Fatherless Women
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How We Change After We Lose Our Dads

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For Jon, for my mother, Iris,

and in memory of my father, Eugene Protter Simon
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Introduction

Writing about my father is about as easy as wading through wet cement. My father, who died nearly eight years ago as I write this, was a complicated man, and my relationship with him was equally complex. A self-professed intellectual, an Ivy League-educated doctor, and enthusiastic supporter of the arts, he took pride as much in the differences between himself and others of his class as in his achievements. Unlike many of his medical colleagues, he claimed to dislike the barriers of status that separated the doctor from the patient, and (particularly in a suburb like ours, with its underpinnings of immigrant, small-town feudalism) from the community at large. Unlike many of his peers in education, those who sat next to him at the opera and the symphony, he was proud of his appreciation of popular culture, particularly any tunes he thought resembled those of the Beatles. Unlike many other men of his era—he was forty years old when I, his youngest child, was born—he believed he had remained current in his thoughts and views. Except, of course, where his youngest child, his second daughter, was concerned.

He was a complex man, despite his affability and the great joy he took in simple pleasures—good food, a long walk on a fine day. And to write about him, particularly to write about my relationship with him, brings back all the convolutions, all the contradictions, that I couldn’t reconcile during his life. Wading through them now, when some of the issues, at any rate, seem to have been resolved, cannot be a straightforward journey. This father-daughter
relationship was sometimes tortured, often peaceful and full of love. To go back and view our interactions with honesty requires a kind of double-tracking memory. It calls for the ability to see how I wished (and sometimes believed) we were then, and also to see the way we were truly interacting, with all the currents and sub-currents of fears and expectations that dragged at us both. Writing about my father, about being my father’s daughter, means reviving decades-old feelings of confusion and anger, of insecurities that reached so deep that I did not know how to trust myself with this life. Writing about my father, about our relationship, means writing about everything I would rather not face.

How could it not? I was my father’s baby, a “daddy’s girl” in many ways. I was his favorite of his three children for a number of reasons, including my resilient mental health, which was apparent early on in stark contrast to the schizophrenia that enveloped both my older siblings as they went through puberty, and which confused and hurt him by its refusal to respond to treatment, to reason, or to the force of his will. I was, by virtue of my health as well as by birth order, his hope for the future and his ally. But because he had seen my brother and my sister falter and stumble, and because he was in many respects a patriarch in the Old World mold, I was also his hostage, the one he was going to carry successfully through life, her protests notwithstanding.

In short, because of the accidents of our family, and because of who he was, I don’t know if he ever tried to understand who I was, or who I was capable of becoming, as I progressed from his precocious little bookworm to a rebellious teen and then a young woman. For I spent much of my time while he was alive responding to his cues, which often meant yielding my will to his. And while he believed that he was open to the world, I see now that by the time I was born, he had in many ways closed himself into a small, tight circle of beliefs that ultimately excluded much of what my life, as an adult woman, has come to be about. Writing about him, therefore, is often painful, as each good memory either brings forth a bad one, or is followed swiftly by the saccharine
aftertaste that lets me know that once again, as I did so often in my childhood, I am avoiding the unpleasant, the unhappy, and the true.

To write about my father, therefore, is once more to interact with him, and that brings up all the unresolved issues and personal contradictions I bring to our relationship. Trying to decipher the influence of my father, of his legacy, I am once more a little girl, dependent and trusting and sometimes betrayed. I am again an adolescent, angry and more vulnerable than I seem. Although many pop psych books want to freeze our relationships with our fathers into specific categories, to make us the “eternal girl” or the “stubborn teen” in all our dealings, the truth is more fluid. On any given day, and in every interaction, I am all the female roles, and he is all the male ones, and I do not think that I am unique in this way. Anything less, any kind of simplification of our dance, leads to error.

Only one truth appears simple, one set of facts that help anchor me. With all the pain and hesitation that I felt—that I still feel—about my father, about his illusions and his intelligence, his childlike and openhanded generosity and the harsh and unappealable judgments he could bring down, I am only sure of this: He was my father and he is dead. And now that his active presence in my life is through, I can begin to see him as a complete and separate entity. I can begin to understand his continuing effect on me. For despite his no longer being a commonplace presence in my life, this complex and contradictory man is very much a part of me. No matter how I approach the subject, I am still my father’s daughter. And no matter how much my life has changed since his passing, he is influencing me. By example, by comparison, by his shadow, and by the passing of that shadow, my father remains very present in my life.

The inspiration for this book came from a series of changes that I noticed in my life after my father died, then witnessed again in the lives of friends as they also lost their fathers. These changes
appeared small at first, but what I saw was that within a few years of our bereavements, their cumulative effect was overwhelming. Five years down the line, a great number of us had changed careers or the style of work we did. We had been stubbornly single, and then we married, or we had been unhappily anchored and were finally able to leave relationships that we had outgrown. We found ourselves free to drop decades-old obsessions, to let gripes and worries finally be. Beyond the very real but temporary dislocation of grief, we seem to have changed, to have learned from our losses. Despite our pain, we seem for the most part to have gotten stronger. And although these changes may be seen as the kind of growing that we women in our thirties and our forties would have done anyway, the nature of these shifts, and the fact that many of us had been unable to make them earlier, suggests a connection between our losses and our gains.

To be realistic, these changes are what therapists would call overdetermined. They are decided by multiple factors—our age and our experience as well as the death of our male parents—and no one influence can explain all our growth. But over all of the changes we’ve experienced hangs the shadow of our fathers, or perhaps the sudden absence of that shadow, an experience I’ve confirmed with dozens of women and with psychiatric professionals who work with families and with women going through transitions. Keeping in mind that many elements contribute to every stage in our lives, I became interested in the father factor—in how the loss of our paternal parents in some way altered us, either freed us to act or spurred us to make moves in our own lives, and in how their presence had influenced both who we had been and who we were now able to become.

I have begun by examining my own life in terms of the shifts I observed first in my work, then in my internal landscape, and finally in the composition of my friendships and intimate relationships over the first few years after my father’s death. None, to state the obvious, was done consciously, or rather, all were the kinds of transformation I had wished for, but had been unable to achieve in
the first thirty-one years of my life. Simply put, despite years of therapy and hard thinking about my life, I had had no idea, while my father was alive, how to make these leaps in growth and love. Then, suddenly, I was making them. Something beyond willpower and ambition was at work; some energy that had been tied up in some way with my father was now set free.

The first change I noticed in my own life was very basic. I attributed it at the time to the stress of that winter, the months of watching my father decline and the weeks of visiting at the hospital where he finally succumbed to the cancer that had begun in his prostate and then infiltrated his bones. For what happened that winter, even as he became sicker and more frail, growing increasingly irascible and peevish with his weakness and his pain, was that I became more honest, stronger at facing what I did not like. The way that I witnessed this, through fatigue that blessedly kept my guilt at this growth at bay, was that my work as a journalist and essayist was getting better, my writing less constrained.

As miserable as I felt, this was meager compensation, but I grabbed at it. That winter, as he declined into an uneasy death, the stories I wrote—occasionally about him—became more clear-sighted and less sentimental. The topics that appealed to me were more immediate, my style cleaner and more concise. I told myself at the time that I was worn out, that the exhausting weight of anticipatory grief had made me less tolerant of journalism’s conventions and its ridiculous expectations of distance and objectivity, that I simply had lost the touch for lightness and fancy in my writing, and perhaps in my life. And I hoped—for even then I realized that I had made a qualitative leap in my work—that the change would be permanent. I wanted to have been tried in the fire of the horrible experience that was my father’s slow dying and come out somehow purified. I wanted his death to mean something, to have served in this way as a gift to me. Perhaps for a while I even believed this was true.

But the second change I noticed served to disprove this ennobling myth, or at least recast it in ways that I hadn’t contem-
plated. For the second change I noticed in myself through the rest of that long, miserable winter was not an unalloyed benefit. It was not particularly complimentary to my father or myself, nor were its benefits immediately obvious. What I first thought, when I noticed a change (as if I were standing outside myself and watching myself run along a strange new set of tracks) was that I seemed to have lost the gift for connection. Throughout that winter and into the spring of my father’s death, I saw myself cool, as if my sense of intimacy and vulnerability was undergoing a chemical transformation. I thought I had become heartless. Whereas before I had been a bonding molecule, drawn to others and to whom others attached, afterward I seemed to have had my ions reversed, so that instead of attaching, I recoiled, bouncing from contact to contact without ever changing or being changed.

This makes me sound promiscuous, and I was not, no more than any of my single female friends. But before my father’s final illness I had always put a premium on relationships, on making an emotional connection no matter how inappropriate or unlikely to last. In the months before my father’s death, in fact, I had only with difficulty ended a long-term relationship that had turned sour soon after its start—two years with a man who epitomized my father’s brilliance and desire for control without any of his sense of propriety or kindness. And only a month before my father was hospitalized for the final time, I had been shattered by the collapse of a shorter pairing, a rebound affair certainly, but one that seemed at the time to hold promise of something more. In the weeks following my father’s hospitalization, however, I found that something had changed in me, in my attitude toward the men I met and dated and slept with, toward my own physical reaction. I found myself, in the middle of an evening with a very handsome co-worker, quite bored. He’s not that smart, I remember telling myself. But he is awfully pretty. I took him home that night because I wanted to, and thought little about it the next day. The old stirrings were there—wouldn’t it be great if we could fall in love? wouldn’t that be wonderful?—but a new clear-eyed, colder self was emerging.
Wouldn’t it be great if pigs had wings? I remember laughing at myself, at the vestiges of regret, as I changed the sheets. It was as if the softness in me had been sloughed off as of no more use than a lizard’s tired skin. Ultimately, what would be left would be, like my writing, more muscular and more honest. Although that winter found me disconnected, for that wasn’t the only incident, I now believe my heart was simply shifting its priorities, realigning to reality, and readying for the kind of deeper commitments that had eluded me before.

These changes were, I now believe, related. Affecting both my work and my attitude toward the men with whom I became involved, these were signs of growth the full implications of which I wouldn’t recognize for years. Perhaps at thirty-one I was finally ready for a new life, for the more serious attitude these changes implied. But in retrospect, I see the loss of my father as a crucial factor in this growth, in my ability to finally walk away from childish ways that no longer served me or my family. Although other factors certainly played a part, one is certain: I had lost my father, and in him I had lost the fantasy of Daddy, of the one man who was going to take care of me. The one man who clearly had to care for me, the corollary being that he had to because I could not care for myself. But in giving up that fantasy, I was also abandoning the image I had of myself as a woman who needed to be taken care of. I was losing, at a disconcerting rate, my illusions.

I recall feeling a little embarrassed in my new skin, the kind of slight shame one has when one discovers that one has been walking around with a seam open at the back or an undergarment peeking out. Had I been that helpless, that girlish for this long? Had I really allowed myself to be infantilized in that many critical areas?

Mercifully, that’s when I began to realize that many other women I knew were undergoing the same kinds of transformations. Rona, single for years, started dating a truly nice man. Lita did the same, and soon after announced her intention of leaving the law, a profession she had always expressed ambivalence about although it was one her father revered. Ellen bought a house and
decided to adopt a child. Kendra quit fretting about her position as a proofreader, a job her father had derided, and learned to enjoy the companionship her office life offered. Cara told me about the happy second marriage that had followed the loss of her father, and from Irina and Rikki, Nora and Tracy I heard a range of reactions, all life-changing, that had filled the approximately eighteen months following their fathers’ deaths. In our work, in our living situations, in our relationships with family members as well as with significant others we were reacting to our fathers’ deaths with emotional leaps that in their breadth surprised us. We were suddenly, in our grief and mourning, growing up.

There have been many studies of inappropriate relationships and of women who find themselves trapped in outgrown patterns, particularly with their male parents. The best of these, such as Linda Schierse Leonard’s *The Wounded Woman*, convey that although we may be caught up in immature patterns of behavior that do not best serve our needs as independent adults, we need not consider ourselves entirely to blame nor be completely blocked by these outdated behaviors. Leonard understands that the situations are complex, that we may derive lasting benefits from our inappropriately girlish or scared or defiant behavior, and that such internalized roles are to be understood, forgiven, and incorporated into the majority of our lives. Most of these books, even the more dated—such as *Fathers and Daughters*, by the Harvard-affiliated psychiatrist William S. Appleton, which once may have been held up as the standard for this field of study, or Suzanne Fields’ popular-psychology *Like Father, Like Daughter*—pay lip service to the concept that we may embody several such types during our lives. Although they tend to simplify to the point of error, even they detail how and why we may act out different roles at different times and under different stimuli. I name these books as a way of suggesting them, with caution, as works that helped me understand the factors that led to the changes in my own life and in the women around me.
I have also talked to more than a hundred women. I have inter-
viewed in person and by telephone more than seventy volunteers,
and read the first-person accounts of as many again. There are
women I found through personal contacts, the friends of friends
and sisters of colleagues, as well as through ads on web sites and
in such publications as Wellesley College’s *Women’s Review of Books*
and local newspapers. These volunteers agreed to fill out a ques-
tionnaire that grew and changed as I learned more from the
responses I received. To encourage candor, I have changed all
these women’s names to pseudonyms, and many identifying details
have been altered to further ensure anonymity and privacy. In
addition, I’ve mined the existing literature, from fictional refer-
ences in novels like Melissa Bank’s *The Girl’s Guide to Hunting and
Fishing* and Anna Maxted’s *Getting Over It*, and in the many me-
moirs, essays, and poems dealing with both grief and growth to
understand the complex individuality of our reactions and also to
find the themes and behaviors common to women in transition.

We are not all alike. I have met women who went through
mourning but whose lives did not change. There were women
whose marriages survived intact or whose dating patterns never
faltered, and those whose careers and thoughts on children and
the future remained stable and consistent even years after this life-
changing event. But they were in the minority, and I could not say
with certainty that these women as a whole were either necessarily
healthier or more entrenched in the past than those of us who
found our lives turned upside down. I realize that to some extent
my subjects—the women who agreed to talk and to write to me of
their deepest, most personal experiences—are what a formal scien-
tist would dismiss as a self-selected group; a population, in other
words, that already had a vested interest in my questions and my
conclusions and was not, perhaps, an accurate sample of all women
who have lost their fathers. I have no way of correcting for this
flaw, although by acknowledging it I hope to bring it to the atten-
tion of the reader. And I do not think it invalidates the truths that I
have uncovered. I have spoken to enough women from all over the
country, from various fields and faiths and stages of life, to convince me that despite the disparities that make all our lives unique, there truly is something like a shared experience for many of us here. That for many of us, somehow, the loss of our fathers triggered changes and brought about a time of growth that helped us realize fullness in our lives. I have realized that our fathers’ true impact upon us often could not be felt without their absence. That we could not see who we were, as their daughters and as the grown women we had become, until they were gone.

Partly because I am following my own experience, and partly because this is an informal, intuitive study, I am not dealing here with the effects of abusive relationships. There is much to be said about such painful relationships, about the scars of incest and the wounds of neglect, shame, pain, and fear. On occasion such factors did surface among the women with whom I spoke, but although I want to allow these women their voices, I am not focusing on the aftereffects of these particularly and horribly damaging father-daughter relationships. I am dealing here with women who may have had imperfect relationships with their fathers, who may in fact have been damaged and hurt, but who on the whole define their childhoods as more or less normal. We are women whose fathers may have let us down as often as they buoyed us up, who scared and disappointed us when we needed their hugs and encouragement, and with whom we had conflicts both open and unstated. But still we believed ourselves loved by them; they were men we trusted, on whom we could usually rely. There are fine books and many still to be written about blatantly unhealthy relationships; my concern is with the more commonplace ones, the father-daughter relationships we recognize around us every day.

To do this, I have realized, I have had to delve into two separate areas. I have had to look at how we mourn and recover from the loss of a parent and also how we, as adult daughters at this point in history, were raised by our fathers. It’s a complicated intersection, the meeting of grief and growing, and at first glance the subjects seem so unrelated as to be impossible to match up, as if we were
making an apples-and-oranges pie and couldn’t figure out how to get the filling to set. All I had to go on was the instinct that there was such an intersection, and that it played a crucial role in my life and in the lives of women like me.

Clearly, my book could not do both of these broader subjects justice in any kind of quantitative or scientific sense. And although much fine writing has been done on grief (notably by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, Edward Myers, Lily Pincus, and Lois Akner, whose works I drew on for this book), and on the development of young women and the influence of their fathers (such as the excellent studies by Carol Gilligan, Michael Lamb, Henry Biller, Patricia Reis, and others), this is not such a book. I am, instead, trying to fix a point in time, a moment when things change and from which there is no turning back, and by looking at that moment—at the event that will occur to more than half the women in this country before they are fifty years old—I am trying to understand what happens next, in terms of our lives, in terms of our pasts as our fathers’ daughters, and in terms of who we will be in our new lives, after our fathers have gone.