

# Too Old to be Orphans

(Or for the satirically minded: A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Imitation)

By Danny O'Neil, 2019

It's the kind of instant message I would have sent 28 years ago if there had been such a thing as instant messaging 28 years ago.

The meaning would have been different, though. There would have been something sneaky about it then even. I would have been a teenager looking to participate in the cliché rite of passage that's getting fucked.

Except we're legal now, and my parents aren't out of town. They're dead, which means that message I just sent to the seven friends I've had since high school was actually a cruelly cynical joke that you may find to be an exceptionally poor joke, and if that's the case, I'd like to point out two things:

- a) They're my parents.
- b) I loved them. Very much.

But they're gone now. My father died at home, in bed, when I was 14 and we lived in rural Oregon. My mother died at home, in bed, just this week. Yesterday morning in fact, at her house in Santa Cruz County where I lived for three of the unappetizing years of my life.

It's just me now. Well, me and my sister and our brother, and while we're too old to be orphans, the idea that I am the oldest surviving member of my immediate family is messing with my head. Or maybe it's my heart.

This wasn't a surprise. Mom was sick for more than three years, and when she opted against another round of chemotherapy three months ago, everyone knew how the whole

Me: Ayo, just bought six joints and I'm going to make it so I can't feel my face. Anyone interested?

March 27, 6:45 p.m.

Me: My parents are gone.

March 27, 6:45 p.m.

It's the kind of instant message I would have sent 28 years ago if there had been such a thing as instant messaging 28 years ago.

The meaning would have been different, though. There would have been something sneaky about it. Illicit even. I would have been a teenager looking to participate in the cliched rite of passage that is getting fucked up in the absence of parental supervision.

Except weed is legal now, and my parents aren't out of town. They're dead, which means that message I just sent to the seven friends I've had since high school was actually a cruelly cynical joke that you may find to be in exceptionally poor taste, and if that's the case, I'd like to point out two things:

- a) They're my parents;
- b) I loved them. Very much.

But they're gone now. My father died at home, in bed, when I was 14 and we lived in rural Oregon. My mother died at home, in bed, just this week. Yesterday morning in fact, at her house in Santa Cruz County where I lived for three of the unhappiest years of my life.

It's just me now. Well, me and my sister and our brother, and while we're too old to be orphans, the idea that I am the oldest surviving member of my immediate family is messing with my head. Or maybe it's my heart.

This wasn't a surprise. Mom was sick for more than three years, and when she opted against another round of chemotherapy three months ago, everyone knew how this whole

thing was going to end. The only question was how long the final lap would take and how bad it would get before we reached the finish line, and the fact that it all happened relatively fast was at least a small blessing for a woman who had already gone through so much before ever being diagnosed with cancer.

I don't know if death ever feels fair, but in this case, it feels like an unnecessarily low blow. She nursed my father through a debilitating illness, the exact origin of which remains a mystery. He died at the age of 38, leaving her with three children. She remarried, moving the family to Santa Cruz, which is an hour and a half south of San Francisco only to be cheated on by a stepfather, whom I loathed by the way, but a man she truly loved. Throw in the death of my sister's husband – also at the age of 38 – and mix in the average dose of the dysfunctions found in every family, and well, it's possible for me to mix up a stiff persecution complex about the whole ordeal.

Except I'm not as angry as I expected to be. In fact, I feel a peace that is quite unexpected. Maybe it's the relief of knowing that it won't get any worse for her or the sincere and deep gratitude I expressed for everything she did for me, her oldest son, and for our family.

But sitting right next to that feeling of peace is the uncertainty that comes when you truly do not know what comes next. \*

My parents are gone, and I feel unmoored. This is not entirely negative. There's a sense that anything is possible, and the future is there for the making. There's also an uneasiness that comes from knowing that we've lost the one person who held us together these past 30 years, many of which were nothing short of turbulent. Yes, anything is possible, which includes the further erosion of my family. }

Maybe that's what compels me to write this. To speak up in hopes of preserving what we do still have. Or maybe it's because her death has freed me to truly poke into the nooks and crannies of my family's history to uncover what happened and explore the impact it has had on me without the risk of hurting her feelings. Or it could be that I now believe I have suffered the requisite amount of turmoil and tragedy to produce something that is both interesting and substantial and can impress everyone with just how soulful I am in spite of all this misfortune.

I'm not really kidding about that. The pursuit of affirmation has been the single most enduring trait of my life. Not just the desire for approval, but the paralyzing anxiety triggered by its absence. It explains everything from my choice of careers to arguments with my wife to the fact that Angel Breedlove dumped me when I was in seventh grade because I wouldn't stop asking her if she was mad at me. It might explain the way I began this story, too. I wanted to make you – the reader – laugh. And then shudder. And then feel some sense of sympathy, maybe even a little pity, for this obviously vulnerable, sensitive man who at the age of 44 has now watched both of his parents die from prolonged illnesses.

We haven't even gotten to my stepdad, yet, beyond the fact that you know I don't like the dude. At all. I have good reasons for that beyond the fact he began dating my Mom within a year of my father's death. First, he was a total dick when I lived in his house from the ages of 15 through 18. The guy came home from work, walked in from the garage without so much as a greeting to anyone who happened to be home and went upstairs to his room and closed the door. Of all the years I lived there, I never remember him washing a dish though he did expect me to wash his car weekly the summer I was 16 years old, which I did. I also peed on it when I came home one night and everyone was already asleep. 😊