

Return

Tanya Mudrick

Madison, WI

HONORABLE MENTION

I second guess myself every time I travel to my wife's grave. Is it a left and two rights? Do we turn at that big tree? Where is the rock that marks the spot? My stepson's feet know the way even if he claims he does not recognize where we are in the changing woods. His heart always leads him to his mother.

To be honest, burial wasn't the first choice for my wife. She wanted her body donated to The Body Farm where it would decompose in the open and be studied by forensic anthropologists. It may sound odd to those who didn't know her, but she loved tv shows like "Bones" and "CSI". Then she went and died during a pandemic and The Body Farm couldn't take donations.

I must admit I'm glad she is still close to home. Now we can visit her more. Our two-year-old asks, "Can we visit Mama's cave?" "Sure we can lovey, but it's not a cave, it's a grave." I suppose in some way he is sort of correct. It is kind of like a cave. At our small burial he helped pour shovels of dirt over his mother's casket with his big brother. His contribution to our makeshift service was the picture book "Mama Loves You So." Devastating, though the death was not unexpected. Lavender was diagnosed with stage 4 kidney cancer when he was four months old.

The woods are a good place to be devastated, or overwhelmed, furious, shocked, and exhausted. The woods hold you regardless of what you feel. It is good to sit with your back against a tree and breathe or sob, whatever you need to do. So much nicer than a more conventional cemetery with the rows of tombstones and the manicured lawns. The woods remind you that your loved one is part of nature, at home with the trees, plants, and wildlife. The woods remind you that your loved one is part of all the life around you. *Life*, not death.

When we visit we return to the woods, and Lavender returns to the woods. Equally important, we return to ourselves. Natural Path provides the living and the dead with sanctuary. We are away from our phones and computers. We are together as a family. We can be present with our thoughts and feelings, whatever grief looks like to each of us that day.

I watch the boys run and play by their Mama's grave. Sometimes they laugh together. Sometimes we make things out of leaves and branches to leave as gifts. It is peaceful and beautiful, a healing place. Some days we don't have time to stay very long. That's ok, we'll return again soon.