

MODERN LOVE

The Devastation of Disinheritance

My father's decision to cut me out of his will shocked me. Could the damage ever be repaired?

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This essay is part of a Modern Love project on the intersection of money and relationships.

In 2017, eight years after I discovered that my father had disinherited me, a FedEx driver stopped at my house to deliver an envelope.

I didn't know how to feel. Joyful? Relieved? Vindicated?

I had already spent what felt like a lifetime trying to move on from the aftermath of my father's will, which sent a shock wave through my family with its surprise sentence: "To my daughter, Mary Beth, I leave no bequest for reasons known to her."

I had tried everything to keep those words from echoing in my head and battering at my heart: yoga, therapy, Al-Anon, and obsessive writing and rewriting of a book about disinheritance that my mother ultimately asked me not to publish.

I sat on the stoop, letting details crowd back in. In his will, my father left the house and investments to my mother. He left his hunting cabin on hundreds of acres he called "the Farm," his most prized possession — place of all his best days and his very last breath — to my oldest brother. The will stipulated that my two other brothers could use the Farm for hunting and hanging out, as they had done all their

lives, but only with permission from our brother. If he ever decided to sell, he was to reimburse himself for repairs and maintenance, then split the rest three ways among the brothers.

I opened the FedEx envelope, knowing what it contained. My oldest brother had done what most family members don't when a sibling has been disinherited: He rallied my other brothers to split the proceeds from the sale four ways instead of three. They had each given me a portion of their inheritance to make sure I got my equal share — essentially “re-inheriting” me.

I waited for a feeling to settle, surprised to realize that once again I felt overcome with sadness.

Why? Maybe I had absorbed a kind of free-floating despair, corresponding with so many anguished, angry and confused disinherited Americans, who'd started contacting me in response to my writing on the topic because there were so few resources for the disinherited. Their sorrow was palpable for sure. When it came to disinheritance, I had learned mainly this so far: All families are tragedies.

In mine, we siblings had all but stopped communicating. I had only recently found out about the imminent sale of the Farm from my youngest brother, whose main communication consisted of texts on special occasions: “Farm for sale. Happy Birthday.”

My mother called to make sure I didn't join forces with anyone in the family who might have wanted to mess up the sale for my oldest brother. There were rifts and fights and silences. As alliances were always shifting — my two other brothers hadn't spoken to each other in years, the younger of the two freezing almost everyone out, the older treating me as if I didn't exist — it was hard to know what was happening and why.

“I'm the last person involved in any of this, Mom,” I said.

I had taken a giant step away from the family confusion, trying to get a grip on my emotions. In the wake of my father's death, after learning about his will, I felt excluded, weepy, wounded — basically useless — for a long time. Much had been

said in the name of protecting (deceiving) me. The whole mess somehow kept prompting me to push my way into the middle of things, where my help was not wanted or needed. So, finally, I took a break.

The ruse began the day after my father had died, when my mother panicked and hid the will (and its divisive contents) until she could figure out what to do after the wake and burial. Assembled in the kitchen of the house where we had grown up, my siblings and I were dismayed by my mother's announcement that she couldn't find it anywhere. We mounted a search in my father's den, which was when I first saw my name scrawled in my father's handwriting across a packet he had stashed at the bottom of his safe.

Before I could take in its meaning, that packet "disappeared," too. My family dodged my confusion and questions for months. Only after I got a copy of the will from my father's lawyer did I find out I had been disinherited.

"But Dad and I were on good terms," I told my brothers. "The last thing we said to each other was, 'I love you.'"

"That's good enough for me," my oldest brother said.

"He was going to change the will," my mother said. "He just thought he had more time."

My oldest brother made the pronouncement: "Then it's up to us to fix it."

Only much later did I think to ask about the contents of the mysterious packet stashed in my father's safe, which my mother reluctantly handed over.

Opening it, I had a sick feeling. Inside was a stack of photocopies neatly folded, a replication of every letter my father and I had exchanged in the 1990s, when I was living in New York City, working as an AIDS medical journalist and marching in the streets with ACT UP. I had joined activists to change government policy and medical protocols. Why not try to change my father, too?

The correspondence had started when my father sent me a poem about his life, which had ironically been prompted by a first visit to his lawyer concerning his will. But in the poem, he had only written about one of us, my oldest brother.

I replied that I was moved by his poetry but also hurt that only his oldest son had ever seemed to matter to him. My father wrote back, explaining that his life had felt simple, nearly perfect, when he was in medical school with only my mother and one baby boy. My mother had wanted children more than anything. He had not.

That stung. Our exchange turned ugly. The last lines I wrote were aimed squarely at my father's chest: "We can keep pretending you love me, Dad, but I see that you don't. So, please know this: As of now, I'm erasing you from my heart."

I gasped. How had I forgotten this?

My mother read over my shoulder, tears in her eyes. "He was so hurt."

"So, because I was erasing him from my heart, he erased me from his will?"

She nodded.

"Wow," I whispered, all but speechless. "He really played the long game!"

My father had always been a tough opponent, determined to win at any cost, even if his sparring partners were his own offspring. My brothers had battled with him many times, only to return with olive branch in hand, seeking acceptance and approval. I battled that man as fiercely as I loved him. Walking away would mean both admitting defeat and letting go of the only way to keep him close.

But no matter how I wielded my pen — the only useful weapon in my arsenal — he ultimately won the war, taking that victory with him to his grave. And beyond.

I felt ashamed and ridiculous for having participated so blindly in my own disinheritance. My father could be maddening and small-minded, but I had been trying to match him in meanness, to hurt him because I was hurt.

It wasn't my oldest brother's fault he was my father's favorite. Our childhood was confusing emotionally, with invisible boundaries that led each of us down wrong paths. He was part of that system, too, and like the rest of us, just trying to get along. He didn't have to make reparations to me, and my other brothers didn't have to follow along. But they did, and it made a difference. Their generosity confirmed that wrongs could be righted, that family was important despite difference, that death wasn't always the end of the story.

I feel grateful to my brothers and have sought connection in the ways that feel possible. I wrote to the brother who doesn't speak to me but didn't hear back. I called the brother who texts; we are OK. And recently, for the first time in a long time, I had lunch with my oldest brother and his family on his birthday.

Although the re-inheritance helped, it hasn't brought all of us back together. But in our last meeting my oldest brother and I seemed to feel the same hope: that we might return to that too brief time during our father's wake and funeral when we were all in it together, the only four people in the entire world who truly understood what it meant to love and lose our formidable father.

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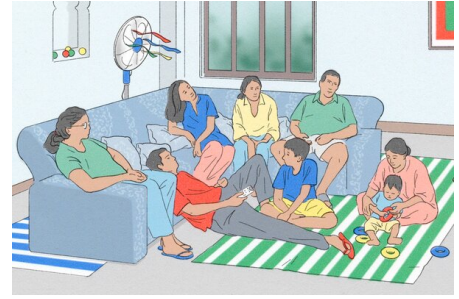
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MB Caschetta has written more about disinheritance (and other topics) in her book, “A Cheerleader’s Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment: A Memoir in Essays.”

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