impossible things to do that day, and somehow we would do them.

The first task was mine alone. Bob was unable to go into Benjamin's room after finding him there the day before, and it would not have been fair to ask our 18-year-old son Sam to do it. I waited until the two of them had gone downstairs to find coffee, then took a deep breath and walked down the hall to Benjamin's room. As I pushed open the door, I realized I was talking out loud, praying really: "Please G-d, please help me. Please just let me be able to find this quickly." Holding my body stiff and walking over to Benjamin's dresser, I heard myself repeating, "Please, G-d," over and over again, like a chant. I kept my eyes pointed toward the dresser, unable to face so many things in that room, and opened the top drawer. *Thank G-d, there it is. I don't have to search for it.* I pulled out the bright blue and green batik bag, the one that Benjamin and his grandma made together just before his Bar Mitzvah, the bag that held his tallit, the prayer shawl in which my son would be buried the next day. Holding the bag tightly against

my chest, I turned toward the door and hurried out, finally exhaling as I reached our room. “Thank you, G-d,” I whispered. Later that morning I said goodbye to Benjamin’s tallit as I handed it to our rabbi, but I carried the empty bag around the house for days.

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Walking this trail is like putting on an old shoe, broken in just right. My dogs stop to sniff and pee next to the same bushes, the same trash cans and fire hydrants on every walk, no matter the season. They know the way: where to turn, when to stop at the crosswalk, when to turn their heads in anticipation of other dogs barking from inside the houses we pass. Rufus insists that we stop halfway through our walks in the summer to rest under the same crab apple tree, where the grass is thick and soft. Only a few times has Mingus glimpsed the beautiful cocoa Wiemaraner that lives behind a certain picket fence, but he pauses in front of that house on every walk, searching for the friend he’s never met.

Our walking becomes a practice, a kind of meditation. We walk as the sun grows warm on our backs and green shoots sprout next to the trail. We watch leaves unfurling above us as spring arrives again. I admire longstanding flower gardens that circle the trees on old lawns, and notice wading pools dotting back yards. When fall comes, we kick dry crimson leaves ahead of us as the light grows sparse. We pick our way across icy patches on the trail and hurry along with the wind in our faces, trying to finish our walk before the early dark of winter.

In the beginning, my steps are labored and I struggle to keep up with Mingus. I must build my endurance slowly, adding five minutes to our walk every week or two. When we finish, my feet hurt and my knees shake. After a few months, I notice the beginnings of strength in my

calves and the muscles that support my arthritic knees. One day I'm climbing the big hill in the park without feeling out of breath.

I hear my black running shoes crunching on the gravel; in winter, the soles of my red boots make the snow squeak as we walk along. I revel in the movement, the power to push forward, and the repetition of one step after another. My breathing grows fast and even, heels touching earth, feet rolling forward. Walking is healing; to move my body is to open up the channels where the trauma sits frozen like an ice dam. Step by step, I feel it melting, becoming fluid.

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Every bereaved family has its own calculations to make when it comes to the possessions left behind by our beloveds. Not just what do we keep and what do we donate, but what will be the timeline of our readiness to face the sorting; how will we manage it, in stages or all at once, alone or together? How do we know when we are ready to part with something, or when we may feel tempted to give in to the unfortunate pressure that urges us to "let go" or "move on"? Sometimes that pressure comes from people who think they are helping us, and sometimes from inside ourselves, where we imagine that it must be *time*, whatever that means, *time* to be emptying out drawers or bagging up clothing for Goodwill. And sometimes it's just the pressure of the unbearable pain that arises when we see a certain pair of worn Birkenstocks in a certain closet. Like suddenly ripping the Band Aid off a wound, we stuff the shoes into a big black bag

with some out of style clothes, and set the bag on the front porch for the charity truck to take away.

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One day on our walk, on a quiet street sheltered by oak trees, I spot a little house for rent. It's a square house with a pitched roof and sage green siding, maybe 1,000 square feet altogether. There's a small fenced back yard, a detached garage, and white curtains at the front windows. Every time we walk past, I memorize the phone number on the "For Rent" sign, and imagine myself calling the owner to inquire about when we can move in. Never mind that we own a house twice as big just a few miles away, with probably years of decluttering and repairs ahead of us before we can put it on the market. I am ready to leave today, to move into this small refuge, where the dogs can play safely in the back yard and our lives will be uncomplicated by grief. Or so I imagine.

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Here is the bed in which Benjamin died. His beloved Japanese tatami bed, the one he picked out when we moved into our new house, just as he started fourth grade. The bed that took three months to arrive from Japan. The futon mattress on which he slept every night, under the quilt I made for him, lying on his side with one knee propped up. Here is Benjamin's desk, the place where he sat for hours, typing at lightning speed on his keyboard, watching two monitors at once, connecting with his world. The desk whose drawers once contained the flotsam of a

passionate life: articles copied from economics journals, academic award certificates crammed in alongside concert ticket stubs, a Stride Rite shoe box full of childhood crayons, a box of condoms, computer parts he'd replaced long ago, a soldering gun, mechanical pencils by the dozens, the expired driver's license with the photo that makes me forget to breathe.

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So many of the things our loved ones leave behind have voices and give off light. When they speak to us, they spin images and stories of remembered times, sometimes lit by the warmth of recollection and sometimes opening up holes at the center of our bodies where the loss and the missing still burn. These objects have a way of asserting to us their right to be here, insisting on the correctness of our holding onto them forever. Their argument goes like this: because our beloved once cherished them, there can be nothing right about getting rid of them, because there is nothing right about the absence of the one we love. It was months and months before I could even imagine getting rid of a single object from Benjamin's room.

And yet they are only things, only material objects, and there is a part of me that knows that wherever Benjamin is, in the joyous cosmology of his hero Alan Watts, that he has let go of all of these things. They are no longer in the universe of his attention. I have his permission, somehow, to keep just what has meaning to me.

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Here is the truck from the charity that gathers donated furniture to distribute to previously homeless families who are settling into new homes. The men come up the stairs, and I show

them the bed and the desk that they will take away. The man in charge looks at the desk and shakes his head, telling me that it may be larger than what they can accept. My voice shakes as I assure him that yes, I read the guidelines on the charity website and I measured the desk, and it's just under the size limit. What I don't say is that he *has* to take it, that I have been preparing myself for months, moving small objects around Benjamin's room so that one day I could bear to have some of them leave. That today I am ready, and if he can't take the desk and the bed, I don't know what I will do. He has no idea what this day is costing me. But he takes the bed and the desk, leaving me with the stained futon mattress that I know he cannot take. He must sense my desperation somehow, because he offers to carry the futon down to the outside trash cart for me before he leaves. But it doesn't fit inside the trash cart. As soon as the truck is gone, I drag the mattress into the back of my car, drive it down to the bottom of our driveway, and stand it up against the mailbox. The frigid November wind whips my hair across my wet face as I tape my hastily made sign to the mattress: "Free Twin Futon." I quickly pack up the dogs and drive to the trailhead, my body all hollowed out inside. We walk the trail. And I pray with every step that the futon will be gone when we get home.

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The first spring of our walking, I watch as a giant hole is excavated in an empty lot next to the trail, a towering dirt pile accumulating next to it. Cinder blocks arrive, a basement takes shape and sprouts egress window wells. Beams and rebar span the opening, followed by carpenters framing walls and securing roof trusses. I imagine the couple who will move into this new house. They are in their early sixties, nearing retirement, children launched, and they want

to downsize to a small house with all the rooms on one level. They want to be part of a neighborhood, with sidewalks and walking destinations. They like to garden, but they want a small yard with less grass to mow and lots of mature trees. When the grandchildren come to visit, the adults will sit together on the wide plank front porch and watch the kids run around the yard.

By fall, the house is finished and occupied, with wicker chairs and baskets of golden mums on the porch. Passing by, I picture Bob and me living in this little white cottage with the ocean blue roof. Life is simple there, with my small garden and no stairs to climb, less time spent on house maintenance and more time to write or quilt. It's a fresh start, the opening of a new phase of our lives. It's a home where there is no bedroom in which our son died. Benjamin is surely with us, along with the things he cherished, but the room from which he left this world is in our past. We look forward to having grandchildren; we host gatherings of family and friends again, as we once did when our family was whole.

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I created all kinds of criteria to guide me through the stages of sorting Benjamin's things. Was it something he'd want a friend to have? Was it something he'd be happy to donate to a person who couldn't afford a computer or an electric guitar? Was it something he cherished, or something that reminded me of happier times? Was it something that was so evocative of his sudden death that I couldn't bear to have it in my house? Somehow I decided that nothing that belonged to Benjamin could be sold at my garage sale; I could not take money for anything that was his. But it was okay to put his battered college sofa in the "free" pile, and watch an old



veteran tie it to the roof of his truck with the intention of giving it to a friend coming out of alcohol treatment who had relapsed when his brother suddenly died. And it was okay to give Benjamin's copy of *The Riemann Hypothesis*, a book with more equations than words, to a young man who told me he was majoring in math, who seemed to love math the way Benjamin did.

In the end, the things I cherish are the things that Benjamin loved. His six-volume set of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, the little Buddha he bought in Chicago's Chinatown, favorite t-shirts he wore until they were threadbare, the perpetual calendar I bought him at the Walker Art Center gift shop, the staple-less stapler that fascinated him, his copy of *Jamberry* from childhood. When I hold these objects in my hands, it is not the thing that speaks to me. It's the loving. I am holding onto my son's capacity to love, to greet life with open arms and to hold so much dear and special; his ability to love learning, and his family, and to love these objects that helped to open his beautiful mind. It's the loving I will keep.

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Our walk comes to its end as we reach the parked car. I open the hatchback and Mingus jumps in. He sits on the towel while I lift up Rufus and deposit him next to Mingus. I take off their leashes, and Mingus leans forward to lick my face. Grief quieted for another day, we head for home.

