

sample chapters of parentless parents

Introduction: Bridging Three Generations

My husband and I had gone to my brother's house for the weekend with our 18-month-old son, Jake. My father had just passed away (my mother had died five years earlier) and I am talking about my first Thanksgiving without my parents.

Throughout the meal, I tried to participate in various conversations but found myself unable to take my eyes off my nephew Dexter and his grandmother. I stared at her as she wiped cranberry sauce off his cheek, and then I looked at Jake in his high chair, face splattered with gravy, mashing turkey with a fork. My mother would never be able to show such affection to her grandson.

Rationally, seeing that scene unfold shouldn't have mattered. But my emotions resulted from the same jealous ache I felt watching my in-laws hold Jake's hand or give him a bath. And though my stepmother, Cheryl, was loving with Jake, I had trouble allowing her to fill that role. Cheryl had been the "other woman." When I felt my eyes filling with tears, I excused myself from the table and walked toward the bathroom in my brother's bedroom, far from the main event, thinking it would be the safest, most private place to get myself together.

I never quite got there. Outside the bathroom was my brother's walk-in closet. At first, I just stopped in the doorway, glancing inside at nothing in particular. Then I was pulled in. I remember raking a group of hangers to the side and standing there, unable to move, looking at a flannel shirt that I was sure had belonged to my dad. The last time I had seen him wear it was the year before, when he and I took Jake to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for the first time. The excursion was my dad's idea. His six-month-old grandson would learn about art and he would be the teacher.

The shirt was a fabric memorial. I had to touch it. Bring it to my nose and inhale it. I began to cry and then dissolved into full-blown tears and, soon, sobs. How could I possibly make up for all the lessons my parents would have taught?

I hid in the closet with all of my inadequacies. The job of being a parentless parent was just too hard; I couldn't teach myself everything a mother needed to know and offer Jake the kind of special relationship his grandparents — the two from my side of the family — would have provided.

My arms didn't feel strong enough to bridge three generations.

It has been nearly ten years since my father died, and each day has brought new challenges and rewards. After my mother passed away, I learned that time lessens the pain. But as a mother of two growing children, I am constantly reminded that no matter how much I miss my parents, their absence doesn't just affect me. Because my children never got to know my parents, the void is also theirs. How much richer would their lives have been if my parents were alive? Would they be sprouting into different people?

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Chapter 3: Who Do My Children Think I Am?

In this excerpt, from Chapter Three, I describe my building feelings of sadness and isolation from the deaths of my parents. It seemed that as my children grew, so did my grief. My kids would achieve bigger and better accomplishments and I'd want to share them with my parents. It wasn't until I realized what else was contributing to my anger and sense of loneliness that I started to feel whole again...

For the longest time, I thought I knew why I'd often gotten so mad. The ripple effects from my parents' deaths had been so obvious. But something else was eating away at me that I didn't even recognize until many years later.

Without my parents, I felt as if Jake and Lexi didn't really know me, as if part of me was completely invisible to them. My children get to see me as a mother and sister, but they can't observe me being a daughter. It's impossible for them to hear my parents poking fun at me or telling even the silliest stories about me when I was young. And they certainly can't listen to my parents wax on about all the ways they look and act like me when I was their age.

I worked feverishly to restore what was missing: I kept in touch with my parents' closest friends; arranged brunch with a teacher from my elementary school; invited one of my mother's longtime boyfriends (a man she nearly married before meeting my stepfather) over for dinner.

Coordinating these encounters took an inordinate amount of effort. I pursued them, however, not because these individuals could remember when I reached certain milestones — those facts they mostly couldn't recall — but because they were capable of telling other real and colorful tidbits. When one of them saw Lexi's purple flip-flops in the hallway, and her yellow ones in her bedroom, she chuckled knowingly. It was February and snow was on the ground. Grinning at Lexi, she said, "Your mom used to wear clogs and shorts to school every day during the winter. It could have been ten degrees outside, but she refused to put on anything else. Your mom was so stubborn!" Instead of embarrassing me, the story made me feel great. For that moment and others just like it, I didn't feel as if I was the only one holding the key to my past. Jake and Lexi could see me through a different prism, which also helped reestablish the parts of me that seemed to have vanished.

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Chapter 5: Keeping Your Parents' Memory Alive

Chapter Five in *Parentless Parents* explores numerous fun and unique ways to keep the memory of your parents alive for your children. In this excerpt, I reflect on a horseback riding trip I took with my son, Jake, during a family vacation in Colorado. Lexi, his sister, was too young at the time to join us. The adventure is an example of using a physical experience to connect my son to his grandmother. Remember, neither of my children ever met my mother. She died before they were born.

On our last full day at the ranch, I asked Jake if he wanted to go horseback riding. I had noticed they offered rides and was thrilled when he agreed.

The trail was breathtaking. As our horses clomped their way up the gently rising slope, there were clusters of harebells, blue flax, and Alpine buttercups rising from the grass. As I marveled at the flowers, Jake noticed the trees. "Mom! Look!" he yelled from his horse without turning around. "The trunks look like they're wrapped in Ace bandages!" He was

right. Aspen trees surrounded us on all sides. The tall, delicate trees are covered in overlapping layers of white bark, making their slim trunks look like wounded legs on a stick figure drawing.

My mother used to love horses, and once took me and Jay to Arizona to ride in the Superstition Mountains. She enjoyed it so much that the last Mother's Day gift I ever gave her was a surprise ride in Central Park. I kidnapped her from her office, put her in a taxi, blindfolded her, and gave the driver the address of the Claremont Riding Academy on a piece of paper.

As Jake and I made our descent, the hooves of our horses scraping the rocks, I noticed a patch of flowers on the side of the trail. The stems were so frail that the mild breeze was whipping the flowers into a frenzy. The cluster reminded me of the Chuckle Patch from TV show *The Magic Garden*, one of my favorite programs when I was young. I took it as a sign. My mom was somehow with us saying, "Hi."

I took a yoga breath. And another one. At that very moment I decided to focus on what was right in front of me – my son, on the side of a mountain, his little strawberry blond head bobbing up and down, his untied shoelaces dangling at his horse's side. Jake was horseback riding because my mom introduced me to riding when I was his age. Yes, just by being, I was keeping my mother's memory alive.

That evening, in the communal bathroom near our cabin, I studied a framed poster on the wall while I waited for Lexi to brush her teeth. It had pictures and descriptions of all the flowers in the area. As my eyes jumped from one photograph to the next I recognized the flowers from the Chuckle Patch. They were Alpine forget-me-nots. Jake had only one person to thank that day for his adventure. Sure, I physically took him up that mountain, but it was his grandma who led the way. And when I tucked him in that night, you better believe I told him.