

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a bright red jacket and light blue jeans, is seen from behind, sitting in a grey rowing boat on a calm, misty lake. She is holding a wooden oar. The background is a soft, hazy blue and white, suggesting a misty or overcast day. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

LOST FATHERS

HOW WOMEN CAN HEAL
from ADOLESCENT FATHER LOSS

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Chapter 6

Broken Passage: Incomplete Adolescence

I remember a dream from early in my life that has continued to reoccur in my nightlife. I am an old woman with long gray hair standing in a cemetery. Rows and rows of gravestones stretch in front of me. The day is windy and cloudy and my hair blows in my face. The sky is gray. I hold yellow flowers in my hand. In my dream, I say, "This is everyone I have loved. I have outlived them all." And that is the end of the dream.

This is one of my biggest fears: to outlive everyone I care for. Perhaps my biggest fear is that if I do not open my heart, there will never be rows and rows of people whom I could outlive. If I can't let them in during life, I can't let them in during death. A part of me is comforted by the dream. If everyone I love is dead, then I will always know where to find them. They won't move, leave, or change their minds about me. They will be there, always, in the ground.

This need to know where people are is also a recurring theme for me. I am afraid people will forget about me. I'm afraid that if they have new friends they won't need me. I have been known to even fabricate situations, especially in childhood and adolescence, to manipulate people to show their care for me. I simply don't trust that people care, and I don't trust that that care will continue.

I used to joke that I would let no one new into my life. "If you're already in," I'd say, "you're in for life. If I haven't met you yet, you'll never get the real deal." This made perfectly good sense to me. The risk of losing someone whom I trusted with my vulnerability was too great. I would control life's constant change by avoiding life.

These behaviors represent the adolescent's search for stability, for control, for order. This is still the child wanting to know, with absolute certainty, where to go for love. The quiet of the dead is deafening. Cemeteries don't move. And though they may not be responsive, they never say no. They never say good-bye. They never do

anything unpredictable. I have found so much comfort in that over the years.

Until recently, I was not able to say good-bye to anyone. I stayed in an abusive relationship for two years because I was afraid of saying good-bye. I cultivated intimate relationships with men who were unavailable because I knew I was safe. I would never risk enough for it to matter if they left me.

When I was seventeen, I was angry and in constant conflict with both of my parents. My father was dying. No one was talking about it, least of all me. At school, I fabricated many stories about his dying. Every other week there was a new fantasized catastrophe that struck my family. I left for school before 6 A.M. and put on dark makeup to give the impression that I'd been up all night at a hospital.

I even told one girlfriend my dad had had a heart transplant the night before. I didn't even know if they knew how to perform heart transplants. She looked me dead in the eye and said her father had just died the night before and he was a donor. She was sure my dad had gotten her dad's heart. I looked at her beautiful, frightened face and knew she was lying, just like she knew I was lying. We hugged each other underneath the catwalks in our school auditorium and cried. I have often wondered what was really going on at her house that compelled her to make up a story like that. I have often wondered what was really going on in my house.

I was terrified to graduate from high school. I remember the wind on the football field graduation night. I remember everyone else being excited about being through with school, about the upcoming parties, about the upcoming sex. I was not going to any parties. I was not going to be having sex.

I saw high school graduation as the end of everything. My friends, whom I had just become close with, would be scattered. I knew enough to know that no one stays in touch. I had turned down a scholarship to the University of Arizona in favor of the community

college, close to home. I was sure the moment our dark blue caps were tossed in the air, all my friends would vanish. My phone would never ring. There would be nothing left to distract me from the dying.

How does a person grow and develop into a functioning adult? What pitfalls stand in the way of one's journey toward psychic wholeness? Does anyone ever achieve "completed" growth, or is the purpose of life about the process—the developing as opposed to the development?

Have I Understood Myself?

In adolescence, everything is new, intense, and potentially life threatening—if not always physically, certainly psychologically. Erik Erikson begs us to ask the question at the end of our lives: "Now, have I understood myself?" This question is at the heart of adolescent angst.

The adolescent is beginning to think of herself as a Self—as something that could perhaps be explored and understood. The adolescent begins to realize that she is not only an individual, but is also part of a group—a community—a whole. How to assimilate the individual into the group without losing the Self is one of the primary challenges, not just of adolescence, but also of most of adult life. If I have a Self and I don't know who it is, can I lose that Self to the needs of a group? Yet, if I deny the Self's involvement with the group, can I survive alone?

During adolescence, the individual is experiencing the following changes:

- *expanding libidinal needs*
- *a widening social radius*
- *more highly differentiated capacities*
- *a developmental crisis evoked by the necessity to manage new encounters*
- *a new sense of estrangement*
- *new psychosocial strength*

This is a tall order for any stage of development. Erikson tells us “a civilization can be measured by the meaning which it gives to the full cycle of life.” I believe we can take this as a warning for Western civilization. In a ritual-less society in which we value youth, not wisdom and beauty over substance, we leave out three-fourths of the human lifespan, focusing all our attentions on the shortest period of our lives, young adulthood. In order to reach Erikson’s ultimate credo, “I am what survives of me,” we must first believe we can survive, and having accomplished that, we must then actually survive.

The ego is the container we have to do our soul’s work. According to Carl Jung, ego formation is the primary goal of the individual for the first half of life, whereas the second half of life is dedicated to transcending and surrendering it. “The ego is the seat of the conscious personality, of subjective identity, the sense of ‘I.’ It is partial, impermanent and changeable, but believes itself to be whole, permanent and absolute. The ego is the conscious part of the total personality, the Self.”

The ego moves through psychosocial stages of development. Adolescence is one of those stages. During adolescence the person is focused on identity versus role confusion, sexuality, and healthy independence from the family. An adolescent’s developmental tasks include:

- *achieving independence from her family, gradually emerging as a separate person with her own goals and values*
- *becoming responsible for her own needs, feelings, and behaviors*
- *integrating sexuality into her sense of identity*

The adolescent needs to find that delicate balance between being dependent on her parents and being alienated from her parents.

Beyond Ordinary

Who am I? Am I the Hitler or the Mother Teresa? Am I perhaps the worst outcome of all, ordinary, destined to make no mark on the world? I think it is the fear of being ordinary, the fear that the great destiny promised to us by our parents may have been just an empty promise—just so much air—that causes teens to take such extreme risks with behavior and emotions. They want to prove that they are not ordinary, and that their lives will somehow matter. It is at this juncture that we need the most care from parents and guardians.

If a parent dies or abandons you during this time, a deep-seated fear and mistrust of all relationships can be created and cause you to shut down emotionally, often for many years. Jan Drantell and Leslie Simon write in *A Music I No Longer Heard: The Early Death of a Parent*:

The child didn't sign up for the good times with the parents, didn't choose the happiness and love, with the knowledge that things change and sorrow may well follow. A child simply can't do that. A child lives in the here and now as if it were forever, and if the trust in the parent is broken by the parent dying, then there's really nothing to do but despair or shut down. The parent is gone. If that can happen, anything can, and it is better, far better, to believe in nothing, to hope for nothing, to bury one's feelings with the dead parent.

Simon and Drantell also write that the primary life task for the child or adolescent who has lost a parent is to learn to open up to the world again. This process can often take years. Even an entire lifetime. Sometimes the fear is simply too strong. If the individual doesn't have a support system to help, she may not be capable of breaking the pattern alone. "For a child or teenager, the death of a parent is not necessarily absorbed into a reality in a day, a week, a year. It takes a long time to realize what hit us," Simon and Drantell write.

Some of the long realization time is due to the adolescent's inability for foresight. She cannot know what significant life passages lie in the future. She cannot know the depths to which she will miss that parent at these moments—a graduation, a wedding, a first job, the birth of a child. Each of these milestones, and many others that are personal and specific to the griever, trigger feelings of loss. To say this is natural and a part of life does not negate the intensity and the reality of the feelings.

Pat, a forty-year-old single woman, says, "Losing a parent at sixteen made me realize at that age that I have no one to count on and so I've never expected anyone to be there. It made me grow up really fast. I learned I have no one to count on but myself." She is relaying one effect of the abandonment she felt when her father died. Her ability to trust in others was shattered.

Ellen, a forty-three-year-old woman, has been married for twenty-two years. Although she has been able to maintain a solid relationship with her husband, she addresses this issue as well. "The loss of my father made the need for male attention stronger. I've always felt vulnerable, needing, wanting." She married at age twenty to a man eight years her senior. "At times, he [her husband] seems the most obvious male figure in my life. I also understand him not to be my father, but my husband. Sometimes, there is some confusion and lines blurring."

"I had to learn to protect myself," said Donna, a fifty-year-old single woman. Donna has had a very successful professional career but struggles with intimacy and romantic relationships. Donna identified independence as a positive result of her early loss. When we are independent, we learn to protect ourselves. It then becomes challenging to enter a partnership. "I have a fear of losing myself," she said. The search for our identity is ongoing. When we have only learned to count on ourselves, the risk of any compromise to that acquired identity is often too great to take.

"Most of my dreams are about loss," said Gloria, a fifty-four-

year-old professional woman. "I'm always getting lost or losing my car in some huge parking lot." Dreams of loss and of being left are very common for people who experience death during adolescence.

I have a recurring dream of a train. Our whole family is on the train for a long part of the trip. The train stops in a small town. My mother, my sister, and I get off the train to buy food. My father stays on the train. The three of us are still in the station when the train pulls away. My dad is standing on the deck of the caboose, waving good-bye. This dream always wakes me up with a deep desperation for connection, and an overwhelming feeling of powerlessness. It also leaves me searching for meaning. If we hadn't gotten off the train, we wouldn't have lost him. My mind seeks the logical causal relationship.

This is a pattern of mine in my personal life. If a relationship ends, I try to figure out why and what could have occurred to prevent that change from happening. I try to find ways I could have controlled the ending of that story.

Laura, a fifty-year-old writer and teacher, has this comment about the incompleteness of the adolescent passage. Her father died when she was seventeen. In her forties, Laura began psychotherapy. "I noticed that I felt the therapist was my father, someone who knew me and could teach me the lessons I hadn't finished learning, like holding the world at bay, dealing with insurance companies, and rooting for myself." This is all too common. Who do we call with questions about the mortgage? Who tells us about IRAs or fixing the lawnmower or the importance of cleaning the rain gutters?

Kristen, a married fifty-three-year-old receptionist, also relates to the need to be independent and the paradox of needing independence yet behaving dependently in romantic relationships. Her father died of a heart attack. "I am very afraid of separation and loss. I think about it all the time. I fear being left alone. I constantly fear the loss of a relationship. My dependency drives people away."

We become our own worst enemy when we seek to cling to

those we love. It is most often not from a need to control, but from a fear of abandonment. However, our partners and friends don't know that, and we can very quickly create our own isolation chamber, even while we scream to tear it down.

Green-Eyed Monster

Janet is an eighteen-year-old woman. Her father died when she was fifteen, after a long-term illness. Her reactions to the loss and the connection to her intimate relationships surface as jealousy. She said of her current relationship, "I have been really jealous and insecure. I am always afraid my boyfriend will leave me. I'm extremely jealous of any girls that get near him."

Jealousy stems from a need to control. Many of us who have survived the loss of our fathers value our independence. However, we are often controlling and possessive in relationships—the very qualities that will push us away from relationships with others. I do not think this stems from a desire to monitor every aspect of our partner's behavior, but rather from a cellular fear of losing that person. We believe that if we control them, they won't leave. Or, if they do, that leaving won't take us by surprise.

I used to be rabidly jealous. I have worked hard on not manifesting that jealousy outward. I have always wanted to "destroy" the other women in my male friends' and partners' lives. I sense this may come from having something tangible to see and attack. A thought pattern that surfaces for me is: If I remove this obstacle, this person won't leave me. I feel this belief system has been created because I could not strike out at death and illness. I couldn't see it and defend against it.

I made a joke at a gathering of women who were attending an anger workshop. "Not only do I have no anger," I said, "but the anger I have is blatantly misdirected." For me, jealousy does not come from a place of power, but from a place of fear. Grief work can help rewrite

these patterns.

The following piece is an essay I wrote after I cleaned out the “junk room” in my house. This room contained my dad’s orange La-Z-Boy chair. I had carried it with me from apartment to apartment to house to house since 1987. This was the chair my father watched television in, slept in, and waited for us to come home from school in. When this chair was filled, my father lived.

The Transition

The chair was never very attractive. Even new. Mustard wool with strands of orange thread woven into the fabric covered the frame. It was never very comfortable. Buttons poked your back when you sat in it. But it was my father’s chair. It lived in the den of our house from 1978 until he died in 1987. Then it lived in the den of my house. Up until last week. Now it’s gone.

I moved the chair out of my dusty junk room. You know the room. It’s the place in your house where everything you no longer need but can’t bear to part with goes to rest. I moved the chair outside to wait for St. Vincent de Paul, the patron saint of lost furniture. The chair must have shivered in its springs from the sun and fresh air. So many years it had lived in the darkness. Its cotton stuffing had been removed from years of feline attentions, and the recliner often stuck and required a hammer to push the footrest back down.

But it was my father’s chair. It was someplace he sat. It was something he touched. As I grow older, there are fewer and fewer people in my life whom he knew. There are fewer and fewer things in my house that he touched. He spent countless hours in that chair watching the PGA on television. The flat voice of the announcer, “Jack Nicklaus for a birdie here on twelve. He’s two down behind the leader, Hale Irwin.” floated through our house like background music. The names of the golfers I knew, if they even play at all anymore, are on the senior tour or designing golf courses from glass-encrusted homes.

When we lived in North Carolina, we owned a blue Cadillac that had belonged to Arnold Palmer. It had white leather interior with maroon trim and a big engine—the kind that never lets you down—unlike your own body. My dad had polio as a child and his legs never worked right after that. He wore shoes with lifts so his legs would be even and to relieve pressure from his spine. But he still strained his back often, asking me or my sister to walk with tiny girl feet on his spinal cord while he lay on the green shag carpet, eyes closed. He loved cars and took extra good care of them. “They have to be my legs,” he said. “If the car breaks down, I can’t walk to get help.” To this day, I change the oil in my car regularly. I balance the tires. Tune the engine. My car has never broken down far from help and never when I am alone. I joke that dad has become my car angel.

But back to the chair. As Dad got sicker and sicker, he spent more time in the chair. He often slept there. I would leave him asleep in the morning when I went to school and find him asleep in the afternoon when I came home. I would wonder if he had moved at all during the day. The chair was next to the side door, with its gray sunscreens that let people inside see out, but no one outside sees in. We used that door to leave the house for school or dates or for long walks around the neighborhood when being a teenager was too much to handle. Since the chair was by the door, Dad heard the engines of the cars that belonged to the fathers of the boys who came to pick up my sister or me. He heard the engine approach long before we got out of the car at midnight to come inside. He’d flash the porch light three times if he thought we were staying in the car with a hormonal boy too long. How I’ve wished now for someone to flash the light if they thought I was out too long, or out with the wrong person, or just out of my mind.

Dad sat in that chair and told me about college at Chapel Hill. He told me how he and his buddies would stay out at the Student Union and play “Stewball” and “Blowin’ in the Wind” on the jukebox over and over while they played pool. It was in that chair that he

told me he was dying and that if Mom found someone else to love, he wanted me to know that was OK with him. He knew I was the child with attachments. I was the child with loyalties. When my mother remarried, I thought of that conversation, but it didn't make me feel any better and it didn't stop me from feeling that somehow everything had been betrayed on levels I had yet to understand.

I have carried that chair for fourteen years. Each time I'd see it, I'd see Dad in it. Sometimes he was asleep. Sometimes he had a glass of tea in a cobalt blue cup. Sometimes he was reading a golf magazine. But always, he was there. I'd sit in the chair, recline back until I heard the snapping of the gears as the chair ratcheted into place. Dad heard that sound, I'd think. A thousand times Dad must have heard that sound. I could fall asleep in the chair and press my nose into the itchy woolen fabric and convince myself I could smell Mennen and Listerine. The scent of spicy spearmint aftershave the possibility that he might have just been there—just yesterday—and if I waited long enough he'd come back.

I searched for a hair, embedded in the weave, that could be analyzed to tell me every piece of genetic information that had made him live—to tell me every piece of genetic information that made him die. One hair that would have proven to me that he had lived at all—that I hadn't dreamt it—one long continuous loop waking dream in which I had a father and a mother and a future that didn't involve death. Although now I know that every future involves death. To believe in a tomorrow means to believe in the ending of today. But this is a paradox I continue to fight.

I have carried that chair for fourteen years. I have nursed it, the fuzzy dust-covered symbol of my wound, showed it as proof that once in my life I knew this man who left—loved this man who left. Proof, perhaps, that there was a time when I could love a man at all.

Sometimes I think I have invented him. Surely, after fourteen years I have invented the idea of what our relationship would have been today. Surely, I have turned him into something he could never

be. But the real pain comes from the fact that I don't know that. Maybe he could have been all that and more. I'll never know. And that not knowing has been a seventy-five-pound wooly, dusty, La-Z-Boy chair on my back. For fourteen years.

When the chair was out of the house, I felt cold wind cut a hole through my breastbone, its edges raw as unheld flesh. The pain was brief. Few tears. Then longer breaths. The space was just—space.

Heart beat. Thump. Thump. Chair outside, not safe from cold or rain. Unprotected. Vulnerable. Dead. Any hairs remaining could blow away. Any DNA evidence tossed to the azalea bushes or the neighbor's swimming pool. Thump. Thump. Breath in. Breath out. Stand on both feet. Earth spinning in a galaxy bigger than the human mind is capable of comprehending. Desperate—so desperate for connection I hold to anything that feels safe. The fibers from a chair. The melted candle from a birthday cake. I hold and the weight breaks me down, bone by bone, until my perception is ground level—eyeball to eyeball with dust.

The chair is gone. My dad is gone. He wasn't here when the chair was here and he isn't here now that the chair is gone. I'm leaving the space for a while. Letting sage blow through. Letting the edges harden a little—enough so another piece of furniture can go there—one that matches maybe—one that doesn't itch or have buttons that poke me in the back. One that is big enough to hold me and big enough to let me go.

Last night I dreamed of leaving. Leaving the desert. Leaving my family. Leaving my home. I cannot recall a dream in which I was the one leaving. I've had countless dreams of being left—of abandonment in train stations, shipping docks, houses, airports, bedrooms—they're almost always the same. I wave goodbye from platforms to people who didn't love me enough to take me with them. People who had destinies with someone else. In someplace else. My role was to hold others, to support them, to help them until they went away. Each time they went away, I bled. But it was familiar. A vampire, the

crimson and salt and heat of my blood nourished me.

In my dream, I went around and said good-bye to the people I loved. I said I would miss them. They shed more tears than I. I got in my car and drove down a wide, black, paved street. The street was lined with blossoming cherry trees and the road curved around the path of a creek. Houses set back far from the street and autumn colored leaves filled lawns that did not require irrigation to grow green. I woke up before I saw the end of the road—my house, my street, my city. But I was driving the car, and sunlight slanted through elm trees from a latitude I did not recognize. I traveled light. Four passengers. The wind, the road, the sun, and the future.

Writing Your Storyline

1. How do we re-story a fractured adolescence? Piece by piece. The Sanskrit word *kirtan* is used in Western context to mean a chant. Broken down, *kir* means parrot and *tan* means mind. The implication here is that the mind is a parrot. It repeats what is put into it. The stories we tell ourselves, whether they are about Aunt Mabel's fruitcake at Christmas dinner or about our deepest fears on loss and abandonment, create our realities.

- In order to re-story a life we have to re-create it. This work is done first in the mind.

- Go to a quiet place. Light a candle or burn some incense. You might want to listen to some soothing music. Turn off the phone.

- Close your eyes and think back to a moment or a day when you were in conflict with your father. Allow yourself to fully imagine the scene. Take care to notice the place you are in and the dialogue you are hearing.

- Write down any key words, phrases, or images you can think of. How did the conflict resolve? Did it? If it did not resolve, write a dialogue or a letter to your father in which you resolve the conflict to your satisfaction.

- Read it out loud. Then return to the quiet place in your mind and visualize the new scene you have written occurring in your life.

2. This exercise has several parts:

- First, write a list as fast as you can of everything you can remember about your dad. You can include everything from hair color to favorite video or DVD to funniest memory. The more specific you can be the better. Do you remember the last words you said to him? Write them down. Did he say anything to you? If he didn't or couldn't, do you wish he had? If yes, what would those words be? Write them down.

- Next, think of a moment in your future where you think you will miss your dad. This might be your wedding, your graduation from high school or college, getting your driver's license, or any number of significant events.

- Write a letter of invitation to your dad to attend this event. Again, the more specific you can be, the better. Fold the letter, put it in an envelope, and put it in a special place. Breathe.

- How would you have liked your separation from your father to occur? Write a short story or draw a picture illustrating what a final good-bye might look like or sound like to you. Try to use as many sensory images as you can (sights, sounds, tastes). The more specific you can be, the more effective the exercise will be.

- What unfinished dialogue still needs to occur between you and your father? Try writing it to him. Ask him to respond. You can write down the response or simply listen to it in your mind.

- Identify a few key moments during your adolescence when you wished your father had been alive, or if he was alive, when you wished he had been able to participate more fully in your life.

- What would have helped you in the time immediately after your father's death? It could be an object, a teacher, a mentor, or a friend. Draw a picture in which you are with that thing or being. If you like to dance, try choreographing a small routine incorporating

the inclusion of that thing or being into your dance of life.

- Can you remember an object that was significant to your dad, or that reminds you of your life with your dad? For me, it was the La-Z-Boy chair. It might be a pipe or a catcher's mitt or a calculator. When you have the object in mind, describe it in detail. Then, set your timer for fifteen minutes and freewrite whatever comes to mind.