A WITH LOVE, ALWAYS RESOURCE

The First Year: Firsts and Hard Dates

Getting through the days you are already dreading

A gentle, practical guide for the first year after a loss, when the calendar itself can feel like the hard part: why the firsts hurt, how to plan a hard date before it arrives, words you can borrow, and an honest look at the year that follows.

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, and both times, the thing that surprised me most was the calendar. In the first weeks after my mom died, people gathered close and the days were full. Then ordinary life thinned out, and what was left was a year of dates waiting for me. Her birthday. My birthday. The first holiday table with one less chair. The day that would mark a year since she had been gone. Each one sat out there on the calendar like a storm I could see coming from weeks away, and I did not know whether to plan for it, hide from it, or pretend it was just a Tuesday.

When my dad died, I thought I would be better at it the second time. I knew the dates would come. What I had not understood yet is that knowing does not make them gentle. The calendar became the hard part all over again, only this time I also knew something useful: a hard date that has been thought about, even a little, is almost always easier to walk through than one that arrives unplanned while everyone around you assumes it is a normal day.

That is what this guide is for. Inside you will find an honest explanation of why firsts carry so much weight, a slower look at the dates people tend to dread most, a step by step way to plan one before it arrives, and sentences you can borrow when you need other people to understand what is coming. There is also an honest page about the second year, because you deserve to hear about it before you get there.

With Love, Always offers peer support shaped by lived experience. This is companionship, not clinical counseling, and nothing here is a rule. Your year will not look exactly like mine, and it does not have to. Take what helps, leave what does not, and know that someone who has watched these dates approach, twice, is rooting for you.

PART ONE

Why Firsts Hurt

Every Date Now Has Two Versions

Before your loss, a date on the calendar was mostly just itself. Their birthday was a day for cake and a phone call. The anniversary was a dinner. The holiday was a trip home. After a death, every one of those dates quietly splits into two versions that arrive at the same time: the day as it used to be, and the day as it is now. You are not only living the present version. You are remembering the old one, in detail, at the exact moment you are supposed to be getting through the new one. That double exposure is a large part of why firsts hurt so much. You are doing two hard things at once, holding what was and facing what is, and it is no wonder an ordinary square on the calendar can leave you exhausted before the day has even started.

A First Is Proof, Arriving Again

In the early weeks, part of the mind often keeps a quiet, unreasonable hope that this cannot be permanent. Firsts wear that hope down, one date at a time. The first birthday they are not here for makes the loss real in a new place. The first holiday makes it real in another. Each first is a fresh piece of proof, delivered on a schedule, that the world has actually changed and is not changing back. That is why a date months after the death can knock the breath out of you even on a week when you thought you were doing better. You were doing better, in the parts of life you had already practiced without them. The first is a part you have not practiced yet.

The Countdown Is Its Own Hard Season

For many people, the two or three weeks before a hard date are heavier than the date itself. You can see it coming every time you open a calendar, write a date on a form, or hear someone mention the month. Your body may start keeping the countdown even when your mind is busy elsewhere: poor sleep, a short temper, a sadness that seems to have no cause until you glance at the date and understand. None of this means the day itself will be as bad as the dread. Often the day, when it finally arrives, is quieter than its shadow was. Knowing that the countdown is a real part of the experience helps, because it lets you be gentle with yourself earlier, instead of wondering what is wrong with you for falling apart over a day that has not happened yet.

Firsts Ask Questions With No Good Answers

Every first also arrives carrying questions. Do we celebrate their birthday, and if we do, how? Do I buy a card, visit the grave, make their favorite meal, or let the day pass like any other? Do I tell people at work why I am quiet, or keep it private? There is no settled custom for most of this, and the people around you may each be answering the same questions differently, which can add friction to grief. If you feel stuck on the decisions themselves, that stuck feeling is part of the first too. The sections ahead will not hand you the right answers, because there are not any. They will help you choose answers that are honest for you, for this year, which is the only standard that matters.

PART TWO

Birthdays and Anniversaries

Their Birthday

Their birthday is often the first hard date to arrive, and it carries a particular ache: this was a day that existed to celebrate that they were here, and now it lands in a world where they are not. You may feel pressure, from yourself or from family, to mark it in a way that is worthy of them. Set that pressure down. A worthy marking can be very small. Some people visit a place that was theirs, cook a meal they loved, look through photographs for an hour, or donate to a cause they cared about. Some people say their name out loud first thing in the morning and then let the day be ordinary. Some people need to work, or be distracted, and that is a legitimate choice too. The day does not grade you. Whatever you do, the truest sentence of the day remains the same: they were born, they mattered, and they are missed. Anything you do that honors that sentence is enough.

Your Birthday

Your own birthday surprises many grieving people. It can feel wrong to be celebrated in a year defined by loss, or painful to grow older when your loved one will not, or simply hollow when the call or card that always came is not coming. If the day feels flat or sad, nothing is wrong with you. You are allowed to shrink your birthday this year: a small dinner instead of a party, a rain check with friends until a month when you have more to give, a quiet day that belongs only to you. You are also allowed to enjoy it, fully and without guilt, if joy shows up. Being celebrated by people who love you is not a betrayal of the person who cannot be there. Many people find it helps to build one small moment of remembrance into the day on purpose, a toast, a candle, a story, so the person is included by choice instead of ambushing the whole celebration.

Anniversaries of Love and Shared Life

A wedding anniversary after a spouse has died, the anniversary of the day you met, the date your family always gathered: these days hold the shape of a shared life, and the first time each one comes around, it can feel like standing in a house where one person is missing from every room. Anniversaries connected to parents and other loved ones can hurt in a different way, because the day may pass unnoticed by almost everyone else. If a date matters to you and the world is not marking it, you are allowed to mark it yourself and to tell your loved ones it is coming, so they can remember with you. If you are the one still living the anniversary of a marriage, there is no correct way to spend it. Some people revisit a place that held meaning. Some spend it with family. Some treat it as a private day and decline company kindly. The day is yours. It always was, and it still is.

The Anniversary of the Death Itself

Of all the dates in the first year, this is the one people most often describe dreading for months. As it approaches, many find themselves reliving the final days in unusual detail: the phone call, the hospital, the last conversation, the ordinary errands of that terrible week. This replay is common, and it does not mean you are going backward. The mind tends to return to the scene as the calendar returns to the date. Plan for this day more deliberately than the others, using the steps in Part Five. Decide early who you want near you, or whether you want to be alone. Decide whether there is a place you want to go or a thing you want to do, or whether the kindest plan is a clear schedule and an early night. Whatever you choose, choose it on purpose. A day this heavy should not also have to be improvised.

PART THREE

When the Whole World Is Celebrating

Mother's Day and Father's Day

Some hard dates are private. These two are not. For weeks before Mother's Day and Father's Day, the whole world seems to be celebrating the exact person you lost. Advertisements ask what you are getting them. Restaurants fill with families taking them to lunch. Coworkers make plans out loud. If you have lost a parent, the season can feel like a conversation everyone is having about the very thing you no longer have. If you have lost a child, or a spouse who was a parent to your children, these days carry their own distinct pain, and they can be just as hard. It helps to name the stretch for what it is: not a day, but a season of reminders, roughly three weeks long, that you are allowed to navigate defensively. Shop early or shop online. Skip the brunches that will undo you. Tell your loved ones ahead of time that the day is tender, so your quietness is understood instead of wondered about.

The Cards Aisle Problem

Almost everyone grieving a parent knows this moment. You walk into a store for something ordinary, turn a corner, and there it is: a wall of cards for the person you cannot buy a card for anymore. Some people stand there and cry. Some people buy the card anyway, write in it at home, and keep it in a drawer, because the love still needs somewhere to go. Some people now shop the card aisle with dread all year, because sympathy cards, birthday cards, and holiday cards all live in the same neighborhood. If the cards aisle ambushes you, you are in very good company. Practical things help: choose stores where you know the layout, send someone else on that errand in the hardest weeks, or order what you need instead of browsing. And if you do buy the card and write the message, know that this is not strange. It is one of the oldest things love does after loss. It keeps talking.

Celebrations That Belong to Other People

The first year also holds other people's happy dates: weddings, baby showers, graduations, and family gatherings where joy is the whole point. Attending can feel like being asked to speak a language you have temporarily forgotten. You are allowed to go and be genuinely glad for them in a smaller, quieter way than you once would have. You are allowed to go for one hour instead of five. You are allowed, sometimes, not to go at all, and to send your love in another form. What you owe people is honesty delivered kindly and as early as you can manage it, not a performance of happiness you do not have. The words in Part Six include a way to decline a celebration that lands on a hard date. Use them without guilt. The people who love you would rather have your honest absence than your forced presence and a week of recovery afterward.

PART FOUR

The One-Year Mark and Its Myths

The False Finish Line

Somewhere along the way, many of us absorbed an idea that grief runs on a one-year schedule: get through all the firsts, and you will be done. It sounds reasonable, and it is often repeated with kindness, sometimes in the form of good news: "Once you get past the year mark, it gets easier." The first year does hold a particular concentration of new pain, and finishing it is a real accomplishment. But a year is a measure of time, not a measure of healing, and the calendar cannot certify that you are finished missing someone. When the one-year mark arrives and you are not done, and you will not be done, because love does not work that way, the myth can make you feel like you have failed at grief itself. You have not. There was never a deadline. There is only a date.

Why Feeling Worse Near the Mark Is Common

It surprises people, and it can frighten them, when grief gets heavier as the one-year mark approaches instead of lighter. There are honest reasons for this. The countdown dread described in Part One is at its strongest for this date. The early months of shock and busywork have long worn off, so the loss is felt without that early numbness. Support from other people has usually thinned by now, so you are carrying the heaviest date with the smallest crowd. And many people feel a strange secondary grief at the year mark itself: crossing it means your loved one now belongs to "last year," and then, with time, to "a few years ago," and that growing distance can ache all on its own. If you feel worse near the mark, you are not regressing. You are feeling the loss at full depth, with less padding around it. That is a hard place to be, and it is a normal one.

Crossing a Year Is Not a Graduation

There is no ceremony at the one-year mark, no diploma, no moment when you are promoted out of grieving. Some people mark the day with family and ritual. Some people let it pass as privately as they can. Both are fine. What matters is releasing yourself, and letting your loved ones release you too, from the expectation that you will now return to being who you were before. You will not be who you were before, and that is not a tragedy on top of a tragedy. It is simply what a significant loss does. It changes the shape of a life. The goal was never to get back to the old life. The goal, if there is one, is to build a life that has room in it for both the love and the absence, and that building takes as long as it takes.

PART FIVE

Planning a Hard Date in Advance

Step One: Name the Date Early

A month or two before a hard date, write it down somewhere you will actually see it, and say out loud, at least to yourself, what it is: "October 14 is the day Mom died, and it is going to be a hard one." This sounds almost too simple, and it changes things. A named date can be planned around. An unnamed one sits in the background leaking dread into ordinary weeks, and it lets other people schedule over the top of it in innocence. Once the date is named, you can ask for the day off, decline the commitment that would have landed on it, and warn the people closest to you. Naming it also gives you the truth in a usable form. You are not "just in a mood this month." A hard date is coming, and you know which one it is.

Step Two: Decide to Keep, Change, or Skip

If the date carries a tradition, a gathering, or an obligation, sort it the way our holidays guide sorts the season: keep it as it is, change its shape, or skip it this year. Keep the family dinner if being at that table will feel like love. Change it if a smaller group, a different place, or an earlier hour would make it bearable. Skip it if the honest answer is that you cannot, and let "this year" do the softening, because it is true: you are deciding about this year only. Make the decision at least a few weeks out, while it is still a decision, rather than in the final days, when it will feel like a collapse. Then tell the people affected, kindly and briefly, using words like the ones in Part Six.

Step Three: Choose One Anchor

An anchor is one small, planned thing in the day that is there on purpose to hold you: a walk to a place they loved, a candle lit at a set time, their favorite meal, an hour with photographs, a visit you make alone before the family part begins. Choose one anchor, not a full itinerary. A hard date stuffed with meaningful activities becomes another performance to survive. One anchor gives the day a center. It also gives your grief an appointment. Many people find that when the day includes a deliberate moment of remembering, the rest of the hours loosen their grip a little, because the love has somewhere scheduled to go. Pick the anchor while you are calm, make it easy to do on a low-energy day, and let it be enough.

Step Four: Arrange Your Exit and Your Loved Ones

If the date involves other people, plan your flexibility before you arrive. Drive yourself, or ride with someone who has agreed to leave when you ask. Decide your time limit in advance and mention it early, so leaving is not news. And choose your support on purpose: one or two people who know the date is hard, who will check on you during it without hovering, and who can be told the truth if you need to go. If you are spending the date alone by choice, arrange a lighter version of the same support: one person who will call in the evening, one person who knows to expect a text. Solitude chosen freely can be restful. Isolation that just happens to you is heavier. The difference is usually one honest conversation held a week before.

Step Five: Plan the Day After, Too

Hard dates have a hangover. Even a date that goes better than expected can leave you wrung out the next morning, and a date that goes badly can echo for days. So plan the day after with the same kindness: a lighter schedule if you can manage it, no big decisions, food that is easy, and low expectations of yourself. Tell the people closest to you that the day after may be quiet too, so your silence is not misread. And sometime in that next day or two, notice what actually helped. The anchor, the early exit, the friend who called. Write it on the worksheet at the end of this guide. The next hard date, and there will be a next one, gets to start from what you learned instead of from dread alone.

PART SIX

Words You Can Borrow

Knowing a hard date is coming is one thing. Finding sentences for it is another. The words below are yours to use exactly as written, by text, by phone, or in person. Shorten them if you like. Do not add apologies that you do not owe. A hard date explained plainly, a little early, is a gift to everyone involved, including you.

Telling family a hard date is coming:

> *"I want to tell you something ahead of time, while it is easy to say. The fourteenth is the day we lost Mom, and it is a hard date for me every year. This year I am planning a quiet day. I may not answer messages quickly, and I wanted you to know why, and to know that I am okay, just quiet on purpose."*

Asking to be checked on:

> *"Would you do something specific for me? Their birthday is on the ninth, and it is the hardest date of my year. Would you call me that evening, just to check in? You do not need the right words. Hearing your voice is the whole plan. It would mean more than I can explain."*

Declining a celebration that lands on the date:

> *"Thank you for inviting me, and I am truly happy for you. Your celebration falls on a date that is very tender for me this year, the anniversary of my dad's death, and I need to spend that day quietly. Please celebrate fully without me, and let me take you out soon to hear all about it."*

PART SEVEN

Dates That Ambush, and the Second Year

Not Every Hard Date Is on the Calendar

The dates in this guide so far announce themselves. You can circle them, plan for them, warn people about them. But some of the hardest moments of the first year come from dates that never appear on any calendar. They are personal, sensory, and completely unmarked, and because nobody, including you, saw them coming, they can feel more destabilizing than the big anniversaries. Nothing has gone wrong when one of these lands. Your memory keeps its own calendar, written in seasons, weather, smells, and songs, and it does not ask permission before turning its pages. Learning your own private calendar is part of the first year, and it is one reason the worksheet at the end leaves room for dates you only discovered by living them.

Their Favorite Season, the First Snow

For many people it is a season that ambushes: the first morning of the weather they loved, the opening of the place you always went together, the first snow of the year falling the way it fell on a day you both remembered. The world treats it as a pleasant change of season. Your body treats it as a door opening into a year when they were still here. These moments tend to soften with repetition, not because the love fades, but because the second and third times, the season is no longer a surprise witness. If a season ambushes you this year, consider naming it once you know: "The first cold week is hard for me." A named ambush becomes, next year, a date you can plan for like any other, with an anchor, a lighter schedule, and someone who knows.

An Ordinary Tuesday

And then there is the plainest ambush of all: an ordinary day, months from any anniversary, when grief arrives at full strength for no reason you can point to. A song in a store. A stranger with their laugh. A meal you suddenly cannot finish. People often panic at these moments, because they seem to cancel months of steadier days. They do not. Grief is not a staircase where each day is one step above the last, and a hard Tuesday is not a fall back to the beginning. It is weather, moving through. The steadier days were real, and so is this one, and the steadier days will come again without you having to earn them back. On an ordinary hard day, the prescription is the same as on a famous one: food, rest, one honest conversation if you can manage it, and no verdicts about how you are doing overall.

The Second Year, Honestly: The Support Fades

Here is the thing people wish someone had told them. In the second year, the world's attention moves on. The check-ins slow down. Invitations assume you are back to normal. Other people start sentences with "by now," as if a deadline had quietly passed. Meanwhile, your grief has not received the same memo. For many people, the second year is in some ways lonelier than the first, not because the pain is sharper, but because the company around it is thinner and the numbness of the early months is gone. If that is your experience, please do not read it as evidence that you are grieving wrong or too slowly. Read it as a change in your surroundings, not in your heart. The remedy, as much as there is one, is to say the quiet part out loud: to tell your loved ones that you still need them, that the dates still matter, that being asked still helps. Most people are not unkind in the second year. They are simply uninformed, and many will step back up gladly when they learn they are still needed.

Why Year Two Surprises People, and What Helps

Year two surprises people because the first year can be survived partly on adrenaline, obligation, and the momentum of getting through the firsts. The second year is when the permanence settles in at ordinary depth: this is the shape of life now, and it will keep being this shape. That settling can bring a fresh wave of grief that feels, unfairly, like starting over. It is not starting over. It is a deeper layer of the same love, and you meet it with more knowledge than you had the first time: you know your hard dates, you know your anchors, you know which loved ones to call. The seconds, the second birthday, the second holiday, are rarely as shocking as the firsts, because you have a plan that has been tested. Use it. And let the second year be its own year, neither a victory lap nor a failure, just the next stretch of learning to carry someone you love in a life that keeps going.

YOUR TURN

My Hard Dates Calendar

Fill this in on a quiet day, and keep it somewhere you will find it again. Short answers count. Dates you discover by living them belong here too, so leave yourself room to add lines all year long.

The dates I am dreading this year (the date, and what each one is)

One date that ambushed me (a season, a song, an ordinary day, so I can plan for it next time)

The hardest one of all (and why it carries the most weight)

For the hardest one, I will keep, change, or skip (circle one in your mind, and write the shape it will take)

My anchor for that day (one small thing, planned on purpose)

My loved ones for that day (who I want near me, or who will call)

My exit plan (my ride, my time limit, my way to leave kindly)

The day after (how I will keep it light, and what I will not schedule)

What I want people to know as it approaches (in my own words, ready to send)

What actually helped (written after the date, for the next one)

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.

However this year goes, whether the hard dates were gentler than you feared or harder than you imagined, whether you planned each one or were ambushed by half of them, you got through them while missing someone you love. That is not a small thing, and neither are you. The dates will keep coming, and so will you, a little more prepared each time, carrying them with you as you go. We will be here for the first year, and for the ones after it too.

With love, always