

The Path of the Childless Parent

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It is terrible to lose a child.

It was terrible to lose my first child, Pax, 30 years ago, to a genetic condition about which little was known at the time. He was three.

That was May 1982. For reasons I won't go into here, I suppressed the grief, putting all my love, hopes and parental nurturing into my second child, Catherine.

All I ever wanted was to have happy, healthy children. It was not to be. Catherine developed mental illness, later diagnosed as bipolar disorder, in her teenage years. She would have been 31 in June 2011, but in April of that year, Catherine took her life.

Everything stopped. The grief I had suppressed for Pax finally came out; the heartbreak at losing both of my two children was overwhelming.

Catherine is laid to rest in a peaceful cemetery in the village of Alton, Staffordshire. As Pax remained in India (where my first husband and I were working at the time), we put a double headstone on Catherine's grave, commemorating both of them. This is my place of pilgrimage.

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Saturday 13th October. It is the 18 month anniversary for Catherine. I arrive at the cemetery while it is still foggy, though there is the promise of a sunny autumn day ahead. I wash the grass cuttings off the headstone, tidy the flowers, light a candle, talk, walk up and down, pray a little, and finally say goodbye for now.

Then I head off on a familiar walk, down the hill, through the picturesque Churnet valley.

I'm not the only walker. There's a group ahead of me whom I soon overtake. There's a grey haired couple. The lady, whom I assume is grandmother, is pushing a stroller. There are two young couples and several children, laughing, playing, running ahead. Dad calls out, cautioning them not to go too far; 'don't climb the trees till I get there!' The group is completed by a couple of small dogs, rummaging through sweet-scented piles of leaves. Everyone is relaxed and evidently enjoying their Saturday stroll.

I walk past, quicker than I usually walk, almost holding my breath. I pass on rapidly, determinedly. It's only when I'm far past them, out of earshot, that I can relax again.

I don't resent this family group, and I'm happy for their happiness, but I am very conscious that they are the embodiment of my unfulfilled dreams. Unlike the person who did not ever have or intend to have children, what I see is in that group is what I had thought my future held: Grandparents, young adult parents, children. Life begetting life. All being well, those children will one day have children.

When their grandparents are laid to rest, their graves will be covered with flowers and sweet words of remembrance, just like the many older people buried in the cemetery where Catherine lies.

But this is no longer my future. I will not walk with my daughter into a church or registry office, to watch her marry. I will not be there to see my grandchildren's Christmas play, or have them over for Sunday lunch. I will not bring them gifts back from my holidays, or call them up to wish them luck for their exams. I won't babysit. I won't walk along with my daughter or my son, giving them advice about jobs and child-rearing.

When Mother's Day comes around, I pull out the old cards that I was sent years ago; there will be no new cards for me. The last flowers my daughter gave me are dried, crumbling and fading in a vase. I try to ignore advertisements on television for the latest toys, for nappies, detergent that doesn't irritate a baby's tender skin, holidays in Disneyworld, happy families gathered around their large new dining table. I won't ever need any of these products.

This picture—this family group—cannot ever be mine. Ever.

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My day did have some good parts: the sun dappling through the trees, the views of the hills, the horses, cows and sheep feeding in meadows; the vibrant songs of the birds, the sweeping flight of hawks, the crunch of golden leaves underfoot, the scent of autumn rain.

But the walk was also difficult. The pain of arthritis was only part of it.

Perhaps Catherine and Pax were with me, their spirits guiding me, comforting me. But they were silent, unseen companions, if so.

Tomorrow, the next day, and all of the rest of my days, they will be unseen.

This is the path of the childless parent.

Losing both of my children, with none remaining, is losing the future. It's not where I expected or wished to arrive. What can I do now but keep going with my broken heart, step after step, cherishing what has been, unable to alter what has gone, and hoping that one day, somehow, we will all be together again.

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Everywhere I turn there are shadows
Of what was
Or could have been
Or should have been

It's sunny, I'm sitting in the park
Grandparents watch
Young parents playing
With small children

Once the children were mine
There could have been more
There should have been more

Young musicians on the bandstand
Parents taking photos
Grandparents clapping with pride
Smiles and congratulations

Once my children also sang
They could have sung again
They should have sung again

Everywhere I turn I am haunted
By sights, darkened by thoughts
Images of a vanished future
That shall never be.