

## How to Lose a Parent: a Guide

### Step One: Guilt

Do you ever lie awake in bed at night and come up with scenarios in your head that will likely never happen? In my earliest memories, I imagined myself meeting the cast of *Grease*, and the young John Travolta sweeping me off my feet. As I grew older, the scenarios grew with me; every night, I got the guy, unlike when I went to school during the day. I don't know how dark your fantasies ever get, but at some point mine drifted into unnerving territory. Have you ever imagined someone's romantic feelings for you being spurred by sympathy? Something terrible happens to you, and your best friend, with whom you've been in unrequited love for years, realizes how much you mean to him and whisks you away as his lover?

March 22, 2009: I lay in bed and had that thought about a boy named Drew. I had been best friends with him for years, and was certain at the time that I was in love with him. That night the thought entered my mind. I painted a vision for myself to enjoy: my father dies suddenly, and at the funeral, Drew, caught up in sympathy, realizes life is too short: he is in love with me, and he needs me to be his girlfriend. I fell asleep knowing the impossible would never happen, and *that* life is but a dream. There's no guilt in my sleep because I think, *surely it will never happen*.

March 23, 2009: My father drops dead in the driveway. I don't get the guy. Of course, I don't say goodbye to my father's still body in the hospital while hoping Drew will burst through the door and ask me to be his girlfriend. But it would've been nice to have some compensation for my shitty fate

that day. Instead my mind falls back to those dark thoughts: *Did I wish my father's death?* I know I didn't. I know I couldn't. I loved my father with all of my heart. It was a twisted coincidence. My fantasy had become my terrible reality.

I kept thinking about this horrible feeling of guilt. Every little thing, things that would otherwise have meant nothing, suddenly felt like a thing that got in the way of me saying goodbye to my father. I thought I was coming down with a cold. So what! My father was coming down with death! I'd seen him the morning he died, looked him in the eyes and said nothing. Not a "Good morning," not a "See you after school." My aversion to morning conversation was now a huge regret. My last words to him were: "Get up and do it yourself."

## **Step Two: Adjustment**

Shortly after my father's passing, my mom came home with a new tattoo. Her pale leg now read, "It is what it is" in a script font. Everyone we knew gave her a sad look, thinking, *What a weird way to commemorate the loss of her beloved husband.* She swore the meaning wasn't necessarily sad. It's just how life goes: it *is* what it is.

We'd all taken this attitude from day one. One of the first things my mom said to me after it happened was: "This is the new normal." I spent weeks training my brain to stop expecting my father to be on the other end of my mom's phone conversations or to walk through the front door. I did what I was supposed to do. I went back to school. I took all the sympathy glances with a

shrugged smile, because that's what I was supposed to do, right? Was I supposed to be in the guidance counselor's office? Was I supposed to start flunking all my classes? No. I had taken my week off, and now everything was supposed to be better and life is supposed to keep moving forward. So I don't remember moping around school, because I didn't. I took the time I needed to catch up on missed work. I asked my teachers, "Are you *sure* I don't need to turn this in?" and jumped back into it. Then the lies started.

I'd been a big part of my church youth group for all of my adolescent life. When my father died I became like a faith celebrity. My faith must be so strong to be able to handle this! God is really taking care of my family, isn't he? I bought into all of it. As soon as my father hit the ground, I was waiting for the lesson. Life is supposed to teach us lessons, right? That's why bad things happen — so we can learn from them, right?

But when your father drops dead in your driveway, it's a little hard to find a lesson, so you take what you can get. Everyone told me, "Bad things happen to good people!" as if suddenly I was this selfless saint who had never done anything to deserve what I got. I don't think I was a bad person, but I don't know that I would've considered myself a "good" person either. But I must have been, because my father died. Bad things happen to good people, and God works in mysterious ways — these were my lessons.

After the shock of losing a parent starts to wear off, you start to question it: Why would this happen? Who is responsible? When you're a youth group kid, it's easy to answer these questions:

God did it because that's what His plan entailed. Simple. You sum up all of life's confusing twists into one answer: God's plan. If you can really believe in this mindset, it's a nice cop-out to have. You don't have to ask the hard questions because you already know the answer. It's like a parent saying, "Because I said so." It's a dead-end answer. You either find comfort in it or live your whole life running into a wall that simply isn't going to get knocked down.

Within 24 hours of his passing, I had updated my Ancestry.com family tree. That's how I made the adjustment in my head: I updated the status of my father to "deceased," and carried on with my life. Everyone around me knew what had happened. I didn't have to answer any questions; I just had to keep moving forward.

### **Step Three: Relapse**

The nice thing about a quick adjustment is the obvious: everything is fine. People ask how you're doing, and the answer is: fine. The death of your father is no longer this tragedy you're working through; it's a fact that is a part of you.

The downside is the idea that you can't just bury your feelings and hope they go away. They never go away; they just grow and transform, and eventually you have to deal with something completely different than the original feelings you were avoiding.

I'd written about my father's death for an English class assignment in eighth grade, about six months after it happened. My peers and teacher thought it was so brave and poignant that I could write about something as tragic as this so soon. Little did I know, I couldn't. Sure, that essay told the story of what happened the day my father died, but I had no idea what that even *meant* at the time. In my first semester of college I took "Edgy Memoirs," a nonfiction-writing workshop. I wanted to write about all the weird crazy things I'd done with my friends in my senior year of high school. But for some reason it all brought me back to my father.

My professor pushed me to write about him, and the result wrecked me. I sat down to write a piece about losing my father and I cried. I had been without him for almost six years, and I thought I had already been through everything: he'd missed my angsty teen years, my sister's wedding, my high school graduation, the birth of his first grandchild. Yet here I was crying because I couldn't figure out who I would have been if he had never died. I fell into a bit of an identity crisis. I thought about every important choice I might have made differently: the high school I chose for myself, the colleges I applied to—would all of this have happened if he hadn't died?

My confusion encapsulated a mixture of emotions: anger at God for letting this happen to *me*, a previously righteous saint; frustration at the fact that there was nothing I could do about it; disappointment in myself for not knowing my father better. There were little things I knew he'd thought about me, for which I had no explanation. My mom once mentioned a journal of my father's she had found in which he'd written: "I wish I could have the kindness of Kamaron." Where did that come from? I was never a bad kid, but he was the kindest man anyone had ever met.

How could he have envied me? Then my uncle wrote in my graduation card a quote from my father: “She will be my smart one.” How did he know? I got good grades, sure, but I was nothing special. All his kids are pretty smart. What did he see in me? This begged the bigger question: what does he think of me now?

God tested Job by allowing Satan to burn Job’s house down, kill all his children, destroy all his cattle, and cover his body in painful sores. At the end of the story God goes off on Job, basically saying, *who do you think you are compared to me, the almighty God?* When Job accepts this, God gives him back double what he’s lost. The lesson is that Christians cannot understand what God is doing in their lives because He’s going to work it out in the end. This does not comfort me. When all these questions flooded my thoughts every day, all I could think was *how could God do this to me?* It’s fucked up. How could he do that to Job? God in that story is a high school bully to me. He has Job in a chokehold, saying, “Who’s the best guy in school? Who’s bigger and better than Job?” and he won’t let go until Job grovels. That is not the God I signed up for.

There was never a chance that I could have saved my father’s life. Not six minutes after, and especially not six years later. But I wish I had asked more questions. I wish I had cried more. I wish I’d talked about it beyond the superficial college essay I presented whenever someone asked about my dad. It’s okay to cry and be angry and confused right after it happens; it seems a little weird to be doing it all six years later in your college dorm room.

#### **Step 4: Haunting**

I can't pinpoint exactly when the dreams started, but I know when they started feeling real. It was normal for my dad to casually appear in a random dream as if he had never died, but he would be very dream-like. Like he would just be sitting in the living room, not saying or doing anything, and I would carry on as if everything was normal until I woke up, sad that he wasn't really back in my life.

Around the time I rehashed the grief, in that first semester of college, he started appearing in my dreams. Now, not only would he be in the living room, or wherever, he would talk to me. On one occasion, while in real life I was hiding a new boyfriend from my mom, my father was yelling at me in a dream for not telling him about the guy. I woke up and told my mom about my boyfriend. In another dream, he commented on my nose ring, which I'd only recently gotten.

The most recent dream was the most vivid. He was there, and all my siblings were there too. We were sitting around just talking, as if nothing was strange. My sister Kari said, "Are we all going to wake up and be sad?" meaning we all knew my dad was only visiting in this dreamscape. I looked at him and he was smiling with saddened eyes, as if he knew this was temporary too. I sat next to him and fell apart, crying, "It's not fair! It's not fair!" He hugged me and said, "I know. It's not fair for me either," and I drifted back to consciousness, crying into my pillow. I knew it was strange and unlikely, but I truly believed I had just spoken with my dead father.

There was a time, probably in high school, when I got to a point where I wasn't thinking about him every day. That went out the window with my relapse. Sometimes it felt like a minute didn't go by when I wasn't thinking about my father. I was trying to manage the whole college transition at the

same time I was revisiting the grief leftover from the loss of my father and questioning what that meant for my identity, and it consumed me. I had to face the questions most people ask themselves at my age while also wondering what my father would say about my answers. It might not have been so exhausting if I hadn't been attending a school whose dominant theology was completely contradictory to his politics.

My father was an avid Republican. I thought I should be, too, until I got to high school and figured out what that really meant. I never understood how my father, who was unemployed for most of the last five years of his life, could support such a wealth-centric agenda. I'd never really thought of myself as an avid anything until I got to college, but suddenly I was using terms like "gentrification" and "cultural appropriation." I wondered whether my father would still claim me if he was around.

Once again I was faced with a wall of unanswerable questions. What did Dad think about Iraq? What would Dad say about ISIS? Why did Dad love Bush so much? Did Dad ever experience racism like this? I had nothing. The day Obama was elected president in 2008, I only remember my dad watching the news sighing, "Well, we lost." I now found myself asking, "Lost what?"

I walked around with the spirit of my father hunched over my shoulders. I constantly wondered whether he would approve of me, whether he would let me have my own opinions. Not that he was oppressive or disrespectful, but the rest of my family had already started to see me as a radical liberal, and they are mostly Democrats themselves. I wondered how I'd turned out so different.



## Step Five: Survival

Throughout my childhood my mom always joked about how she would have to be the first parent to die, because if my dad went first me and my siblings would have to pull her out from under the bed. The funny thing is, we didn't. She had to turn her whole life around—get a full time job, take over all the bills, deal with my father's debts—and she did it. I think it's comforting to take pride in the small victories. Every time we fix a toilet or move furniture without a “Man of the house,” I'm able to look up at the sky and say, “See? We don't *need* you!” Then I look around me and think yeah, my life may have been easier with my dad, but I'm doing just fine without him.

There has to be a point when you tell yourself: stop it. Stop questioning yourself; stop festering with anger, stop waiting for something to change. Nothing is going to change. Time is going to keep moving forward and one hundred years from now your father is still going to be dead. You don't need to accept it; you need to keep living with it until you drop dead in the driveway or wherever.

Little pieces of my father still lived in our house. There was a piece of him in our cat, Pyewacket. He had been somewhat indifferent toward her, but she loved how he'd rub her back with his foot. My father's last words to me were, “Open the door for the cat.” Pyewacket walked around the house in the days after his death knowing something was different, like animals that know when a storm is coming. She couldn't speak her sadness, but we felt the confusion in her meows. She died six years after him.

“Well, I don’t really believe that pets go to heaven,” said my mom, delivering the cat’s eulogy. “But if they do, I sure hope Alvin is rubbing your back with his foot. And I hope you weren’t in any pain. You were a good cat.” She wiped her face, and we took a moment of silence.

The situation was bittersweet on my end. I was not sad to see the cat go. I might even say I was glad to be done with her. I was however, disconcerted. Every time the house creaked after my father died, a little bit of me hoped it was him, only to be dashed a second later when I remembered he was dead, and it was just the cat. After the cat died, whenever I heard a creak in the house I didn’t know what to think.

My mom had also kept my dad’s cell phone number. She paid ten extra dollars on our phone bill every month just to ensure no one else was assigned that phone number and to keep his voicemail running. He didn’t even have a personalized message except for the “Alvin McNair” part, which he’d recorded, but that was enough for her sometimes, just to hear that bit of his voice.

Nearly seven years after his passing, I still wake up every day and have to tell myself my father is dead. It’s one of two truths I have to accept: life and death. I am alive and my father is dead. There’s nothing else to it. There’s not a lesson to be learned here. There is no comfort in knowing he’s in a better place, or that he was a great person. This doesn’t make me a better person, or mean my life is special. It means I have a dead parent. Every time I meet someone new eventually the question comes up: what about your parents? I can keep up the façade, only mentioning my mom when it

comes to my home life, but at some point everyone wonders about this missing piece to my life. Did he leave me? Are my parents separated? No, he's just dead. It is what it is.