

STRENGTH IN RESILIENCE

Overcoming the challenges of having divorced parents, I share my family's journey of turning loss into growth.

When my father left, his struggle with alcohol had become too much to bear. His departure marked not only a turning point in my life and the end of a marriage but also the beginning of a challenge that would shape me, my family and how I view the world. His absence left a void that could never fully be filled despite my mother's incredible efforts. Father's Day and parent-involved events were particularly difficult. I remember sitting alone, watching other little girls bring their dads to Career Day and celebrating Father's Day with handmade cards while I stared at a blank sheet of paper, unsure of what to write. I remember in third grade, we made family trees and I was left with only half a tree to present. Outside of school, family outings to restaurants where I would see complete families always felt like a painful reminder that mine was incomplete. At school, hearing kids in my grade one-up each other by showing the gifts from their dads was gut-wrenching. They let me be the judge so I would still contribute something to the conversation, but I felt more pathetic than if I had just stood there quietly.

While I struggled silently with these feelings, my older brother faced his own set of challenges.

My brother never showed it, but I could see how deeply it affected him to grow up without a father. He passed milestones without any guidance, learning crucial life skills on his own. I remember watching him sit at the computer, searching for YouTube tutorials on how to shave. He learned how to throw a football from watching videos online and figured out how to tie his tie for Prom alone in his room. My mother did her best to teach him the lessons a father would traditionally pass on to his son and realized she'd also have to see me miss out on more than just Father's Day celebrations. I would miss moments that a dad was supposed to be there for — like being walked down the aisle, helping me move into college or being my second biggest supporter at graduation.

My father's absence is a wound that never fully healed, and I still face small everyday reminders. Filling out forms that used to say "parents" but now read "parent(s)" became a frequent occurrence. Perhaps the teachers felt sorry for me, or maybe they just wanted to save me some ink. Regardless, it was a stark reminder that my family was different. Growing up without a father taught me loss before I could even walk, and that loss made me more guarded and hesitant to show vulnerability. This became a problem in my relationships; trust was difficult to come by, and I often questioned the stability of the relationships I did have. I always feared that they too would disappear just like my father had.

Yet, despite the challenges and the pain, there was a silver lining. Growing up without a father also taught me strength and perseverance. I learned to rely on myself to confront challenges without expecting someone else to come and play the hero. My mother's strength became my own. Watching her navigate the difficult journey of single parenthood taught me the importance of persistence, no matter the difficulty. Her determination and unwavering love held our family together, and I draw from her example every day. She showed me that happiness does not require a traditional family structure and that she possessed a strength far greater than my father ever did.

As I grew older, I began to view my mother's role in my life with a deep sense of pride. She was more than just a mom; she was my role model, my biggest supporter and the person who taught me the value of resilience. Her ability to continue being there for every small milestone — from the soccer matches I won as a little girl to

pursuing a career in journalism — with nothing but support and encouragement, inspired me to face my struggles with the same resolve. It was through her that I learned to value and cultivate the relationships I had.

Now, as a senior in high school, the term "parent (s)" — instead of "parents" — no longer evokes feelings of resentment. Instead, it inspires feelings of gratitude for the love and strength my family and I have fostered despite the challenges we have faced. My older brother is now in college, and we have both learned to find

resilience and appreciation in every relationship we are fortunate enough to have. We have learned to rely on each other when times are tough and when they are great. The loss of our father, though painful, was replaced by the strength we had gained as a family. Piece by piece, we slowly fixed what he broke, and in doing so, we became stronger.

Wherever my father may be, I want him to know that we learned to live without his guidance, support and presence. And while the past shaped us, it does not define our future.

The truth is, growing up as a little girl and watching my dad let his addiction consume him was heartbreaking. I wanted him to get better for us, to fight for our family. But he did not. He let the alcohol win. I will never forget that feeling of wanting him to choose us but knowing deep down that he would not. It hurts in ways that are hard to put into words, and that pain will always be a part of me. But it's also what drives me to be strong, to push forward and be the best version of myself — because I refuse to let his choices define who I become.

"We learned to live without his [my dad's] guidance, support and presence."



I ♥
MY MOM
-KAITLYN



To: MOM
From: KAITLYN

I love
my family
because they
cher me up
waa im
down

my family
tree

MOM
DAD
SIB