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Lost and Found: When Dad Disappears

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A strong and loving relationship with his daughter is one of the greatest gifts a father can give. But what happens when the gift arrives damaged -- or never arrives at all?

A number of women in my study -- in their 20s and 30s, well established and successful - - continue to struggle to align expectations with the realities of a relationship that is distant, damaged or simply doesn't exist.

Having lost my own father to a heart attack at age five and raised by a single mother, I could easily relate to the women I have interviewed (in my research for a new book on dads and daughters) who never had a chance to know their fathers. I saw a special kind of pain, however, in women whose fathers could have been a close part of their lives, but chose not to.

While there are many reasons for the absence of a father, a surprising number of women felt, on some level, that they were to blame. Boys in these situations might bury their feelings. For women, they seem to keep finding their way to the surface.

I saw deep anger. I saw real disappointment. What I didn't see was women who said: "He can go to hell. Who needs him?" There was a need to keep working and trying and hoping for some kind of fix, some degree of rapprochement. Even in cases where fathers clearly, egregiously, did not deserve that kind of determination, I saw women who would rebuild the relationship if they could.

Unfortunately, some try to recreate it with other men -- boss, boyfriend, husbands. I heard many stories of women who find it hard to have a clear and clean relationship with men because those relationships keep getting tangled up in a need to make up for their loss.

Tammy is a 31-year-old real estate agent, whose father abandoned her when she was four. He has since remarried, and started a new family. As a child, she invented a father to replace him. Even today, she feels the loss -- and tests every relationship for trust and stability.

"After my dad left," she said, "My mother burned through a lot of different men. It always seemed to me that most of them were passing through, which was fine with me because so many of them were losers. But I needed a replacement for my dad, so I invented a fantasy father. He was tall and nice. I remember imagining him telling me that he would never leave -- no matter what. That kind of certainty and feeling of safety is something I always wanted," she said. "But I guess I'm still looking for it. I think sometimes that search complicates my relationships. I keep looking for something that men shouldn't have to provide."

For other women, fathers haven't departed; they are simply distant. Often, mother and father have split up, but the father remains part of a daughter's life -- even though he is outside the family as she used to know it. Often in these relationships, the bond is replaced by a kind of choreography, where the steps are executed well, but without feeling.

Glynnis, a 35 year-old who started and runs a small chain of beauty supply stores, still spends time with a father who left the family for a wealthy woman. To listen to her is to hear admiration without connection.

"My dad," she said, "is like someone out of *The Great Gatsby*. He is very formal with everything -- a real gentleman and very polished. He's also extremely attractive and an unbelievable athlete. In tennis, he was always the best dressed and the best player on the court."

As she talks about him cracks begin to appear in the fantasy. Eventually, with tears in her eyes, she softly admits: "My father did a bad thing. You don't leave your wife for someone else. You don't leave your family. He could have helped us. He could have been more involved in my life and my sister's. I love him. But I have never stopped being angry. I can't imagine ever cutting off our relationship. But I also can't imagine ever feeling about him like a daughter should feel about her father."

It's not unusual to try to fill the holes in our lives; to invent something that isn't there. Fantasy is fine. But as some point we all must face reality. Perhaps that person we want so much to be a part of our lives never will be, or perhaps does not deserve to be. My fantasy was to pretend my father lived in an oak tree outside my window. I would fall asleep at night knowing he was watching over me. But at some point as a young woman I had to come to terms with the fact that you can waste a lot of your life and use up a lot of emotional energy trying to find something that isn't there.

*The data I compiled and the patterns I've observed are presented as collective experiences. I have honored the confidentiality I promised, by changing names and disguising identities.