A WITH LOVE, ALWAYS RESOURCE

Losing a Parent

When the people who made you are gone

A longer, gentler guide for one of life's deepest losses: what changes when a parent dies, how families find their way through it together, what to do with the house, the belongings, and the unanswered questions, and words you can borrow when your own will not come.

BEFORE WE BEGIN

A Letter From With Love, Always

Dear friend,

I lost my mom when I was twenty-nine and my dad when I was thirty-five. I say those ages out loud because they still surprise me. I was a grown person with a life of my own both times, and both times I felt, in some quiet and disorienting way, like a child again, standing in a world that had lost the two people who were supposed to be standing behind me in it. If that feeling has visited you, at whatever age you are now, I want you to know it is not a failure to grow up. It is what love feels like when the people who made you are gone.

I was my mom's executor, which meant that while I was grieving her, I was also signing papers, making calls, and answering questions I did not feel ready to answer. I am one of seven siblings, and I helped them cope too, even on the days when I was barely coping myself. I learned some things the hard way: that siblings can love the same parent fiercely and still grieve in completely different ways, that a house full of belongings is really a house full of decisions, and that the questions you meant to ask do not stop mattering just because the person who could answer them is gone. This guide gathers what I wish someone had handed me then, plainly and without hurry.

With Love, Always offers peer support shaped by lived experience. This is companionship, not clinical counseling, and nothing here is a rule. There is no schedule in these pages and no correct way to do any of this. Take what helps, leave what does not, and go at the pace your own heart sets. Someone who has stood where you are standing is glad you found this page.

PART ONE

Losing the Witness to Your Life

The Person Who Remembered You First

A parent is the only person who knew you before you could know yourself. They remembered the version of you that you have no memory of at all: your first words, the way you slept, what frightened you, what made you laugh before you had words for any of it. When a parent dies, that living record goes with them. People often describe a strange, specific ache in the months afterward, reaching for a detail about their own childhood and realizing the one person who held it is no longer here to ask. That ache is not vanity and it is not small. Part of grieving a parent is grieving the witness, the person whose memory proved that your earliest self was real, was seen, and was loved from the very beginning.

The Strange Orphan Feeling, at Any Age

Many adults are caught off guard by a word they never expected to apply to themselves: orphan. It sounds like a word for small children, and yet grown people in their forties, fifties, and beyond use it quietly after a parent dies, because nothing else quite names the feeling. It is not only sadness. It is the sense that a layer between you and the world has been removed, that the people who stood at the front of your life are no longer standing there. You may feel suddenly older, suddenly unprotected, or suddenly in charge of things you never asked to lead. All of that can be true at once, and none of it means you are handling this badly. It means the shape of your family has changed, and you are feeling the new shape honestly.

When the Phone Call Has Nowhere to Go

For many people, a parent was the default call: the first number dialed with good news, bad news, or no news at all, just the ordinary report of a day. After the loss, that instinct does not switch off. Your hand still reaches for the phone when something funny happens, when a recipe will not come together, when a child does something wonderful, when the car makes a noise. Each reach is its own small loss, repeated in ordinary moments, and it can happen for a long time. It helps to name it for what it is. You are not stuck or going backward. A habit built over a lifetime of love takes time to soften, and in the meantime, some people find comfort in telling a sibling, a partner, or a friend the thing they would have said on that call, out loud, so the news still gets told to someone who understands who is missing from the conversation.

Seeing Them in Yourself

Somewhere in the grieving, most people have a moment that stops them mid-motion: a phrase in their parent's exact wording coming out of their own mouth, a gesture, a laugh, a way of folding laundry or loading a car that is unmistakably theirs. These moments can bring comfort and pain in the same breath. Comfort, because something of them plainly continues. Pain, because the reminder arrives without warning. There is no need to sort out which feeling is correct. Over time, many people find these echoes become gentler, even welcome, a kind of inheritance nobody had to sign for. If one catches you today and you need a minute, take the minute. It is a visit, of a sort, and visits are allowed to move you.

PART TWO

Becoming the Generation That Remembers

The Family Historian, by Default

After a parent dies, a quiet promotion often happens without anyone announcing it. You become the person who knows. Relatives begin calling you for the story behind the photograph, the name of the town your grandparent came from, the reason two branches of the family stopped speaking, the proper way the holiday dish is supposed to be made. Younger family members may look to you the way you once looked to your parent. It can feel like an honor and a weight at the same time, because you are still learning to live without your own source while becoming the source for others. You are allowed to take this role slowly. You are also allowed to say, honestly, "I do not know that one, and I wish I could still ask." That sentence is part of the history too.

Holidays and Traditions Land on New Shoulders

Traditions rarely announce that they are changing hands. One year you simply realize that if the gathering happens, it will happen because you organized it, in your home, with your cooking, carrying the parts your parent used to carry without anyone noticing the effort. Some people find real comfort in stepping into that role, a way of keeping the family stitched together. Others find it overwhelming on top of grief, and both responses are honest. What matters is that the role be chosen, not inherited by silence. A tradition can be held by a different sibling for a while, shared among several households, made smaller, or rested for a year. Keeping a family close is the point. The exact shape it has always taken is not.

Keeping the Stories Without Carrying Them Alone

Becoming the generation that remembers does not have to mean becoming the only memory. Stories survive best when they are shared out loud and written down in more than one place. A simple family group chat where people post old photographs and what they remember about them can hold more history in a month than years of good intentions. A shared folder, a notebook passed around at a gathering, a recording of an elder relative talking while someone asks gentle questions, all of these spread the weight. Invite siblings, cousins, and old family friends to contribute their pieces, because each person holds a different version and a different handful of details. The fuller picture belongs to everyone, and building it together can be its own kind of healing.

PART THREE

When One Parent Remains

Grieving While Watching Your Parent Grieve

Losing one parent often means carrying two griefs at once: your own, and the one you witness every day in the parent who remains. Watching a parent mourn the person they built a life with is its own particular heartbreak. They may seem diminished, distracted, or unlike themselves in ways that frighten you, and your instinct may be to set your own grief aside entirely and become the strong one. Try to resist the idea that only one grief gets room at a time. Yours counts, even here, even now. It is possible to bring a meal, sit through a hard evening, and still tell a trusted person, honestly, that you are grieving too. Families get through this season best when nobody has to disappear in order for somebody else to be cared for.

Roles Quietly Reversing

After a death, the surviving parent may begin leaning on you in ways that feel new: for decisions, for paperwork, for rides, for reassurance in the night, for help with a house that suddenly feels too big and too quiet. This reversal can stir up complicated feelings. Pride in being trusted. Sadness at seeing a parent need help. Occasional impatience that you are ashamed of five minutes later. All of these are human, and none of them cancel out your love. Go gently, and go honestly about limits. Helping with bills is not the same as taking over a life, and most parents, even grieving ones, still want to be treated as the adults they are. Ask what help is actually wanted before assuming, and revisit the answer as months pass, because it will change.

The Parent You Have Now

One of the quieter surprises of this season is discovering that your relationship with your surviving parent becomes its own new thing. Without the other parent as buffer, translator, or fellow audience, you may talk more directly, learn stories you never heard, or clash in ways you never used to. Some adult children find an unexpected closeness in this chapter, a friendship with a parent they had only ever known as half of a pair. Others find the new shape harder. Either way, it is a real relationship being built in real time, inside grief, and it deserves patience from both sides. Give it room to become what it will become, rather than measuring it against the family as it used to be arranged.

PART FOUR

Siblings, Grieving Side by Side

Different Grief Under One Roof

Siblings who loved the same parent can grieve so differently that they barely recognize each other's sorrow. One wants to talk about the loss constantly. One cannot say the name out loud yet. One throws themselves into organizing, photographs, and paperwork. One goes quiet and answers messages days late. None of these is the correct style, and none of them measures love. Each sibling also lost a slightly different parent, because each relationship was its own. Birth order, distance, old closeness, old friction, who lived nearby, who got the phone calls: all of it shapes the grief each person carries. When a sibling's way of mourning irritates or worries you, it can help to translate it first: this is their pain, wearing the clothes it owns. Translation will not fix everything, but it can keep difference from hardening into judgment at exactly the time your family needs each other most.

The Organizer Sibling

In many families, one sibling becomes the organizer: the executor, the caller, the keeper of lists, the one who knows where the documents are and when the appointments happen. If that sibling is you, please hear this clearly. Competence is not the same as coping. The person holding everything together is often the person whose grief gets asked about least, because everyone assumes the busy one is fine. You are allowed to be both capable and heartbroken. You are also allowed to hand pieces of the work to others, even if you would do them faster, and to say that you need a week where nobody calls you with a task. If the organizer is your sibling instead, the kindest thing you can offer is not gratitude alone but actual labor: a named task, taken off their list, done without being managed.

Old Patterns Wake Up

Grief has a way of opening old doors. The sibling who was always the peacemaker starts peacemaking. The one who felt overlooked as a child may feel it again when decisions are made. Childhood roles and old scores can surface around hospital updates, funeral choices, money, and belongings, and it can be startling to find a decades old feeling sitting in the middle of a brand new loss. Naming it helps, at least to yourself: this argument is partly about today, and partly about a very old story. That awareness will not dissolve the tension, but it can keep a hard week from becoming a permanent fracture. Most families who come through this intact say the same thing afterward: they decided, sometimes daily, that the relationship mattered more than being right about any single decision inside it.

Staying Family Anyway

Staying family does not require agreeing about everything. It requires a few small, repeated choices. Assume good intent before assuming the worst. Keep the group informed, even when the update is that there is no update. Do not make permanent decisions in the worst first weeks if they can safely wait. Repair quickly when a conversation goes wrong, with a short call rather than a long silence. And keep some thread of ordinary connection alive that is not about the loss at all: a shared joke, a photograph of a grandchild, a plan for a meal with no agenda. The words below are for the conversation many siblings dread most, the one about belongings and decisions. Borrow them exactly as written if you need to.

Opening a hard conversation about belongings:

> *"I love you, and I want us to still be close when all of this is settled. So I want to talk about the belongings slowly, together, before anything is decided. Nothing leaves the house until we have all had a chance to say what matters to us. Can we agree on that first, and work out the rest piece by piece?"*

When the work has landed on one person:

> *"I need to tell you something honestly, because I do not want it to turn into resentment later. I have been carrying most of the calls, the papers, and the decisions, and I am running low. I am not asking you to take over. I am asking you to take two specific things off my list, and I will tell you exactly what they are. That would help me more than anything else right now."*

PART FIVE

The House and the Belongings

A Lifetime, in Objects

Going through a parent's belongings is rarely about the objects. The coat in the hall closet still holds a shape. The kitchen drawer holds handwriting, lists, and small saved things whose meaning only they knew. Every room asks a question, and the questions come faster than any grieving person can answer them, which is why this work is so exhausting even when it looks, from the outside, like simple sorting. Expect it to take longer than you planned and to cost more energy than it appears to. Work in short sessions with an end time you keep. Bring water, bring a sibling or a friend if company helps, and let yourself stop mid-room when you have reached your limit for the day. The house will still be there tomorrow. So will the memories, which are the actual point of all of it.

What to Keep, and How to Decide Gently

A method that helps many families is to sort into four honest piles rather than two. **Keep** is for what you will truly use, display, or treasure. **Pass on** is for what belongs with a particular sibling, relative, or friend, and naming that person now prevents hard feelings later. **Let go** is for what can be donated or released, knowing that an object's usefulness to a stranger is also a kind of honoring. And **Not yet** may be the most important pile of all: a box, clearly labeled, for anything you cannot decide about today. Indecision is information. It usually means the item is carrying more than its weight, and a labeled box buys you the months you need to find out whether it is the thing itself you need, or only the memory, which a photograph can hold just as faithfully.

The Room You Cannot Enter Yet

Almost everyone who does this work has one: a bedroom, a study, a workshop, a closet, some space where their parent is so present that walking in feels impossible. Please do not treat that room as a test you are failing. There is no prize for forcing yourself through it on a schedule, and there is real harm in white-knuckling your way through grief's hardest rooms before you are ready. Leave the door closed. Do the rooms you can do. If practical matters force the issue eventually, bring your most trusted person, set a short session, and agree beforehand that either of you can call a stop. Many people find that the dreaded room, when its day finally comes, is gentler than the months of dreading it. And if it is not gentler, you are allowed to close the door again and try in another season.

Permission to Go Slowly, and to Not Decide Today

Unless a lease, a sale, or a genuine deadline says otherwise, most belongings decisions can wait far longer than the urgency in your chest suggests. The pressure to clear everything quickly often comes from a wish to be done with hurting, and clearing a house, however necessary, does not actually finish the hurting. It just removes the place where the memories lived. So go at the pace that lets you stay whole: one drawer, one closet, one Saturday at a time. Photograph rooms before you change them. Keep a short list of what went to whom, kindly and without scorekeeping, because memory gets fuzzy and paper does not argue. And remember that keeping something is not the only way to honor it. A story told, a recipe copied for everyone, a photograph shared: these keep the meaning while letting the object go.

PART SIX

When Both Parents Are Gone

The Second Loss Is Its Own Country

People who have lost both parents often say the second loss is not simply the first one repeated. It is a different country. The first death, however painful, happened inside a family that still had a parent in it. The second death changes the family's very structure: the generation above you is gone, the home base may go with it, and you may feel the ground of your identity shift in ways the first loss did not touch. It is also common for the second loss to reopen the first, so that you find yourself grieving both parents at once, sometimes for the one you lost years ago even more sharply than before. Nothing about that means you grieved wrongly the first time. It means the two losses belong to each other, and your heart is doing the honest work of feeling them together.

The Family Home

When the last parent dies, the family home often becomes the hardest practical and emotional question of all. That house may hold decades of holidays, heights marked on a doorframe, and the last physical place where your family existed in its original shape. Selling it can feel like losing them a second time. Keeping it can be financially or practically impossible, or a burden nobody truly wants. There is no choice here that does not hurt some, and families do best when they say that out loud instead of pretending one option is painless. Whatever is decided, give the house a goodbye if you can: one last meal at the table, photographs of every room as it was, siblings walking through together telling the stories each corner holds. A home that is honored on its way out leaves cleaner memories than one that simply disappears between signatures.

Holidays With No House to Go Back To

The first holidays after both parents are gone carry a particular question underneath all the others: where do we go now? The gathering place is gone, and with it the assumption that someone else is hosting the family's life. This is where the work of Part Two becomes real. Some families rotate the gathering among siblings. Some choose one new anchor, a restaurant meal, a rented cabin, a smaller table that grows its own traditions over time. Some skip a year entirely and find each other again the next. What matters is that the question gets asked out loud, early and kindly, rather than left to silence and hurt feelings in December. A family that can talk about where to gather is a family still gathering, and that, in the end, is what your parents built: not a house, but people who keep finding their way to one table.

PART SEVEN

The Questions Only They Could Answer

The Questions That Arrive Too Late

Sooner or later, usually over something small, it happens. You want to know how your parent met their oldest friend, what their own parent was really like, why the family moved that year, how the recipe is supposed to taste, what they were afraid of at your age, what they hoped for. And the person who carried the answers is gone. This particular grief, for the unwritten and unasked, is one of the least discussed and most common parts of losing a parent. It can bring regret with it, even guilt, as if you should have known to ask while asking was possible. Please be gentle with the person you were then. Almost nobody asks everything in time, because while our parents are alive, we quietly believe there will always be another ordinary afternoon. That belief was not foolishness. It was love, living in the present tense.

Part of the Answer May Still Exist

A question only they could answer fully may still have pieces scattered among the living. Siblings remember different conversations. Cousins, aunts, uncles, and old friends each hold fragments: a story told at a wedding, a letter kept in a drawer, a detail mentioned once decades ago. Old photographs, documents, recipes in handwriting, military or school records, even the objects in the house can answer more than you expect. Gathering these pieces will not reconstruct the whole answer, and it is honest to admit that some part is simply lost. But families are often surprised by how much can still be assembled when everyone brings what they hold. Ask while the asking is possible. The generation above your parents, and your parents' oldest friends, carry pieces that exist nowhere else, and time with them is not unlimited either.

Write Down the Stories While Anyone Still Can

The single most useful thing this guide can urge on you is also the simplest: write the stories down now, imperfectly, in whatever form you can manage. Not a polished memoir. Notes. A phone recording of a sibling telling the story the way they remember it, with the disagreements left in. Captions on the back of photographs, with names and places and years, because a photograph of unidentified people is a story already half lost. A shared document where the family collects what each person remembers about your parents: how they met, what work they did, what they said when they were proud, what the holidays at their table were like. Future family members, including children not yet born, will one day reach for exactly these details the way you are reaching now. What you write down in an ordinary evening this year is the answer to a question somebody will ask in thirty years. That is not a small thing to give them.

PART EIGHT

Words to Borrow

Why Borrowed Words Help

Grief is hard on language. The moments when you most need a clear sentence, at the store, at work, in front of your children, in a hard talk with a sibling, are often the moments when your own words scatter. The sentences below are written to be used exactly as they are. Adjust a word if you need to, or do not. There is no weakness in reading a kind sentence off a page until it becomes your own.

Answering "How are you?" honestly, at the grocery store level:

> *"Honestly, it is a tender season. I lost my parent, and some days are steadier than others. I am alright to talk for a minute, and I might keep it short today. Thank you for asking like you really want to know."*

A shorter version, for when even that is too much:

> *"I am hanging in there, and that is the truest short answer I have. Thank you for asking."*

Telling your children, or your friends, what you actually need:

> *"I want to tell you what helps, because I know it is hard to guess. Please still say their name to me. Please still invite me, even when I say no, because being asked matters. If I go quiet, I am not angry. I am just missing them, and it passes faster when nobody tries to fix it."*

Asking a sibling to share the work:

> *"I am not bringing this up to keep score, and I need your help with something specific. Could you take the calls about the house this month, or go through the kitchen with me on Saturday? I do better when we are carrying this together, and I think you might too. Tell me which one you can honestly do, and I will trust you with it."*

Notice what these sentences share: they are honest, they are specific, and they end before the apology starts. You do not need to earn care by making your request small enough to disappear. The people who love you would rather hear the true thing, plainly, than watch you carry everything in silence and guess wrong about why you went quiet.

YOUR TURN

What I Want to Hold On To

Fill this in slowly, on a quiet day, in pieces if that is all you have. Short answers count. There is no deadline on this page, and coming back to it months from now is not falling behind. It is exactly how this kind of remembering works.

The stories only they knew that I want to write down (names, places, how it began)

One question I wish I could still ask (and who might know part of the answer)

Something of theirs I want to keep close (and where it will live)

A belonging or decision conversation to have gently (with whom, and when)

One tradition I want to carry forward (in whatever shape I can honestly hold)

What I need most right now (said plainly, the way I would say it to them)

If you are ever in crisis, please reach out right away. You can call or text the **988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline** at **988** anywhere in the United States, or reach the **Crisis Text Line** by texting **HOME** to **741741**. Both are free, confidential, and answered by people who are there to listen, day or night.

Your parent knew you first, and loved you longest, and that does not end because they are gone. It changes shape. It lives in your hands doing their tasks, in your voice telling their stories, in the way your family keeps finding its way back to one another. Go slowly with all of it. Write down what you can, ask for help before you are empty, and let yourself be somebody's child in your memory for as long as you live. We are glad you are here, and we will be here for what comes next.

With love, always