

A final act of love

After my son's suicide, I sorted through his apartment, his pain, his wishes



Jason Hay, Thanksgiving 2017. (LeeAnne R. Hay)

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I stand in front of the glossy black painted door to his apartment. The key is in my hand, poised before the deadbolt lock. I don't want to open this door. The whine of a hot August wind whips through the covered breezeway of the complex built in the early 1980s style of open hallways. The gust engulfs the moment's anguish, and the heat penetrates the hollowness of grief inside me.

My sense of sight tunnels to just the door, the deadbolt lock and the key. My body is stilled as my mind processes one thought: "I'm about to enter a crime scene where my son, Jason, died."

I turn the key; the door swings open. Gary, my husband, is standing behind me with his hand on my shoulder. The darkness brings forth acrid scents of cleaning fluids. I stand there for a moment, and I adjust to it. I have spent the past four days trying to *adjust* to this tragedy. I am outwardly functioning as The Mother Who Keeps Her Family Together. Internally, there is a grief-stricken mess.

I reach out to the left wall and flick on the light switches. The first thing I notice is a strip of concrete floor where the carpet is missing. I guess the cleaning company I hired before entering my son's one-bedroom apartment removed it. They specialize in "crime scene cleanup." I shiver at the thought. How surreal it is to do a Google search for a company that provides this type of service. Other parents are searching out wedding venues or vacation destinations with grandchildren. We won't have those moments with Jason. He will forever be 30 or younger, alive in our memories alone.

The place is a mess with the clutter of a young man who made his living in information technology. Computers, monitors and video games stand silent with a shroud of dust covering them all. The small kitchen has cabinets filled with cookware and utensils that are stacked up and clean. The refrigerator reveals the truth, full of weeks-old takeout boxes and expired condiments.

Gary softly says, "I'll start to box up the heavy stuff. Why don't you empty the drawers, search the mail, and try to find all his paperwork."

As I walk into Jason's bedroom, my mind visits the comfort of the past. Jason is 14. Gary and I take him and our other three kids to see the new house we bought before celebrating our wedding and blending two families into one. Jason isn't happy about having to change school districts as he starts high school. We let him have the first choice of the four kids' bedrooms as a small consolation. We thought that his outward sullenness was a teenage reaction to a situation not in his control. We believed that unconditional love, therapy and a nurturing home environment would help him reconcile his issues.

I come back to the present and am standing like a statue as my heart sinks. The comfort gives way to the acknowledgment that once he turned 18, he made his own choices. He did not continue treatment and randomly stopped and started taking medications throughout his 20s. Whether he did this as a misguided attempt to assert his independence, we will never know. Despite a safety net of family support, his illness would manifest itself in taking his own life, and here I am now.

I gather all the piles of unopened mail and unbox a brand-new paper shredder Gary has found in a closet. I empty dresser drawers and toss the contents into three stacks on the floor: keep, donate, trash. More than anything at that moment, I want to find a confirmation that Jason had known pleasure and joy in his life. If only that alone could be a salve to me now.

I empty the shredder three times of the collected confetti-like bits from the documents I am feeding into it. Months of old utility bills never opened yet paid by autodraft are the most common. The runner-up is in traffic warnings and citations for the infractions of failing to signal, driving with an expired registration, and parking at meters that ran out of time. I think that our family has run out of time with Jason, too.

I gather all the medical discharge papers and prescriptions written and signed by those who failed miserably at "doing no harm." I wonder if there is anything here that might reveal why this has happened. I place these papers in a black basket that chronicles the tragic end of a young man who broke with reality, sought help and didn't get it despite having insurance.

I find a receipt from an outdoor sports store. The time on it confirms Jason had purchased a gun at 8:07 p.m. on a Saturday night. I hold it in my hand for several minutes just staring at it, wondering why a person with mental illness documented by local police, a county hospital and a private hospital was allowed to buy another gun. I place it like another brick of anguish into the basket too.

At 8:54 p.m. that same night Jason texted a group message to our immediate family and two of his friends. He wrote, "Hello all, I just want to tell everyone that I love them. ... I cc'd my friends so everyone can support everyone." Frantic messages and calls to his cellphone went unanswered. The police were notified by two of us on the group text.

My husband's cellphone rang a few hours later that night. The caller ID showed it was Jason. Gary quickly picked up and said, "Hello, Jason?" The voice replied, "This is County Medical Examiner Investigator Smith. I am sorry to tell you that Jason fatally injured himself tonight. Who are you, a friend?" Gary replied, "No, I'm his father."

As I overheard the call, my husband choked back tears and handed me the phone. I remember the investigator's voice asking me questions that I must have answered. I recall him gently telling me to "write this information

down.” I obeyed his quiet instructions as I accepted his apologies for having to provide me with the mundane details of something so unimaginable.

Jason was found dead at 9 p.m. when the police entered his apartment. The door was unlocked. He had left a note on top of his work phone that needed to be returned to his employer. He had also called 911. He told the dispatcher, “I’ve done something, and you will just have to send somebody out here to find out what it is.” Then, he ended the call. His phone was set to not accept incoming texts. He never saw our pleas; he never answered the call his distraught father made to save his life.

Sleep eluded us that night. The early morning brought another jolting call on Gary’s phone. It was a woman from Donate Life, a state registry. She said, “I am so sorry about your loss. I wanted to tell you that Jason had chosen to be an organ donor on his driver’s license.” Gary placed her call on the speaker. “His corneas can give sight to two people, and tissue and bone donations would help over 70 more,” she said. “Will you give permission to honor Jason’s wishes?” she asked. From deep within me, I broke and bent over wracked with sobs. Gary held me and told her, “Yes, I give my permission.”

“OK then, I have to ask some personal questions about his lifestyle and health history,” she said. Gary looked at me and touched my hand.

My worst day as a mother would be another mother’s answered prayers.

I wiped my face, composed myself and helped Jason with this last act of love. Medical history and a detail of his personal habits came tumbling out of me; he never smoked or did street drugs and didn’t drink after college. I clung to this unknown woman’s voice as the sustenance I needed to accept that Jason’s death was not a waste. An innocuous check mark on a form Jason made when he was 16 years old was the difference between sight and blindness, life and death for others’ destiny.

I take another black basket and fill it with more random documents that provide phone numbers and potential creditors that might need a contact in the coming weeks. Along with a sentimental Disney snow globe I had bought Jason during his teen years, I am ready to leave his apartment. I know we will have to return to finalize the removal of furniture and clothes, but not this day.

Two weeks later, I am here, again, at this place where Jason died. It has taken every ounce of inner strength and emotional self-control for me to be here so that my husband is not alone. Gary’s promise that I will not have to come back here after today is no relief because it is not entirely true. I will not drive by the highway exit, nor pass through this suburb again without being pulled back to the trauma of losing a child by his own hand.

A moving company that donates all usable goods to local charities is here to finalize the apartment’s emptying. While three young men load a truck, we stand by the balcony sliding glass doors. It is a pleasant view from the second floor overlooking a courtyard with large trees. It is hard for me.

“I know this isn’t the fanciest place, but he could have had a nice life here. This is so hard to watch the last of his things be carried out,” I think out loud. Gary stands behind me with his arm around my shoulders and echoes, “I feel it, too.”

The crew leader asks us to do a final walk-through and for payment. As he is leaving, he stops and says, “Again, I’m sorry for your loss.”

We both thank him, then stare for a moment at one another. We walk out the doorway, and I turn and face the glossy black door one last time. I put the key in the lock and turn it; nothing could ever be worse than this. Gary takes my hand in his, and a veil of warm wind shepherds us, drying my tears as I walk away.

If you have thoughts of suicide, please call 1-800-273-TALK to reach the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline anytime. I promise you are not alone.

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