

An Adult Orphan

Category: Loss

written by Ronna L. Edelstein | July 1, 2025

When I imagine an orphan, I see a curly-haired moppet who dances her way from a hard-knock life to easy street, or a Dickensian lad who struggles to find his place in the world and fulfill great expectations.

When I imagine an orphan, I do not see a 77-year-old woman with wrinkling skin, graying hair, and sagging body parts. But, as of November 1, 2014, when my beloved father died in my arms, I became an orphan.

Due to this loss, I no longer have an older relative to guide me, support me, and love me. Since 1986, I no longer have Grandma to remind me to “take care of business one day at a time.” Since 2007, I no longer have Ma to remind me that “this too shall pass.” And for over 10 years, I have no longer had Dad—my best friend—to support me in every possible way. These losses consume me; time does not heal them.

Being an adult orphan also makes me more cognizant of my own mortality. Without a protective buffer, I am, in a chronological sense, the next in line for a visit from the Grim Reaper. As I crawl into bed after another day in which fresh grief over my losses conquers my attempts at normalcy, I confront the fear of death that haunted me as a child. As an adult orphan, I also have the formidable responsibility of being the guardian of the family saga. It is up to me to keep alive all the multigenerational stories I inherited from Grandma and Ma and Dad and pass them along to my son, daughter, niece, and great-niece.

Society expects children to cry during times of profound loss, but it believes that adults should hold it together and approach loss with the stiff upper lip of the stereotypical British aristocrat. We adults are supposed to have a handle on such situations because . . . well, because we are adults.

Yet my losses, especially that of my dad, have made me a child again. Maybe I should reread Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* to remember I am not alone. Maybe I should join an adult group that deals with loss. In my life of maybes, there is only one certainty: Loss has turned me into an adult orphan who lives with constant heartache.

Ronna L. Edelstein

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania