

Shoes

Nine big boxes came back home. Boxes of clothing, boxes of books and photo albums and papers, umpteen athletic bags, three bikes, golf clubs, four pairs of skis...random belongings of a tall, energetic, active son who was kicked to death by bouncers in Atlantic City, NJ, during a bachelor party with college buddies. Our twenty-four year old son Peter died in July 2001.

I never guessed it would take so long. After four and a half years, we've nearly finished sorting through the boxes. We rented a storage unit. Slowly and deliberately, every few months, we spent a couple hours going through his stuff, saying good-bye, saying hello. We were getting to know him all over again. We looked into every notebook, searched every pocket for what my husband called "hidden treasures," re-sorted, took home a few items for our own closets. Several t-shirts and baseball caps were given to his friends, household goods were appropriated by his sisters, and carloads went to charity. Mark, shorter than his son by a couple inches, decided to rebuild Peter's bike — one Peter built for a high school class project — and he's ridden it on many long-distance trips. Recently Mark took one of Peter's business suits in for alterations, still unwilling to toss the expensive purchase from Jermyn Street in London where Peter was working as an investment banker at the time of this death.

For me, it's the shoes. I just can't part with the shoes.

My fixation started with black Bally loafers soon after the moving truck pulled out of our driveway. Not able to stop myself from exhorting the young men unloading the boxes to be careful when they went to bars with their buddies, I started pawing through the boxes as soon as they left. At the top, just under creamy white packing paper, I found the Bally loafers that Peter had worn on the last day my family spent together. I snatched one of the shoes, sniffed it, hugged it to my chest. Then I took the shoe, my

journal and a few photos down to the lake behind our house in order to spend time alone with Peter on the dock which had already become my mourning bench. The shoe was an immediate, visceral link to the living, breathing son whom I could hardly believe would not be coming home again.

A few months later, in the early fall, I buried that black Bally loafer under red tulip bulbs in a new garden patch I planted in memory of Peter. Digging in the clay, tucking the shoe among bulbs, smoothing the surface of the soil with my bare hands, the task gave me a sense of grounding Peter again in the yard where he'd kicked soccer balls and he and his Dad had played lacrosse, among the bushes he used to trample in pursuit of balls, at the edge of the lawn he used to mow to earn his allowance. When a crew came last year to plant new arborvitae in the spot which had proved too shady for tulips, I wondered if they'd uncover the shoe and what they'd think if they did. Sure enough. When I went to inspect their work at the end of the day, the loafer was sitting on top of fresh mulch next to a new tree. It sits there still.

My husband tries to wear the brown business tie shoes. He polished them and put them in his closet. I can recognize them as Peter's whenever he wears them because of the gap at the back of his heel. Peter's size fourteen shoes are hard to fill.

Such a motley, well-worn collection. Raggedy athletic shoes, spanking white leather tennis shoes, Doc Martens purchased in London when his parents came to visit during his college junior year abroad, indoor soft-soled soccer shoes, outdoor soccer cleats – still stinky – along with shin guards, bike shoes and three pairs of ski boots as well as one pair of boot covers to keep his feet warm in below-zero Minnesota temps.

Most of the shoes are still tied! That speaks volumes about the personality of the active young man who wore them. Too busy to bend down to untie them, he'd rather put the toe of one against the heel of the other to work his way out of the shoe in a hurry.

Each shoe tells its story. Its creases and muscle marks, its lining worn away, the treads full of mud. Each tells of miles trodden and adventures enjoyed. And Peter's foot inhabited every one of them! They took him places. They helped him accomplish dreams, win games, ski slopes, tackle business. They held his life and his breath.

I'll get over the shoes. God knows I've gotten over a lot more than I ever thought I could. Now I know grief is a journey with its own many steps, a process with its own timetable which takes us places we never intended, or wanted, to go. It's a journey on which we are embarked and from which we learn in spite of our moments of intransigence.

I'm confident I'll be able to part with the shoes eventually. For now, just today, I'll gaze at them awhile longer, remember the tall lanky son who wore them, sigh a couple times, shed a few tears. Maybe tomorrow I'll take them to Goodwill. Hopefully another young man with size fourteen feet will be able to put them to good use.

I hesitate...maybe the brown and white golf shoe would look good among my pansies.