

5.

In the early 1960s, a psychologist named Marvin Eisenstadt started a project interviewing "creatives"—innovators and artists and entrepreneurs—looking for patterns and trends. As he was analyzing the responses, he noticed an odd fact. A surprising number had lost a parent in childhood. The group he was studying was so small that Eisenstadt knew there was a possibility that what he was seeing was just chance. But the fact nagged at him. What if it wasn't chance? What if it meant something? There had been hints in the psychological literature. In the 1950s, while studying a sample of famous biologists, the science historian Anne Roe had remarked in passing on how many had at least one parent who died while they were young. The same observation was made a few years later in an informal survey of famous poets and writers like Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Swift, Edward Gibbon, and Thackeray. More than half, it turned out, had lost a father or mother before the age of fifteen. The link between career achievement and childhood bereavement was one of those stray facts that no one knew what to do with. So Eisenstadt decided to embark on a more ambitious project.

"It was 1963, 1964," Eisenstadt remembers. "I started with the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and then it turned into both *Britannica* and the *Encyclopedia Americana*." Eisenstadt made a list of every person, from Homer to John F. Kennedy, whose life merited more than one column in either encyclopedia. That, he felt, was a rough proxy for achievement. He now had a list of 699 people. He then began systematically tracking down biographical in-

formation for everyone on the list. "It took me ten years," Eisenstadt says. "I was reading all kinds of foreign-language books, I went to California and to the Library of Congress, and to the genealogical library in New York City. I tracked down as many parental-loss profiles as I could, until I felt I had good statistical results."

Of the 573 eminent people for whom Eisenstadt could find reliable biographical information, a quarter had lost at least one parent before the age of ten. By age fifteen, 34.5 percent had had at least one parent die, and by the age of twenty, 45 percent. Even for the years before the twentieth century, when life expectancy due to illness and accidents and warfare was much lower than it is today, those are astonishing numbers.

At the same time as Eisenstadt was pursuing his research, the historian Lucille Iremonger set out to write a history of England's prime ministers. Her focus was on the period from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the start of the Second World War. What sort of backgrounds and qualities, she wondered, predicted the kind of person capable of rising to the top of British politics at a time when it was the most powerful country in the world? Like Eisenstadt, however, she got sidetracked by a fact that, as she wrote, "occurred so frequently that I began to wonder whether it was not of more than passing significance." Sixty-seven percent of the prime ministers in her sample lost a parent before the age of sixteen. That's roughly twice the rate of parental loss during the same period for members of the British upper class—the socioeconomic segment from which most prime ministers came. The same pattern can be found among American presidents. Twelve

of the first forty-four U.S. presidents—beginning with George Washington and going all the way up to Barack Obama—lost their fathers while they were young.*

Since then, the topic of difficult childhoods and parental loss has cropped up again and again in the scholarly literature. There is a fascinating passage in an essay by the psychologist Dean Simonton, for example, in which he tries to understand why so many gifted children fail to live up to their early promise. One of the reasons, he concludes, is that they have “inherited an excessive amount of psychological health.” Those who fall short, he says, are children “too conventional, too obedient, too unimaginative, to make the big time with some revolutionary idea.” He goes on: “Gifted children and child prodigies seem most likely to emerge in highly supportive family conditions. In contrast, geniuses have a perverse tendency of growing up in more adverse conditions.”

I realize these studies make it sound as if losing a parent is a good thing. “People always kid me and say, ‘Oh, you mean I’d be better off if I don’t have parents, or if I murder my father?’” Eisenstadt says. “The idea that some people could be successful without parents is a very threatening concept because the common idea is that parents help you. Parents are essential to your life.” And that, Eisenstadt stresses, is absolutely true. Parents *are* essential. Losing a father or a mother is the most devastating thing that can happen to a child. The psychiatrist Felix Brown has found

* The twelve are George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, Andrew Johnson, Rutherford Hayes, James Garfield, Grover Cleveland, Herbert Hoover, Gerald Ford, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama.

that prisoners are somewhere between two and three times more likely to have lost a parent in childhood than is the population as a whole. That’s too great a difference to be a coincidence. There are, clearly, an enormous number of direct hits from the absence of a parent.*

The evidence produced by Eisenstadt, Iremonger, and the others, however, suggests that there is also such a thing as a remote miss from the death of a parent. Your father can commit suicide and you can suffer from a childhood so unspeakable that you push it to the furthest corners of your memory—and still some good can end up coming from that. “This is not an argument in favour of orphanhood and deprivation,” Brown writes, “but the existence of these eminent orphans does suggest that in certain circumstances a virtue can be made of necessity.”†

* Brown begins with these haunting lines from Wordsworth, whose mother died when he was eight:

*She who was the heart
And hinge of all our learnings and our loves:
She left us destitute and, as we might,
Trooping together.*

† Or, as the English essayist Thomas De Quincey famously put it: “It is, or it is not, according to the nature of men, an advantage to be orphaned at an early age.”

when all of us depend on people who have been hardened by their experiences.* Freireich had the courage to think the unthinkable. He experimented on children. He took them through pain no human being should ever have to go through. And he did it in no small part because he understood from his own childhood experience that it is possible to emerge from even the darkest hell healed and restored. Leukemia was a direct hit. He turned it into a remote miss.

At one point, in the midst of his battle, Freireich realized that the standard method of monitoring the children's cancer—taking a blood sample and counting the number of cancer cells under a microscope—wasn't good enough. Blood was misleading. A child's blood could look cancer free. But the disease could still be lurking in her bone marrow—which meant that you had to go through the painful process of gathering bone marrow samples, over and over again, month after month, until you were sure the cancer was gone. Max Winrobe heard what Freireich was up to and tried to stop him. Freireich was torturing the patients, Winrobe said. He was not wrong. His was the empathetic response. But it is also the response that would never have led to a cure.

* In his memoir *The Theory and Practice of Hell*, Eugen Kogon writes of what happened at the German concentration camp Buchenwald whenever the Nazis came to the leaders of the camp and demanded that they select for the gas chambers those from among their own ranks who were "socially unfit." Not to comply meant disaster; the Nazis would then turn the prisoner leadership over to the "greens"—the sadistic criminal element also interned at Buchenwald alongside Jews and political prisoners. On "no account," Kogon writes, could the "pure of heart" be asked to make that decision. Sometimes human survival demands that we commit harm in the cause of some greater good—and, Kogon writes, "the more tender one's conscience, the more difficult it was to make such decisions."

9.

Does this mean that Freireich should be glad he had the childhood he had? The answer is plainly no. What he went through as a child no child should ever have to endure. Along the same lines, I asked every dyslexic I interviewed the question posed at the beginning of the previous chapter: Would they wish dyslexia on their own children? Every one of them said no. Grazer shuddered at the thought. Gary Cohn was horrified. David Boies has two boys who are both dyslexic, and watching them grow up in an environment where reading early and well counted for everything nearly broke his heart. Here were one of the top producers in Hollywood, one of the most powerful bankers on Wall Street, and one of the best trial lawyers in the country—all of whom recognized how central their dyslexia was to their success. Yet they also knew firsthand what the price of that success was—and they could not bring themselves to wish that same experience on their own children.

But the question of what any of us would wish on our children is the wrong question, isn't it? The right question is whether we as a society *need* people who have emerged from some kind of trauma—and the answer is that we plainly do. This is not a pleasant fact to contemplate. For every remote miss who becomes stronger, there are countless near misses who are crushed by what they have been through. There are times and places, however,

"We used to do bone marrows by grabbing their legs like this," Freireich told me. He held one of his giant hands out, as if wrapped around a child's tiny femur. "We'd stick the needle in without anesthesia. Why no anesthesia? Because they'd scream just as much when you gave them an anesthesia shot. It's an eighteen- or nineteen-gauge needle straight into the shinbone, right below the knee. The kids are hysterical. The parents and nurses hold the kid down. We did that for every cycle. We needed to know if their bone marrow had recovered."

When he said the words "grabbing their legs like this," an involuntary grimace passed across Freireich's face, as if for a moment he could feel what an eighteen-gauge needle straight into the shinbone of a small child felt like, and as if the feeling of that pain would give him pause. But then, as quickly as it appeared, it was gone.

10.

When Jay Freireich was doing his medical training, he met a nurse named Haroldine Cunningham. He asked her out on a date. She said no. "All the young doctors were pretty aggressive," she remembers. "He had a reputation for being very outspoken. He called a couple of times, and I didn't go." But one weekend, Cunningham went to visit her aunt in a suburb outside of Chicago—and the phone rang. It was Freireich. He had taken the train out from Chicago and was calling from the train station. "He said, 'I'm here,'" she remembers. "He was very persistent." This was the early 1950s. They have been married ever since.

Freireich's wife is as small as Freireich is enormous, a tiny woman with a deep and obvious reservoir of strength. "I see the man. I see his needs," she said. He would come home from the hospital late at night, from the blood and the suffering, and she would be there. "She is the first person who ever loved me," Freireich said simply. "She is my angel from heaven. She found me. I think she detected something in me that could be nourished. I defer to her in all things. She keeps me going every day."

Haroldine grew up poor as well. Her family lived in a tiny apartment outside Chicago. When she was twelve, she tried the bathroom door—and couldn't get in. "My mother had locked the door," she said. "I got the neighbor from downstairs, who was the landlord. He opened the window and got in. We called the hospital. She died there. You don't really know when you're twelve or thirteen years old what is going on, but I knew she was unhappy. My father was away, of course. He was not a terrific father."

She sat in the chair in her husband's office, this woman who carved an island of calm out of the turbulence of her husband's life. "You have to realize, of course, that love doesn't always save people you want to save. Somebody asked me once, weren't you angry? And I said, no, I wasn't, I understood her misery.

"There are things that either build you up or put you down. Jay and I have that in common."