

# The Grim Loneliness of Being Left Behind

Category: Courage

written by Paul Rousseau | March 11, 2022

Rosie is in the hospital, alone. She is alone because she has survived the deaths of a child, two husbands, and five siblings. "They left me behind," she laments. "All I have are flimsy memories and yellowed obituaries." She plucks several photos from a bedside table and stares at them, as if in pilgrimage.

She shows me one of the photos. "This was my first husband. We were married fifty-eight years." She traces the outline of his face with a trembling finger. I tell her he was handsome. She nods and shapes a thin smile that quickly puckers into a grimace. "I became friends with a lady in room 423; her name was Mildred. She was a little younger than me." I notice the word was—as in past tense. She glances toward the ceiling. "Last night...oh dear God..." Tears leak in rivulets down her cheeks. "Last night, my door was open; I heard a ruckus. Then I saw a nurse taking her to the morgue." Her head droops like a wilted flower. Soft, ragged sobs rise from her belly; new grief has fueled the cinders of old grief.

"I'm ninety-two years old, and I have no one." I move a chair to her side and cradle her shoulders. "The world always takes back what it lets us have," she whispers, "until we have nothing." We sit silent, the only sound the rhythmic blip, blip, blip of the heart monitor. She heaves a deep, weary breath. "I'm just tired of being left behind. I don't know what else to say."

She is right; there is nothing to say. Deaths are ubiquitous and accumulative in old age. It is like rolling the beads of a worn rosary between two fingers and noticing there is always a new bead. Nevertheless, the emotional trauma can be overwhelming, particularly when the survivor is left behind, alone. And there is no solace, no balm to make the pain disappear; it lingers, festering like an abscessed tooth softened by antibiotics.

Rosie closes her eyes and collapses back in bed. A dim groan crosses her lips. I gently grasp her hand. She needs a witness to her suffering; I will be that witness.

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