

# “Anne don't got no daddy”

Anne Bokma, who grew up without a father, looks at how the experience shapes women, and how fatherless daughters can heal.

**When I was** four, my father left our family and, except for two brief meetings, I didn't see him again until I was 29 and he was lying in a coffin, dead of a heart attack at 49. Something died in me that day too, and I laid to rest any hope of ever knowing this mystery man whose absence has haunted me for so much of my life.

My father set off for work, kissed my mother, me and my baby brother goodbye, and simply vanished from our lives. “He ran away,” was the explanation I was given. In my young mind, I pictured him wrestling into his coat as he took off on foot down the driveway of our rented house, away from our small town and out of our lives forever. >

## Healing for daughters of divorce

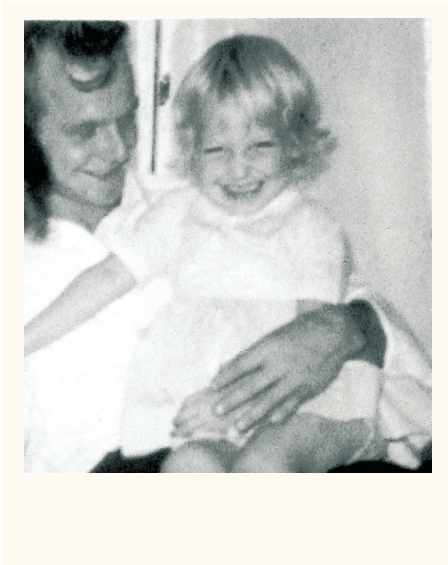
For a fatherless daughter, the first step in healing the heartbreak is understanding that there are very real repercussions for the glaring absence of the first man in a girl's life. Poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, dropping out of school, criminal involvement and teen pregnancy are “all connected more strongly to the daughter's relationship with her father than to her

relationship with her mother,” says Dr. Linda Nielsen, a professor of adolescent psychology at Wake Forest University in North Carolina and author of *Between Fathers and Daughters: Enriching and Rebuilding Your Adult Relationship* (Cumberland House, 2008).

“Children consider themselves to be half their mother and half their father,” explains >



ILLUSTRATION: KATY LEMAY



**Anne with her father just before he went to work one day – and never came home.**

My parents married young: My mother was 17 and my father was 19. I was born a year later. He was ill-equipped for fatherhood – rebellious and irresponsible. He liked to drink and sometimes stayed out all night. My mother once frantically slit the tires of his Ford pickup with a steak knife in a desperate attempt to keep him home.

It was 1966 when he left and nobody in our town was divorced. I didn't know anyone else who didn't have a dad. When I was eight, a group of girls taunted me, chanting "Anne don't got no daddy" until I ran inside and buried my face in my mother's lap, the soft cotton of her apron drying my hot tears. Clearly there was something terribly wrong with me if my own father didn't love me.

When my father disappeared, so did our entire household income; my stay-at-home mother experienced several very lean years before she remarried. She was on mother's allowance (as welfare was then called), and cleaned houses and picked fruit for extra

money. She didn't even have a bank account, keeping whatever spare cash she had hidden in the freezer. I suppose we were technically poor, but I had such a close bond with my mother that I never felt I lacked for anything.

Meanwhile, I fantasized about my handsome and charming father showing up out of the blue to shower me with gifts and to offer some perfectly reasonable explanation for his absence. I imagined him as wise and kind as Gregory Peck playing Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Like Scout, I wanted to be the apple of some daddy's eye. Even today I'm capable of crumpling into heart-heaving sobs whenever I watch movies that show loving daughter-father relationships.

About three years after my father abandoned our family (a time during which we referred to him only as "Mr. You-Know-Who"), he came back wanting visiting rights. He came for two Sundays in a row and then disappeared again, this time to live >

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Edward Kruk, an associate professor of social work at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and an expert on child custody issues. Granting sole custody (usually to the mother) can therefore cause a child's self-esteem to plummet. "Well-intentioned custodial parents don't always realize that any undermining of the father also undermines the child's self-confidence and image," says Kruk.

"Fathers are absolutely key to teaching by example how to relate to men," adds Dr. Marshall Korenblum, chief psychiatrist at Hincks-Dellcrest Centre

in Toronto. Daughters of divorce tend to have more conflict with their boyfriends than their peers and, once grown, a higher divorce rate, he says.

Finally, a wounded mother who makes her daughter feel guilty for wanting a relationship with her father, or who puts down the father, runs the risk that her daughter will harbour resentment and anger toward her in later years, says Nielsen.

Nevertheless, there are specific steps fatherless daughters can take to cope with the loss they feel, >

*“I felt sad. I knew I was forever frozen in his mind as an adoring toddler; he had no sense of the woman I was becoming.”*

in another province. There were never child-support payments, birthday cards or Christmas presents, only a couple of phone calls when I was a teenager. It was obvious he had fortified himself with alcohol beforehand. “When you were little, you used to wrap your arms around my neck and tell me that you wanted to marry me when you grew up,” he told me. I felt sad. I knew I was forever frozen in his mind as an adoring toddler; he had no sense of the woman I was becoming.

I always imagined that we would reconnect at some point later in my life, but that opportunity never came.

When my father died, he was a complete stranger to me, yet I could not hold back the flood of tears at his funeral. After his death I sought out more information and came to understand how troubled he really was. By all accounts, he was tortured by his mistakes. He never stayed in one place for very long and had a series of relationships with women, none of which stuck. Some of his siblings believe he was bipolar. More than once he ended up in a men’s shelter. Deserting his wife and children drove his self-imposed misery, and I wonder if things might have been different for him if I had met him as a grown woman. That I didn’t is the biggest regret of my life.

The sadness I feel over the void he left has lingered, but is now mitigated by compassion for the sad and lonely life he led after leaving us. I’ve come to understand that I wasn’t the only one who missed out. He did too. **hm**



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says Jonetta Rose Barras, who received such a tidal wave of responses to her first book, *Whatever Happened to Daddy’s Little Girl?* (One World/Ballantine, 2002), that she penned a second, *Bridges: Reuniting Daughters and Daddies* (Bancroft Press, 2005), a self-help book that acts as a guide for fathers and daughters who want to reconcile.

Here are a few suggestions from Dr. Nielsen, Kruk and Barras that women who grew up fatherless can put into practice to begin healing.

- **Learn his side of the story:** A broken marriage has two perspectives, so seek out your father and find out his side of the story. Appreciate the complexity of why he left. “People think

of the divorced father as a carefree, swinging bachelor rather than the depressed, lonely, disoriented human being he often is,” says Dr. Nielsen. Understanding why he left will help you see that it very likely had nothing to do with you and that he may have suffered from your absence as much as you suffered from his.

- **Try to reconnect with your father:** Experts agree that this step is key to healing. But be realistic. Don’t create a fairy tale in your head about a Prince Charming dad; don’t expect a monster, either. “Very often the image you have of him or the reason he is not in your life

## How to help your daughter

- **Keep disagreements private:** “If there was adultery, you don’t need to let your children know. Set boundaries,” says Dr. Linda Nielsen, a professor of adolescent psychology at Wake Forest University in North Carolina. If you are harbouring anger toward your ex, get help to deal with it so you don’t pass it down to your children. Many mothers think they are strengthening the bond with their daughters by denigrating their fathers; instead, find positive ways for the two of you to become closer.
- **Stay out of their relationship:** Sometimes mothers really want to encourage a relationship with the father, but the father is unable to reciprocate. “If this is the case, help her understand it’s not her shortcoming – perhaps there is something in his upbringing that is causing him to behave this way. Help your daughter see it’s a problem on his part, not a rejection of her,” says Dr. Nielsen.
- **Be father-friendly:** Your attitude is perhaps the single most important factor in ensuring your daughter doesn’t grow up fatherless, says Nielsen. “Fathers and daughters usu-

ally remain close only if the mother actively encourages and facilitates their relationship.” To this end, work to share parenting. Edward Kruk, an expert on child custody issues in British Columbia, says “The key is to separate marital hostilities from parental responsibilities.” Kruk is heartened by a recent trend toward shared parenting (voluntary custody arrangements in which the children live with each parent about half the time).

- **Recognize that it’s difficult for a stepfather to take the place of a biological father:** Your daughter may see a stepfather as competition for your love, says Dr. Marshall Korenblum, chief psychiatrist at Hincks-Dellcrest Centre in Toronto. “Recognize that the situation can be hard for both the stepfather and for the daughter.” It’s a good idea for the mother to discuss her expectations about the type of fathering role her new partner will play. If her daughter’s father is very involved, the stepfather may act more like a friend or uncle. However, if the father is absent, she may want him to be more of a father figure. – A.B.

are not correct. As an adult you may be pleased and shocked by the father that you find,” says Dr. Nielsen.

- **Don’t hang on to blame:** It truly wasn’t your fault. “A daughter often carries around the feeling that there is something wrong with her that caused her father to leave,” says Dr. Nielsen. “But your father is likely not in your life because he had difficulty interacting with your mother, not with you.” And realize that even if you blame your mother for limiting contact or your father for not being more involved, “the sole-custody system perpetuated these arrangements,” says Kruk. “When

children recognize the system was the problem rather than the parents, that can be healing.”

- **Find a father figure:** If your father has died, you can’t find him or you aren’t interested in reconciliation, find a male relative or older friend who could act as a surrogate father. “Use your surrogate as a confidant, a guide, someone with whom you can share parts of your life and whom you can trust to handle them with care,” says Barras. It’s healing to fill long-felt needs, such as having someone who can provide advice on how to deal with men, can model self-respect, or can give unconditional love. – A.B.