WHAT TO DO WHEN AN ESTRANGED PARENT DIES: A CHECKLIST[1]

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1. Get a legal pronouncement of death.

Unpack a week of groceries into the empty cupboards of a college-campus house reserved for writers to work without the demands of regular life. Imagine how clean this 1950s-laminate kitchen will remain without your family—how whine-free the evening will be with only you, the screened-in porch, and a book.

Roll your eyes when your brother calls at this exact moment when you are imagining the calm before you.

Press 'ignore.'

A new text from your mother cuts across the screen: "Answer your brother's call."

You do, grousing to yourself that this better be worth it.

"Apparently," your brother says instead of hello, "According to a letter I got from the life insurance company, Dad has died."

Deny. Doubt. You want to correct this statement, feeling somehow as if your dad would have told you himself if he were dead. But hearing it like this—second-hand (or is it third-hand?) without warning from a life insurance company—feels wrong.

And it is wrong. But you are having trouble pinpointing exactly how or when it got that way. So, you ask your brother to explain. To start from the beginning.

"I went…to the mailbox," he says in his slow, I'm-watching-TV voice. "And I opened…this envelope—"

"So, you believe this letter?"

"I don't know why an insurance company would offer me money if it didn't have to."

Now, the facts become facts—and the feelings to these facts erupt. Your eyes begin to water and you shake your head, replacing whatever that emotion was going to be with a response your father has taught you so well: Umbrage.

Immediately, scold yourself. Scold yourself for crying over a person who abused you and your brother. Who you haven't even talked to in years. Who

1. Section titles are quoted from "What to Do When Someone Dies: A Checklist"

you don't love. Scold yourself, especially, for not loving your own father.

"Hey—you okay?" your brother asks and you realize you are still on the phone, standing in the middle of a living room that is not yours, that is supposed to be a retreat from the world. Everything decorated in a velvet and raspberry pink.

"Yes, just shocked," you say in as cool of a tone as you can manage. Because you *want* to be okay. You want to deliver a better version of yourself, the therapy version you've been imagining for the past few years who is in control of her emotional reactivity. You want to present a black-and-white Hollywood starlet version of grief: an upright chin, unblotched skin, a single tear that doesn't disrupt the mascara—or the day's plan.

Touch off the phone and release the ugly cry, complete with snot sliding into the mouth and dog hair sticking to sweaty knees. Ask yourself: Why are your knees sweating? Can knees even sweat? And where did the dog hair come from?

Notice how the rug fibers feel—and look—like plastic this close up. Add this to all that is wrong with the world, including the giant plastic patch in the Atlantic and the growing patch in everyone's lungs. But the worse transgression feels like *you*. What sort of daughter doesn't love her parent?

Tell yourself that once a parent crosses certain lines, physical or sexual abuse, then all loyalty ends. If that's the case, though, why can't you stop crying, especially since you have already scolded yourself and presented all the logical reasons why you *should* stop crying?

Let yourself cry. Just ten more minutes. Then decide to be done with this. Done with him. Upturn your non-Hollywood chin and think: "This is a new beginning."

2. Notify close friends and family.

Call your husband to tell him the news. The clinking of dishes stops. "Woah," he repeats again and again as you sob and your ten-year-old daughter jabbers in the background: "When do *I* get to talk? When's *my* turn?" After five minutes of crying while your husband asks questions you can't answer like *when? how?* and *where?* talk to your daughter.

Blow your nose with a honk, and present that mother-cheery voice, fake as the red of a maraschino. Your daughter's pleased with the fakeness, which you doubt she even doubts. She prattles on about how a friend didn't share her M&Ms at lunch even though yesterday your daughter had shared her Skittles. This might be a moment to discuss how life is not fair, how people

don't do what they should, but you can't unbraid the words from your body—and don't trust yourself not to cry. So, you end by telling her how much you love her and be sure to refill the dog's water bowl.

Call your mother, which you hope will make you feel better, but she doesn't know what to say either. And because there is no one else who needs to be notified, call your brother again. Wonder what the silences between "He's really dead" and "I can't believe it" mean. Suspect your brother is crying between his words. Wonder if you hear crunching. It's too loud for a potato chip.… Something thicker. Fritos. Your brother is eating a handful of Fritos. "It's sad," he crunches. "It's so sad," he crunches again.

Realize that no phone call will offer relief and decide to go on a walk. *He can't hurt you anymore*, you tell yourself. But that is and is not true. Years of constant threat in the home resulted in Complex Post Traumatic Syndrome. In other words, your brain changed because of him. Resulted in a hyperactive amygdala even now when your life is supposedly free of him. It's as if the plastic T-rex you played with as a kid has made a home inside of you. Hyper vigilant to threat. Quick to anger if you feel taken advantage of, which you often do.

Realize it is possible for a person to be gone *and* still hurt you.

Remind yourself that you don't want to wallow—or waste this day. This gift of a writing retreat. Don't let this death derail your career, you tell yourself. Note how such a thought about your career tanking in one day is an example of the hyperactive amygdala. An overreaction. Spend another hour creating an online module for a class your students will likely complete while watching Netflix—and eating Fritos.

3. Decide what you'd like to do with your loved one's body and arrange transportation.

The next morning, take your coffee with an extra shot of cortisol and adrenaline. Decide you want to do something to acknowledge this death, but there is not even a body. Your father died as an unhoused person. Whatever government association that buries the unclaimed has already buried him, which, according to the life insurance letter, was eight months ago. The grass has already grown.

Call your brother, again, while cleaning the already clean kitchen.

"I can't believe he managed to keep up with the payments," you say.

"I can't believe anyone would give him life insurance," your brother says.

"Did the letter say how much it is?"

"Nope. Can I have it if it's not much?" he asks.

"Sure," you say, scrubbing grease freckles off the outside of a skillet. Then: "Wait. How much is 'not much'?"

"One thousand."

"Yeah, sure."

"What if it's more? My transmission is grinding—."

"Then we're sharing." Continue to scrub.

Later that day, feel a new type of sadness that you don't quite understand relating to the fact that there is no estate to reconcile, no funeral to plan, no obituary to write, no gathering to arrange, no Facebook post to compose. This is the withered reality, not only because your dad was unhoused, but because he ostracized everyone who had ever known him. This realization makes you feel as alone as you imagine he does. As he did. You desperately wish now for all those activities that other people dread: all the details that lead to a huddle around a hole.

Understand that this will be one more family experience that others get, but that is out of reach for you. One more family fact you do not want to share.

4. Secure major property.

Since he doesn't own anything to pass down, decide there are two things you want: to find out how he died and find out where he is buried. These are facts a daughter should know. Things you can hold in your mind. Facts that can be relayed at a dinner table where candlelight flickers off etched wine glasses. Facts that are a stay against oblivion. Facts that can illuminate the hole he is in, which seems to only be growing darker.

Return to the life insurance papers. They say he died in Florida. Call every VA hospital in that state until you find the one where he last stayed. Yes, he was here, someone eventually says. But she cannot not tell you anything else unless you sign some forms—one of which may or may not assume responsibility for his past debts, which are likely to be in the hundreds of thousands.

Realize you are at a dead end. Realize there is no joy in this irony.

5. Notify the person's employer.

Return home a week later to discover that, coincidentally, a colleague's father has just died, too. Her Facebook grief produces in you a jealousy, bitter and off-putting, like the scent of alcohol the morning after. Your

colleague writes long posts with details about how her father made her the confident woman she is today. How his last few years were spent gardening, volunteering at church, and building dollhouses for his grandchildren. Write "Congratulations" accidentally and then replace it with "My condolences."

Make a pasta salad to deliver to your colleague, because it feels funerally. Deliver the pasta, and become even more jealous upon seeing the offerings left on her porch: foil-wrapped casseroles with taped notes of condolence and heating instructions, four-foot orchid wreath shaped into a crosse, ten cases of Bud Light. The gifts overflow to the point the family has left a sign on the front door directing everyone to the massive coolers for cold and for hot. Also on the door is another request: "Please do not ring the doorbell. The family is resting."

Pause over this sign. You have not told friends about your dad because of how awkward everything is. Yet, because of this fact, you feel alone in your grief. Dishonest. And angry at all this food. You can't even decide in which cooler to place the pasta salad, which is warm now but can be eaten chilled. Maybe the question isn't where to place the pasta salad, but where to place yourself. There is not a cloistered living room with other family members dabbing at their eyes waiting for you. Maybe you should crawl inside one of the coolers and gorge on all the banana puddings.

Scurry away carrying your pasta salad before you do something you will regret.

At home eating the pasta with your small family, decide once again that it is best to stay silent about your situation because it's too complicated. People will say kind, painful things like: "May the memories of his life warm you during this difficult time." And "I'm so sorry for your loss." But it is the space between those words and your reality that is difficult. And you are not even sorry for your loss. Not really.

You are sorry for losing out.

6. Research COVID-19 funeral restrictions and guidance for your area.

Thank your aunt with the weird hidden room filled with 1950s carnival games (including an electric shock machine) when she finds an online picture of your father's tombstone. Try to find peace in this little tooth of a tombstone. Physical proof that the person existed.

Now with a burial location, you are able to procure a death certificate from the same county as the graveyard. It will arrive in five to seven days—and you feel excited to learn how he died and think it might just lead to

that thing called closure.

Attend the funeral for your colleague's father. The receiving line squirms all the way out the church doors. "Five hundred people!" the five hundred people keep whispering amongst themselves.

Listen to the eulogies and the daughter who stands up to speak because her brothers are too afraid of crying in public. Imagine a life where a father was a person to admire. A person who protected you and who apparently grew really tasty tomatoes.

Decide that you should pull back on the hours at the office. Be the type of person who engenders such love as this father with the five hundred guests did. Someone who begets potted peace lilies with white ribbons, tubs of too-sweet potato salad, chicken strips the size of small shoes. This, you decide, is your new dream.

When the death certificate arrives, rip it open, feeling crackles of energy run up your arms. Groan at the typo regarding his name. Of course. Your brother may not be able to claim the insurance money now. And he really does need a new transmission.

Scan to find the cause of death: Pneumonia. Hungry for more, call the hospital listed and find that he never was admitted. Never made it beyond the ER waiting room.

Wonder if your father, unable to pay, was one of the many whose Covid diagnosis was unreported or changed. He died, after all, July of 2020. One Florida scientist that month told NPR that she was fired for not erasing Covid numbers[2]. Did Covid cause the pneumonia?

Does Covid also explain what else has been bothering you: Why did he not try to contact you one last time when he knew he was dying? Was he too sick?

Or too afraid that you would reject the call as you had before?

7. Decide on funeral plans.

Maybe you have been wrong. Maybe you need some traditional ceremonies—with other people. It is feeling pointless—and a bit depressing—to keep crying alone. They are not ugly sobs like that first day, but more like wobbles on the surface of a lake, blurring everything under it.

Beg your brother and mother to come visit for the weekend for a makeshift memorial. "Can we go shoot some pool? Hit the town?" your brother asks.

2. https://www.npr.org/2020/06/29/884551391/florida-scientist-says-she-was-fired-for-not-manipulating-covid-19-data

"Yes," you say.

"And oysters. I want some oysters."

Even though you are a non-believer, you are so desperate for some relief, and so confused as to why you need relief considering you have lived two decades without him, visit a neighbor who is a minister. She walks her standard poodle every day, and when you post new publications, her husband drops off wine in gold-foil bags, which feel like miraculous appearances. So, you ask her if she could pray with your family when they come. She immediately nods, as if you asked if she could pick up a can of corn at the store. In fact, she says, she has "just the prayer." It is titled "When a Difficult Person Dies." Finally, something that is in 12-point font is true. Relish the fact that you are organizing a meaningful memorial that will provide a modicum of peace. Your family will go to worship service at the poodle walker's church, then slouch away afterward to the vestry for a private prayer. After the Sunday service—and a lunch out with oysters—everyone will drive an hour to Orange Beach. There, facing the shushing surf, the turquoise waves, your family will throw twelve roses into the water while your husband plays "Amazing Grace" on his guitar. Each of you will say one nice thing about your father with each rose. This, you decide, will be perfect.

As a firm atheist, your husband asks if he has "to come to the church part." You still feel as if you don't have a right to this grief, so you say he doesn't need to go. A year later, realize in therapy that both of you were wrong—him for asking and you for not stating what you needed. That not trusting your feelings is another consequence of CPTSD.

For now, repeat what was ingrained as a child. Pretend everything is fine. Tell your husband it is fine. All fine. He, the avoidant attachment type, is all too eager to believe you. And you, the anxious attachment type who wants to be the secure attachment type, is all too eager to believe yourself, too.

All you need, you tell him, is for him to sing "Amazing Grace" at the beach. Besides, you are probably making too big a deal out of it, you babble on. Your father was not like his wonderful father who passed five years earlier and whom he still misses every day. And there is one benefit if your husband remains home during church. He can stay with your daughter who is confused that her step-grandfather is not her grandfather. Confused that there is another grandfather. Confused that she finds out about the new grandfather at the same time he is pronounced dead.

8. Order a casket or urn.

During the worship service, realize you forgot to buy the roses. Jab off a text to your husband to find some roses and wonder who was the priest that drew the short straw to write the prayer: "When a Difficult Person Dies." Marvel at how skillfully the prayer avoids triggering words for you like *love* or *peace*. Instead, the prayer emphasizes: *Release*. *Allow*. *Accept*.

Giggle when the minister keeps calling your father by the wrong name. Giggle harder when you catch your brother giggling. Your mom says, "Enough!" under her breath and you are kids again in church, working for the reward of a Dum-Dum lollipop.

As the giggles convert into hiccups, wonder if all of this was a terrible idea. Your loneliness, though, has simply become too lonely. Tell yourself what you will one day believe: that the funeral is not only for the deceased but for the grieving. That you have a right to the grieving process like everyone else.

After the service, return home and load everyone in the car for the beach memorial. Or try to. Your step-father, who has Alzheimer's, wants to be helpful and keeps locking the car from inside the house whenever you unlock it. Do this five times before you see him standing in the window, jowls down, remote raised. Finally, once in the car, your daughter complains about the hour drive so much that you change the location to the bay only thirty minutes away. "More time for playing pool later," your brother adds.

Once everyone arrives, your daughter places an inflatable puffin around her waist and squeals into the water while the rest of you trudge out to the shoreline.

Begin to sing "Amazing Grace" and then restart. No one knows the words.

9. Perform a more thorough check of the person's home.

Hand your brother and mother four long-stemmed roses to throw into the bay. Flinch when your brother says, "No fair! You had all week to come up with four nice things to say about him."

Start to realize your brother's pain might be worse than yours. Your stomach clenches at the thought of what secrets your brother might hold. Look away at the horizon, the murkiness of the water, too brown to be appealing. Not waves so much as a sloshing back and forth. Bits of straw from new subdivisions float on the surface along with fertilizer-foam.

Flinch again when your mother, who always loved your dad no mat-

ter what, which was one of the many issues, throws the last rose in with a giggle: "And he was just so damn good looking."

As the flowers buoy up in the brown bay, wobbling along with the waste, realize why romantic love has always scared you. How love encourages some people to refuse to let go of relationships that no longer uplift but degrade. How even some rose varietals will try to take root in salty water.

10. Write an obituary.

While you are watching the roses roll in and drift out, a girl swimming in a blue and white striped bathing suit is also watching. She begins scooping them up, all twelve of them, dripping and alive like a baby in her arms. Watch open-mouthed as your daughter starts yelling, "Put those back! They are for a dead person. Put them back!"

In the first act of God that day, be pleased that this rose-loving girl speaks little English.

She scoops up the final rose and then rushes back to her parents propped on their elbows in the sand. The girl is gasping over this red, wet miracle: an ocean that produces roses. The unexpected bounty that life sometimes gives. The beauty that is here. Along with the grief.

Watch the girl hang her head as her parents stab their fingers toward the water, filching glances at your little public gathering. The girl shakes her head *no* and the parents' voices quicken. Maybe they are explaining the roses in her arms are not hers. Or maybe they know the roses are meant to be taken out to sea, a raft for sadness. Maybe they know what you did not know then: that everyone deserves to grieve, even if, especially if, the mourner is estranged from the person who has died.

Realize that you are mourning not only your father's life, but the childhood you did not have.

The girl curdles her mouth and then stomps toward the water, back to the rocking slosh. She stares at the velvet flowers in her arms, and then holds each rose up close to her face, one by one, before releasing it. Perhaps she is noticing how the veins are redder than the petals. How the petals curl over each other like lips in a kiss. How the closed buds are heavier than their wide-faced friends, eager for the rain and sun. Red by red they go. Cardinal-bright blooms, tight-fisted hearts, pointing neither east nor west, in a direction you do not yet understand.