

Chapter Eighteen

PARENTS

Here today, gone tomorrow



NR Amazed, Bedazzled, Filled With Wonder

Thank you from the heart for sharing excerpts from Reeve Lindbergh's book, *No More Words*. I can see how you fit yourself and your fading mother into that situation, or vice-versa. The writing is most touching, not only about your mother, but about your own questions and feelings. You have been so very close to your mother for all these wonderful years, and are handling these final years of her life with exceptional strength and grace. I learn much from you, N, and owe you a great deal for all of the things you have shared with me along the way.

My own folks, of course, keep on keepin' on like the grand troopers they have always been. Every time somebody mouths truisms about how "We all go," there's a little bell in my head that says, "Except for mom and dad." Especially dad. He's 90 now, and just the other day the doctor told him he would live to be 100. Mother, who is 88, insists she will not go until after dad goes, because "Who would take care of him if I weren't here?"

I feel fortunate, and hope they last forever. As long as they are here, I am not an orphan. (God forbid I should ever have to grow up!) Ah, well, it all plays out. I

simply stand back and watch the show of our lives and times, amazed, bedazzled, filled with wonder.

SL **As Night Descends: Father-Love**

It may sound strange to you, but let me gently say that it is a good thing for you to have these deep feelings for your father and your mother and yourself. You are tapping into some profoundly important layers of your psyche, the things that have been buried down in the dark places. You have always had these feelings — of a trembling child, anxious, yearning, recognizing the things you needed but were not given, recognizing those many moments of happiness that remind you of your love for your parents, especially your father now, as he seems to be truly approaching the end of his road.

If I might, let me suggest that you do not resist these feelings as his night descends. Let yourself feel them. Cry whenever you need to. Cherish the feelings as they bubble up to the surface. Do not fight against them. Instead, welcome them, embrace them. Some are terribly unpleasant, especially those that reawaken long-buried pains. And some are incredibly loving, touching your heart — memories such as your father's teaching you Latin names or taking you pond dipping. Hold those moments tenderly in your heart. They are beautiful. You were a child. He was still strong and able to care about you. All of these memories and the feelings that go with them, all the good things, all the bad things — all of these things bring you to life again. They open your heart and mind. They help you remember. And they bring you closer to him, yes, and closer to yourself as well.

Allow them to rise. Allow them to be fully conscious. Savor details. Let yourself cry or laugh. Don't stifle your feelings or push the memories back down into the shades and shadows. Let them help you grow and come to understand him and

yourself better than ever before. Hold and cherish each remembered moment of sadness, anger, love, joy or pain. They will in themselves lead you through the night terrors into daylight. Remember the love you have always felt for him, love so deep and strong and true that it far transcends whatever walls of resentment you have built in your psyche over the years to protect yourself from the state of negativity into which he eventually descended. These magic moments are precious and beautiful. Surrender to them. Let them flow freely. Feel the tears and weep. Feel the tender joys and allow yourself to smile. Resist nothing. Embrace everything.

And when you can, see if you can forgive him. Forgive yourself as well for the understandable anger you have felt toward him for his failing to give you all that you needed, especially reassurance, support, confidence, validation. No need to feel the least bit guilty about whatever anger you have justifiably felt over the years. You have been an amazingly dutiful, understanding daughter. You have felt your anger only because you love your parents and they were not able to fulfill either your love or your deep-seated childhood needs. But now, as your father fades, you can feel the depths and heights of love for him — and for your loving self.

Let the rising tide of memories both good and bad cleanse you and awaken new love, new self-recognition, new appreciation for you and your father and mother both then and now. They could not help themselves, and there were many positive things that happened too. These are the times when in your solitude and daily life you can be closer to your father in your mind and more loving in your heart than ever before. These moments are beautiful and precious. Open your arms, your mind, your heart and welcome all things that arise within you.

SL Toward the Far Shore, But Not an Orphan

Spring is treating you roughly. So sorry your sister's slow disintegration is so painful for you. It's a traumatic time, ugly, full of anxiety. Your description of her, and of your visit, is so vivid, poignant, full of love and impending loss — of her, of the life you shared together when younger. Not easy, losing a once-loved one, and losing a huge part of yourself and your own life-history. All you had was each other to help you through those harsh times with your parents, "to survive the flaming spears and the silences" to which your parents subjected you. My heart is with you.

In thinking about my parents' eventual departure, I, too, have been struck by that feeling of being abandoned, orphaned, left alone in the world. And you're so right, it's better to have a miserable family than no family at all. The stuff about "everybody dies sooner or later" and "it's natural" just doesn't cut it, doesn't give any comfort at all. Indeed, your sister is already embarked toward the far shore. All you can do is wave as she slowly travels on, shed a few tears, smile through it all, blow her a kiss, and wish her well. I know your being there at her bedside recently made her feel better. You did right by her and right by yourself as well. It's good you went.

I'm glad you think of me and sometimes have a conversation with me about whatever is going on. And when the going gets rough, as it is these days, it's good to speak your thoughts to the presence within you that shares your heartache when things are down, and your joy when things are up. I hope thoughts of me are a comfort to you, because it's true, I am with you.

It is not true that when she dies, nothing will be left of you. I know you know this in your heart, even as you recognize the feeling of being lost, orphaned, alone right now.

But time will help you heal, and time will help you come to a place of rebirth — into a new and different kind of independent selfhood. When I think of my parents' eventual departure, I remind myself of this thought, that I am not a child any longer, and I will not be an orphan. I will survive, I am an adult, and when they are gone, they will still be with me. Hard to see and understand and embrace that thought on this side of their departure. But I know I will be able to embrace it after they are gone. You will be able to embrace it, too. What else can we do? In this sense, all will be well. It's a cliché to say life goes on, but it does. You will not drown. All will be well. And you will fly. But it does take a little time. . . .

Truly, dear S, you're having to look the grim reaper right in the eye these days. That insecurity you feel is primal. Soren Kierkegaard called it "fear and trembling." You are raw and your feelings are right on the surface of your being. It's good you are not trying to push them back and away. Keep feeling everything deeply and truly. This kind of intensity is a sort of gift, albeit painful. Feel deeply, watch closely, see and understand what you are going through as you go through it. These are times that enrich your soul. Difficult as it may be, cherish them, for they too shall pass. You will be a deeper, stronger, wiser, even more loving and compassionate woman by virtue of passing through these portals.

I, too, will keep these thoughts in mind when it is time for my parents to sail away to that same far shore.

Much love, L

SL Grieving: Two Identities Involved

. . . . One of the difficulties I have about the inevitable passing of my parents has to do, not with them, but with me. When they die, one after the other presumably, I

will have to go through not only their loss and my being alone in the world (so to speak), rather like an orphan, but something more.

I will also have to survive the loss of my own identity without them. I will have to give up not only their existence in my life, but my present way of seeing and feeling the world with them in it. I lose not only them. I will also lose myself-as-I-am, which requires a different kind of grieving in its own right.

Seeing this was something of a startling revelation. I am now setting about preparing for their loss on their terms, and for my own loss of identity as a son. There are now two elements, two identities, involved, not just one. I am now looking at grieving for them and their departure, and for myself as a son no more, newly emergent as a man parentally alone.

This seems to me to be something of a subtle insight and I'm not quite sure if I am seeing it clearly. Does this make sense to you?

I recently ran across this passage on the Johns Hopkins University site —

Grieving often produces a wide range of feelings. The psychological process itself is a means for the mind to adjust, over time, to the acute sorrow of a loss. Grieving also allows us to accept the finality of the loss, to experience a full range of feelings as a result of the loss, and to adjust to our changed lives. The end of grieving for our loss does not entail forgetting; rather, it usually comes with the acceptance of it.

It may sound odd, but I hope that when my parents die I will not feel numb, empty, hollow, or indifferent. I hope I feel their loss intensely, and that I feel that loss with deep love in my heart, not for me alone, but for them as well. I hope I will need time to grieve, time to absorb those words I just quoted, time to evolve into my new self — a self without parents.

Even now I do not regret Peter Pan's disappearance in my life, and I will not be an orphan, because finally, I trust, I am becoming an adult, a whole person, an authentic person who has a life of his own. Perhaps I am already there. Perhaps the writing of these words is in itself an acknowledgement of that fact. I hope so. We'll see.