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A man says,

Honey, I'm getting in that line.

The Trail
Non-Fiction by Julie Wittes Schlack

Three years ago, on a damp January night in Vermont, our friends' twenty-four-year-old son Sam killed himself. It took about a week after his disappearance for his body to be discovered hanging from a tree, at the summit of a hiking trail that had long been one of the family's favorites.

Today – a gorgeous, sunny early September day when the sky is clear, the temperature warm but not cloying, the scent of pines and mud pure and sharp – I took a hike on what I think was that same trail. I hadn't started with that intention – I chose it because it was nearby, promised a great view, and was a convenient way to spend a few hours while my husband Mark went bike-riding with Sam's father, Steve. It was only when I got to the well-concealed trailhead that I suspected that this might have been the place.

Mark and Steve met ten years ago when both were working on the same publication, a leading computer magazine innocuously headquartered in a tiny town in New Hampshire to better accommodate the lifestyle choices of its founders. The magazine attracted an odd lot of technologically sophisticated hippies, survivalists, libertarians, and geeks who were bound largely by their passion for country living and contempt for the pace, noise, and pollution of the city. Steve, a native New Yorker like Mark but with an even broader accent and more acerbic personality, was an editor there. Mark was his boss and, to some extent, protector against colleagues who felt scraped by Steve's rough edges.

I met Steve and his wife Sandi for the first time in Athens, Greece, on a press boondoggle. While Mark and Steve dutifully went to meetings and seminars by day, Sandi and I, two strangers thrown together by circumstance, explored the ruins and markets of the city. She was wiry, curious, and a little distant – a freckled, crooked-toothed, self-contained, somewhat sarcastic

woman whose life seemed to revolve around her husband, her garden, and her own thoughts.

Steve and Sandi sprang from the same roots – both city-born-and-raised Peace Corps alumni, who, at some point, deliberately left their social activism and urban roots behind and constructed a life in rural Vermont for themselves and their three sons. Steve spoke with some pride about how they'd worked the system, intentionally making little enough money to ensure that their sons were eligible for need-based scholarships to private boarding schools and later universities. They puzzled me, having created this small, idyllic, and apparently well-fortified life for their family in Marlboro, then shedding their children, sending each of them away to boarding school from sixth grade onward. Perhaps at that time, with a newly empty nest, I was especially prone to judgment, but their equation eluded me. I understood trading off a culturally rich but expensive life with your kids in the city for a slower-paced and less expensive life with your kids in the country, but I didn't understand voluntarily absenting yourself from your kids a minute before you had to. But as our conversation inevitably turned to our children, and Sandi spoke about the travel, sports, and learning that prep schools had afforded her sons, I began to see that providing *opportunity* was her expression of maternal love, in some ways, a rather selfless gift.

Three years after that trip to Greece, on a Monday in January, Steve called Mark to say that he would not be in. His oldest son Sam, who had graduated from college the previous spring and was once again living at home, was missing. He'd gone to a party at a friend's house in New Hampshire on Saturday night, left around 1 a.m., and still wasn't back in Marlboro. They weren't too worried yet, Steve said calmly, and no traffic accidents involving Sam's car had been reported.

"Who knows, he might have met a girl and just gone back to her place," Steve speculated, but Mark said his hope sounded hollow.

On Wednesday, Mark told me that Sam was still missing, and that Steve and his son Michael, still home for the holidays, had driven up and down every twisty, icy road between Peterborough, New Hampshire, and Marlboro, but seen no sign of Sam's car. By the time he phoned in to the office on Friday, Steve sounded hoarse with exhaustion.

"There's nothing more I can do," he explained, "but I need to stay with Sandi. She's not sleeping, and I need to at least get her to eat and talk and do something besides sit by the phone."

"Could Sam have just impulsively decided to get away?" Mark asked.

"Maybe," Steve answered with no conviction. "I mean he wasn't thrilled to be home – who would be, after being away for four years...anyhow, if Sandi's all right, I'll be in on Monday."

"No news," he tersely told Mark on Monday when he arrived at work, then retreated to his office for the balance of the day.

On Tuesday, Steve didn't phone or show up at work. Mark didn't phone him, by now knowing what he'd hear and delaying the conversation for both their sakes.

On Wednesday, Steve called. The previous morning, on a hunch, he and Michael had driven to the base of a trail where the family used to hike and saw Sam's car, with a dent in the right fender, pulled off the road, halfway into the woods. There were two empty Jack Daniels bottles in the front seat. He and Michael climbed the trail. There was far less snow than usual that winter, but the path was slippery and sullen, with rocks erupting through the ice like boils. At least that is what I imagine, and I try to stop at that, because the next thing I imagine is the sight of Sam hanging from a tree.

"We're thinking maybe he was drunk and he hit something," Steve told Mark, "– a tree or a mailbox or another car – and he felt so guilty, you know? Felt like such a screw-up for doing it..."

What a pathetic attempt to make sense of the incomprehensible, Mark and I agreed. But this baffled grasping was something we understood. A few years earlier, our daughter had suffered from depression and we were still haunted by the sight of her in that period, huddled up wordlessly in a corner of the couch, the quilt wrapped around her woman's body and child's face. Bewildered, we'd rifled through our memories of the preceding years in a frenzied quest for viruses, genes, critical moments when we'd done the wrong thing, any answer at all to the question: How could this be our golden child?

For all of our harsh introspection, our criticism and self-criticism, we didn't find ourselves guilty. Looking at ourselves, we saw moments of immaturity, of poor judgment, of tempers lost when they should have been reined or anger constrained when it should have been expressed. But we could find no trauma, no pattern of neglect or cruelty or indifference or disapproval that could propel our daughter to such despair. We knew we'd adored her, respected her, been delighted by her, allowed her to bring out the best in ourselves in caring for her, and yet none of that was enough. What we felt – what I felt – was not so much guilt as a sense of absolute bewilderment and failure. I'd brought this extraordinary person into the world and I'd failed to keep her whole and safe, failed to help her find joy in life and in herself. How could my limitless love not have been enough?

On Saturday, as raw and gray and heartless a day as I can remember, at her son's funeral, I met Sandi for the second time. The small wooden church was packed. It seemed as if this town really was one big family, as one person after another stood to share memories of Sam – his first-grade teacher, his next-door neighbor, schoolmates, the soccer coach. They all spoke about his talents, his promise, his opportunity now so lost. Then Michael, his pimply seventeen-year old face clenched and damp, his skinny frame trembling beneath an absurdly crisp, white shirt and red necktie, who stood to say "I don't know why

you did this, Sam, and I don't know if I can ever forgive you, but you're my brother and I love you."

Mark and I wept. We gripped one another's hands and, in shame, shared the prayer of horrified thanks that this was not our daughter, not our unbearable loss, not our incredulous grief to bear every day for the rest of our lives.

After the service, feeling like a voyeur, truly like I'd fallen into someone else's nightmare, I looked at the three poster boards in the clapboard reception hall, each covered with photos of Sam as a baby, as a toddler, in his soccer uniform, with his brothers, at the beach, with a face full of ice cream, in a cap and gown, sleeping in his mother's arms, burying his younger brothers in sand, clowning with friends, dozing in a lawn chair, tossing a ball, leaning out a car window with the sun in his eyes and the wind whipping back his thick black hair – the pictures jammed together, overlapping, providing frenzied evidence that yes, he had been loved.

I signed the book to indicate we'd been there, briefly clasped Sandi's hand but saw no recognition in her dazed eyes, and fled.

Steve took a leave of absence from work, but he and Mark spoke occasionally on the phone. He and Sandi were in grief counseling, Mark reported, but according to Steve, Sandi was still shattered. Mark sensed that Steve was in need of distraction and eager to get back to work, so about two months after Sam's death, Mark said we should go up and pay them a visit.

It was a typical limbo-like March day, neither winter nor spring, the sun so pale as to be almost indistinguishable from the tired clouds. The four of us ate lunch, compared the benefits of front-wheel to all-wheel drive on mountain roads, and took a short walk to the school up the road. Sandi showed us three trees that had been planted there in Sam's memory, and that was the first time his name was mentioned. When we returned to the house, Mark and Steve went out for a drive in Steve's new Subaru, and Sandi and I went into the living room to

talk. The room was dim, and the poster boards of photos were there, propped up side by side against the bookshelves. In the pauses in our conversation, I could hear the clock tick and the old farmhouse floor creak with each step taken by their aged golden retriever.

"How are you doing?" I asked her.

"Oh, pretty awful," she answered in a taut voice. Then she gave me a pained smile. "You know, you're the first person to have asked me that since Sam died. Our neighbors have been wonderful in their way, bringing us food and planting trees and stacking our firewood. But they're all afraid to ask me," she said, sounding mystified. "They're afraid to talk to me about Sam, almost like they don't want to *remind* me." She laughed bitterly, then lapsed into silence.

That was the last time I saw Sandi, and she wasn't home earlier today when I dropped Mark off to go biking with Steve. We arranged to meet up at the house later in the afternoon, then I set off for this trail, which our guide book referred to as "one of the best-kept secrets in Southeastern Vermont." I had to look closely to find the turn-off to the dirt road that led to it, and almost passed the entrance to the trail itself. It started in woods, then climbed from shade to dappled sunlight to finally, rocks and meadow, circling hawks, and a gorgeous view of the Green Mountains to the west and Mt. Monadnock to the east.

It was on the way down, as I once again passed from sunlight to shade and the sweat on my skin started to chill me that it occurred to me that this might have been the place. I started and then couldn't stop imagining winter. I pictured Steve and Michael, cold and wet, gloveless, snot streaming from their noses, bile in their throats, tears streaming from wind-ravaged eyes, stumbling up this trail, fear and hope thrusting them onward, dread making them sick. Then I passed a big old tree with a solid L-shaped branch, one round and massive arm jutting out from the trunk almost perpendicular to the ground, just right for a gallows.

Don't be morbid, I told myself. This probably wasn't the tree. This probably wasn't even the mountain. But it could have been. And other than Steve and Michael, who would ever know? There would be no plaque nailed into the tree, no leftover rope still slung around the branch, no signs of Sam's life or his death in this or any forest.

When I got back to the house, Sandi was out front, gardening. She came over to greet me and dirt-crusted hands outstretched to either side, gave me a bird-like peck on the cheek. We went inside the house, where the late afternoon sun bounced off the dark television screen, creating an astonishing indoor glare. Michael, about a foot taller and a foot wider than the last time I'd seen him, came into the kitchen for a glass of lemonade. Then Geoff, their middle son, recently graduated and once again living at home, came in from his job as a house painter, the white spatters in startling contrast to his tanned arms and luminous green eyes. These were two handsome guys, and when they said, "We're just going out to hit a few balls," I felt that I was in the kind of normal household that only exists on television.

Sandi washed her hands, then we went into the living room and drank iced tea. Their new puppy, Wanda, skittered wildly around the wooden floor. Sun poking in through blinds and crooked curtains made jigsaw splashes of light in the room. Sandi seemed well, and because she seemed well, it seemed presumptuous to acknowledge it. After all, this was only the third time we'd ever met. And so we talked about Sandi's job, about the price of the firewood newly stacked up in their front yard, about the joys of fresh tomatoes. The conversation was cordial, a little forced, the exchange of two old acquaintances that had little reason and no particular interest in being closer friends than that. Our last visit's intimacy – borne of grief and shared confidences about our desperate children – was real but transient, and receded in the bright, mundane light of a Sunday afternoon.

Still propped up against the bookshelves, side by side and unmoved, were the three poster boards of Sam. The photos had lost their gloss, the edges of some had curled, and the images were somewhat faded from the relentless sunlight.

Does she still see them? I wondered. Can she see anything else?

Pedagogy
Poetry by Tim Skeen

One day after work, my father brings
home the Zenith short wave radio
from a second hand store.
It's the radio they couldn't afford
when he was a kid. It had followed
Patton's army as it fought across Europe,

MacArthur's return to the Philippines,
John L. Lewis's UMW victories.
The radio opened like a tackle box,
and when I turned the knobs,
a light came on to illuminate silence.
That radio never did make a sound,

so I began with a book about steam shovels
held close to its light. While I read aloud,
I pretended to hear over the airwaves
my own voice, not tentative, more like
a trusted announcer who knows things
I could never learn on my own.