# WHAT WE CARRY INTO LOVE

Understanding a father's absence, your worth, and the relationships you build



ALBERT KWAIMI

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The extended teaching situations are fictional illustrations; separately identified historical passages use cited public accounts. They are not reports of identifiable people, professional case studies or guarantees of a particular outcome.

What We Carry Into Love Albert Kwaimi Revised digital edition, 2026

Published by Albert Kwaimi Journal
albert-kwaimi-journal.albertkwaimi.workers.dev

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# A note to the reader

This book explores the histories we bring into love, with particular attention to a father's absence and the care we did or did not receive. Readers whose fathers were present can also consider what they learned about trust, disagreement, affection and support. There is no requirement to find a wound in every memory; dependable care and the strengths it gave you belong in the reflection too.

"Fatherless" can describe many different lives. A father may have died before a child was born or while the child was growing up. He may have left, been unknown, been prevented from contact, or been physically present but emotionally unreachable. He may have been unsafe. Some readers have more than one father figure; some have none they can rely on. These stories are not interchangeable, and no one owes the world a tidy explanation of theirs.

This book is for people of any age who are making sense of a father's absence and deciding how to live with what it has meant. It does not claim that everyone without a father is damaged, that every absent father is cruel, or that one kind of family is the only kind in which a person can thrive. A father's absence may bring grief, anger, practical hardship, unanswered questions, relief, confusion, or several feelings at once. Your experience belongs to you.

The extended teaching examples are fictional illustrations, not the author's personal story or clinical case studies. Historical passages are separately identified and sourced. This book is educational and reflective; it is not therapy or a substitute for professional care. If the absence is connected to abuse, violence, serious distress or immediate danger, seek trusted local support and put safety first. You are not required to contact, forgive or reconcile with anyone to make progress.

# Introduction: What we bring into a relationship

You can bring more than affection into a relationship. You can bring the way a question used to be answered at home, the silence that followed a mistake, the comfort of a promise kept, or the habit of preparing for a person to disappear. Sometimes you recognise these things while they are happening. Sometimes you notice them only afterward, when an ordinary disagreement has left you with a feeling larger than the disagreement itself.

Imagine waiting for a message from someone you love. The facts are small: a conversation paused, a reply has not arrived, and you do not yet know why. The meaning you give those facts may be much larger. You may think that you have become inconvenient, that affection is about to be withdrawn, or that you must do something immediately to keep the relationship safe. Another person may feel equally uncertain and respond by becoming unreachable first. Neither response tells us the whole story of the person having it. It gives us a place to begin asking what is happening now and what feels familiar from before.

This book pays particular attention to a father's absence. Sometimes that absence is visible: a father died, left, lived elsewhere or was never known. Sometimes he was physically present but emotionally difficult to reach. Sometimes distance protected a child from harm. These histories need different language. A loving father lost through death is not the same as a father who repeatedly chose not to show up. A parent constrained by work, illness or an unjust law cannot be understood through the same account as a parent who used fear to control the family.

You may also have grown up with a father who cared for you well. That care belongs in your story. It may have taught you to expect respect, to ask for help or to believe that disagreement does not

have to end a relationship. You can reflect on what you carry without searching for damage. A father can be dependable in some ways and limited in others; a family can give a person real strengths alongside questions they later need to examine. The purpose here is accuracy rather than a verdict against every parent.

What happened in childhood may be relevant to adult love, but it does not explain everything. A difficult relationship also has a present: the person you are with makes choices, your circumstances change, and both of you have responsibilities. An old fear does not make a current broken promise imaginary. A current partner's kindness does not automatically silence a fear that has been with you for years. Learning to hold those two truths together is more useful than deciding that every problem is either your past or the other person's fault.

We will begin by naming the absence and making room for grief. We will then consider questions of worth and belonging, closeness and family loyalty, support, contact, parenthood and the ordinary occasions through which a life continues. The extended fictional stories give these subjects room to develop. The historical passages draw on identified public accounts. They do not supply private conversations or diagnoses that the evidence cannot support. Reflection beside a historical account is an invitation to consider your own experience, not a claim that we can explain another person's entire life.

Read with a particular relationship in mind if that helps: a partner, a sibling, a parent, a child or the relationship you have with yourself. Notice the moment when a feeling becomes a conclusion. Ask what you know, what you are assuming, what you need and what action would respect both your needs and the other person's freedom. Sometimes that action will be a conversation. Sometimes it will be a firmer boundary, more support or a decision to step away.

You do not have to contact, forgive or reconcile with a father to make use of these pages. You do not have to become a parent or remain in a relationship to prove that you have grown. You do not have to complete an exercise that feels unsafe or overwhelming. Take the explanations slowly and allow your own circumstances to matter. The aim is to understand what you carry well enough to make more deliberate choices about the love, care and relationships you build now.

CHAPTER 1

# 1. Name the absence and make room for grief

A father's absence does not describe one uniform experience. Death, distance, emotional unavailability and unsafe presence leave different questions. This chapter makes room for those differences and for grief that changes as your life changes. You do not have to prove that your loss is severe enough to deserve attention.

The word “fatherless” can be useful when it describes a gap in care or relationship. It can also become a label that makes a person sound incomplete. You are not an incomplete human being. You may have grown up without a relationship you needed or wanted. That is a real loss, but it is not the total measure of who you are.

A father may be physically present and emotionally distant. He may provide financially but not offer comfort. He may love his child and still be unreliable. He may have been a safe, close parent who died. He may have been dangerous to live with. The words “present” and “absent” can hide more than they reveal unless we ask what the relationship actually involved.

Try describing your own experience without forcing a verdict: “My father died when I was young”; “I met him a few times”; “He lived with us, but we did not talk about feelings”; “I do not know who he is”; “I chose distance because contact was unsafe.” These sentences are not competing for a prize. They are ways to name the facts that matter in your life.

When someone has died, others may recognise the grief. When a father left, was unknown, or remains emotionally unavailable, people may not know how to respond. There may be no ritual, no agreed date to remember, and no social permission to mourn. A

person can grieve the relationship that never formed, not only the person who died.

That grief can be complicated by hope. A father may still be alive, and a child may keep imagining that a call or visit will change everything. Hope is not foolish. It becomes exhausting when life is suspended until another person makes a choice. You can leave a door open in your mind while still building days that do not depend on someone else walking through it.

If a father was abusive, frightening or controlling, distance can bring relief. A person may also grieve what could have been, feel guilt for feeling relieved, or miss certain good moments. None of these feelings cancels the others. You do not have to make your father entirely good or entirely bad in order to decide what contact is safe.

Finish these prompts in private: “The thing I missed most was…” “The thing I needed then was…” “The thing I want now is…” “The story I am tired of hearing is…” You do not have to show this to anyone. Notice where your body tightens or relaxes as you write. Stop if you feel overwhelmed; grounding yourself in the present can matter more than completing the page.

## The different kinds of missing

Different absences leave different questions. Understanding the kind of loss you experienced can help you stop comparing your story with someone else’s.

When a father dies, there may be memories, photographs, family stories and an identifiable loss. A child may not remember him clearly, or may remember a voice, smell, laugh or routine. Grief can arrive in waves, and milestones can sharpen it: graduation, marriage, a child’s birth, a move, or a decision for which you wish you could ask his advice. The wave does not mean you have failed to move forward.

A father may live elsewhere after a separation. Contact may be regular, occasional, conflicted or stopped altogether. A child can love both parents and still feel pulled between them. Adults sometimes share more information than a child can carry or ask the child to pass messages. It is okay to want permission to be a child instead of a messenger. As an adult, you can revisit which parts of the old story you were asked to hold.

Some people know very little about their father or have had no contact. The unanswered questions may concern history, health, culture, ancestry, or simply whether he thought about them. Wanting information is understandable. So is deciding that pursuing it would cost too much right now. Curiosity does not create an obligation to search, and a search cannot guarantee a relationship.

Some fathers live nearby but are not available for emotional connection. Perhaps affection was absent; perhaps all conversations were practical; perhaps the father was consumed by addiction, work, illness or his own unresolved pain. Context can add understanding. It does not erase the child's need for attention or the adult's memory of going unseen.

A father can be present and harmful. Abuse, threats, sexual violence, coercive control and chronic humiliation are not simply a lack of warmth. The priority is protection and support. A child is not responsible for preventing an adult's behaviour. An adult survivor does not have to offer contact or forgiveness to prove healing.

One person may experience several of these forms over time. A father may have been loving and later disappeared. Another may be deceased and have left unresolved conflict. Write a simple timeline: what happened, what you were told at the time, what you understand now, and what remains unknown. Use "I do not know" where that is the most honest answer. Uncertainty is not a failure of memory.

## Grief that changes with age

Children understand death, separation and abandonment differently as they grow. An explanation that made sense at six may not answer the questions of sixteen or thirty. New understanding can reopen grief without erasing earlier healing.

A young child may wonder who will pick them up or whether the absent parent will return. An older child may compare themselves with peers or ask whether they caused the departure. A teenager may want privacy, identity and direct answers. An adult may feel the absence again while caring for a parent, raising children or meeting relatives from the other side of the family.

When a child believes, “He left because I was bad,” that belief can feel more manageable than the truth that adults make choices a child cannot control. It gives the child a sense of influence: maybe if I behave perfectly, he will come back. A caring adult can say clearly, more than once: “You did not cause this. The adults are responsible for their choices. You are allowed to love him and to feel angry.”

Birthdays, Father’s Day, school events and family photographs can bring feelings forward. So can ordinary moments: seeing a father teach a child to ride a bicycle, hearing a phrase he used, or needing help with a repair. It can help to plan for difficult dates. You might choose a quiet activity, spend time with someone supportive, visit a place, write a letter you will not send, or let the day pass without marking it. There is no correct ritual.

Families sometimes protect children by saying only good things about a father who was harmful, or only bad things about one who was complicated. Children deserve truth in a form they can handle. Adults can share what they know without making the child responsible for their conflict. As an adult, you can hold a fuller picture: the good, the painful, the ordinary and the unknown.

## When grief needs more support

If grief remains so intense that you cannot manage daily life, or if it brings persistent hopelessness, panic, self-harm thoughts or danger, reach out to a qualified mental health

professional, doctor or trusted local support service. If there is immediate danger, contact local emergency services. Seeking help is not an admission that you are broken; it is a practical response to pain that deserves care.

## Eleanor Roosevelt: loss and the care that follows

The FDR Presidential Library records that Eleanor Roosevelt's mother died in 1892 and her father in 1894, while she was still a child. After her mother's death, she lived with her grandmother. Its biography also identifies her teacher Marie Souvestre as an important influence on her education and thinking. These are distinct relationships, not a single person replacing everyone she had lost. [1]

The reflection for this chapter is to give loss and subsequent care separate space. Receiving help does not settle every question about someone who died. A person can name what a grandmother, teacher or other adult offered without being required to describe that care as identical to a parent's. This is a way of reading alongside the historical account, not a diagnosis of Roosevelt or an explanation of her later achievements.

For your own history, name one relationship that ended or changed and one particular act of care that followed. Let each keep its own description. You do not have to turn gratitude into a reason to silence grief.

## Hannah: when a happy occasion carries grief

Hannah had been looking forward to her wedding until an ordinary question made her leave the room. The woman arranging the ceremony asked who would walk beside her. Her aunt offered to do it. Someone suggested her older brother. Both were people she loved, and the question was a reasonable one. Yet the conversation seemed to move past a place in her life before she had been allowed to stand there herself.

Her father had died when she was eight. At twenty-seven she could remember the sound of his keys, the way he peeled an orange without breaking the skin, and one evening when he waited outside a school concert because she had insisted that he must not miss her part. Other memories were less certain. Had he really called her by the nickname everyone used now, or had the family repeated it until she imagined hearing his voice? She wanted him at the wedding. She also wanted a relationship with the adult she might have known, someone who could ask about the man she was marrying and hear her answer.

When Hannah tried to explain, her aunt said, gently, that she should enjoy the happy things. There would be enough worry without reopening an old sadness. Hannah knew the advice came from affection. Her aunt had helped raise her and had already given time and money to the wedding. That made it harder to say that the advice hurt. She thanked her, changed the subject and went home with a problem that now felt like ingratitude.

For several days she became intensely practical. She checked the invitations twice, compared prices, made lists and offered to handle jobs other people could have done. The work had a purpose, but it also kept her away from the question she could not answer: how could she be so happy about one relationship and so sad about another? She was afraid that if she allowed the sadness to begin, it would take the whole occasion from her.

Her partner, James, noticed that she had stopped enjoying the planning. His first interpretation was that she might be uncertain about marrying him. Hannah heard anxiety in his questions and hurried to reassure him. She promised that everything was fine. He became more careful around her. She became more careful around him. Two people who wanted to support each other were beginning to protect each other from information they both needed.

The change came during a quiet evening, without a special exercise or a dramatic breakthrough. James mentioned a song his father liked. Hannah began crying and apologised before he had said anything. He asked what she was apologising for. She could not explain it neatly. Eventually she said, "I am happy that we are doing this. I am missing my father in a way I did not expect. I keep thinking you will hear that as a problem between us."

James admitted that he had wondered whether she was unhappy with the wedding. Once they named the misunderstanding, they could talk about the actual loss. Hannah wanted someone who knew her father to tell her what he was like beyond being a father. She wanted to remember him without pretending that any relative could know exactly what he would have thought of her choices. She wanted a place for him at the wedding that would not require her to explain her grief to a room full of guests.

These wishes were related, but they needed different responses. A ceremony could acknowledge someone who was missing. It could not provide the years of conversation she had never had. Hannah began to see why the planning question had hurt so much. People had offered to fill a role on the day. Her longing reached beyond that role. Her brother could walk beside her lovingly and still be her brother. Asking him to become an answer to everything missing would put a burden on a relationship that already mattered in its own right.

She visited her father's older sister with a small notebook. She asked for one ordinary memory rather than a grand account of

what a wonderful man he had been. Her aunt told her that he was often late, that he sang badly when cooking, and that he took a long time choosing presents because he worried about getting them wrong. The details made Hannah laugh. They also made him feel less like a flawless figure she had been expected to carry and more like a person she could begin to understand.

Then the aunt told a story Hannah had never heard about an argument between her parents. Hannah felt uncomfortable. Part of her wanted every available detail; another part wanted to protect the few memories that had stayed warm. She said that she would like to hear more another day. The aunt respected the pause. Curiosity did not have to become a demand that Hannah absorb every part of the family history in one afternoon.

At home, she wrote three separate headings: what she remembered, what someone else remembered, and what she imagined. The photograph of him at the school concert belonged in the first two columns. The picture in her mind of him proudly giving a wedding speech belonged in the third. She did not discard it. Imagining can be part of missing someone. She simply stopped asking the imagined speech to prove what he would certainly have said.

This distinction mattered because relatives often offered reassurance in the form of certainty. "He would never have allowed that," one said about a decision she had made. Another insisted that he would have wanted a large celebration. Hannah could appreciate the feeling behind those comments while recognising that they were interpretations. She did not have to organise her wedding around competing claims about the wishes of someone who could no longer speak for himself.

She chose a small photograph for a table near the entrance. Her brother would walk with her. She would keep a private moment before the ceremony to look at the picture, and the programme would carry a short acknowledgement of loved ones who were absent. She decided against a long public tribute. The decision did

not measure the size of her love. It reflected what she could carry on that particular day.

When her aunt suggested that a photograph might make people sad, Hannah resisted the urge to defend her entire emotional life. She explained the plan, thanked her aunt for the care she had given, and said, "I want this small acknowledgement. I also want us to celebrate." The aunt did not immediately understand. Their conversation ended without complete agreement. Hannah had to tolerate that unfinished feeling rather than turn her boundary into a campaign to make everyone approve.

James asked what she wanted him to do if grief became strong during the wedding. She said she would prefer a quiet question rather than a public announcement that she needed space. They agreed that he could ask whether she wanted company, a few minutes alone, or help returning to the guests. A friend knew where she might step away. These were ordinary arrangements. Their value was that Hannah would not have to invent them while already feeling exposed.

She also made a plan for the days before the ceremony. She would not leave every difficult conversation until the final evening. She would eat with people she trusted, finish the necessary tasks early enough to rest, and give herself permission to leave a conversation that turned into an argument about how she should feel. The plan was imperfect. A late delivery and a family disagreement still upset her. Having support did not remove the pressures of a wedding; it meant that sadness about her father did not have to be treated as one more organisational failure.

On the day itself, the photograph brought a sharper feeling than she expected. She stood beside it for a moment and remembered being a child waiting at the school gate. Then her brother came to find her. He did not tell her that her father was watching or that she must stop crying before the photographs. He asked whether she was ready, and when she said she needed another minute, he waited.

Later, during the meal, Hannah laughed so hard at a friend's story that she briefly forgot the photograph. When she remembered it, she felt a quick stab of guilt. The guilt carried an old belief: remembering her father faithfully meant keeping the absence present at every moment. She had no reason to accept that rule. She could turn toward the people at the table. The enjoyment was real, just as the loss was real. Neither required the other to disappear.

Several days after the wedding, she felt unexpectedly flat. The urgent tasks were finished, and the ceremony had not answered the larger longing. She had acknowledged her father. She still could not phone him. This was an important disappointment to recognise. If she had expected a perfect ritual to settle the whole loss, she might have blamed herself for choosing the wrong one. Instead, she understood the ritual as one act of care within a continuing life.

Hannah began meeting the aunt who had shared the ordinary stories for lunch occasionally. Sometimes they talked about her father; sometimes they talked about work, recipes or the aunt's own childhood. Their relationship grew around more than the task of preserving him. Hannah also spoke with a counsellor when the feelings became difficult to manage. She did not treat that decision as evidence that the wedding had gone badly. It was a way of finding room for something the wedding could only partly hold.

There are readers whose history makes Hannah's choices unsuitable. An absent father may have been harmful, and displaying his photograph may feel dishonest or unsafe. Another reader may have no picture, no reliable storyteller, or no wish to include him in a public occasion. The useful part of Hannah's experience is the care she took to identify what she wanted. Her decisions belonged to her particular relationship, not to a rule that every person must honour a father in the same way.

The questions behind her decisions are worth considering slowly. What has this occasion made newly visible? Which part is about the person, and which part is about a role or conversation you hoped to

have? What can the people around you actually offer? Where are they trying to help, and where are their attempts making it harder to speak? A precise answer often gives support somewhere to begin.

You might discover that you want a memory, a practical companion, privacy, or simply permission to have an unsettled day. You might want no special acknowledgement at all. The point is to make a choice you can inhabit. Grief can change as a life changes, and you can respond to the loss of today without requiring your younger self, your relatives or your future self to feel exactly the same way.

Some readers have photographs and stories; others have almost nothing. A person may grieve the inability to remember a voice or may feel little attachment to the individual but miss the relationship they imagined. None of these responses needs to imitate somebody else's grief. Describe what you actually miss rather than borrowing the emotion you think a good child should have.

The same care applies to relief after the death of an unsafe father. Relief does not establish that you never cared, and sadness does not erase the harm. A truthful account can contain more than one feeling without forcing a final verdict about whether the person was entirely good or bad.

## Reflection: describe the loss in today's language

Complete three sentences: "At this stage of my life, I wish I could...", "What I know about him is...", and "What I need around me now is..." Keep unknowns as unknowns. If another person offers support, ask for something concrete, such as listening to one memory, attending an event with you or respecting a day when you do not want to discuss it.

Return to the page at another milestone if you wish. It may change. Your earlier understanding was not necessarily wrong; it may have belonged to an earlier stage of your life.

# Further reading and support

The main stories are fictional illustrations, and the reflection exercises are original prompts rather than clinical assessments. The resources below offer background information or help finding support. They do not establish a diagnosis or determine whether a particular relationship is safe.

## Grief information

NHS: “Grief after bereavement or loss.” A public guide to varied grief experiences and routes to support. NHS service instructions are specific to its own healthcare setting; readers elsewhere should use appropriate local services.

https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/feelings-and-symptoms/grief-bereavement-loss/

## South African support

The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) lists mental-health information, support groups and helplines. Its listed 24-hour lines include the Cipla Mental Health Helpline, 0800 456 789, and the Suicide Crisis Helpline, 0800 567 567. Website: https://sadag.org/

Childline South Africa offers its free 24-hour helpline on 116 for children and people seeking help about children. Contact information: https://www.childlinesa.org.za/contact-us/

Resources and contact details were checked on 12 October 2026. Services and numbers can change; consult the organisation’s current website. Outside South Africa, use local services. If there is immediate danger or a medical emergency, contact local emergency services rather than waiting to complete a reading exercise.

## Sources for the historical passages

[1] FDR Presidential Library and Museum, “Eleanor Roosevelt Biography.”

https://www.fdrlibrary.org/er-biography

[2] Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (1845), chapter I. Original text reproduced by Project Gutenberg.

https://www.gutenberg.org/files/23/23-h/23-h.htm

[3] Trevor Noah, interview with Terry Gross, Fresh Air, 22 November 2016, “Trevor Noah Says He Grew Up In The Shadow Of A Giant (His Mom).” NPR interview carried by NPR Illinois.

https://www.nprillinois.org/2016-11-22/trevor-noah-says-he-grew-up-in-the-shadow-of-a-giant-his-mom

[4] Nelson Mandela Foundation, “Biography of Nelson Mandela.” The Foundation explains the evidence for the corrected 1930 date of his father’s death.

https://www.nelsonmandela.org/biography

[5] Barack Obama, “Weekly Address: Celebrating Father’s Day,” 18 June 2011. Archived White House transcript.

https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/18/weekly-address-celebrating-fathers-day

Historical passages summarise the identified accounts in original wording. Reflections beside them are the author’s applications, not clinical explanations of the people described. No private conversations have been invented for these passages. Sources checked on 12 October 2026.