

LITTLE ORPHAN MARY

Mary's mother died in 2010,
Mary's 60-year-old husband David died in 2012,
and Mary's 8-year-old grandson died in 2013.

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Self care articles for the bereaved

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It's been weeks since the death of my mother.

I was in the grocery store last Friday when I felt the now-familiar lump forming in my throat. Was I going to embarrass myself and start crying in the bread aisle?

You see, every time I shopped at our small-town grocery store I'd walk by a display of bulk-packaged chocolates on styrofoam trays labeled with a sign saying \$3.99/lb. Last year my mother had wanted to give her oldest grandchildren gifts, despite her limited budget. She'd seen the bulk candy display and thought it was a pretty good price for assorted chocolates. When she brought six trays of various confections up to the checkout, the cashier weighed them and announced the total: "\$62.00."

Mom was horrified when she realized the price she'd seen below the packages had meant per pound.

But she bought them anyway—
she had her heart set on giving her
adult grandchildren a special gift.

In the ensuing moments between choosing the trays and getting to the checkout, those chocolates had somehow become the perfect gift.

She showed me the receipt later, still in shock over the high cost of the bulk candy. I commiserated with her then, reassuring her the grandchildren would love the bags she was going to put together. I refrained from pointing out that Brach's bagged chocolate was much cheaper.

It was with a great deal of love and care that my mother divided the bulk candy into brown paper bags, tying them shut with a red ribbon, and labeling each with a handwritten tag. On Christmas day, she proudly presented the bags to the older grandchildren.

I thought I had grief all figured out. All I had to do was buy my apples and oranges elsewhere, bypassing that candy display. I'd managed to completely avoid that section of the store several times, knowing that soon the holidays would be over, the display would be removed, and I could breathe a sigh of relief.

So why was I standing in the bread aisle, gulping back tears?

It is easy to understand why the display of chocolates saddened me. It makes sense that a television program about losing a mother would bring tears. When someone asks me about my mother and I have to talk past a lump forming in my throat, it is understandable.

But when I am shoveling snow in the bitter cold and an unexplained sadness overwhelms me? Or sitting on the couch laughing at a comedy one minute, only to realize in the next that the tears of laughter have suddenly become tears of sadness? To stand in front of loaves of bread at the grocery store and wonder if I can make it through the checkout without shedding tears?

“What is wrong with me?”

Not having experienced this depth of emotion before, not even after my father’s death twenty-four years ago, I wonder at my seesawing emotions.

I nudge the feelings back and forth in my mind, working them like a loose tooth. Is this normal? Am I depressed? Am I okay? Do other people feel like this when they lose their mother?

Suddenly it dawns on me, the simplicity of the answer:

I miss my mom.

And I’m an orphan, a 51-year-old orphan.