# Death is a gift.

It cuts through the illusion that someone else is holding something that really resides in you. Leaving behind a painfully clear reflection of what you're carrying and what matters to you. You just don't have to wait until someone dies to look at the reflection.

For me, this wasn't an easy sight, but here is a glimpse into what I saw.

A few years ago if you had asked how I would feel if my Grandpa died, I would've said something like, "I'll be sad to lose him, but we weren't that close. We didn't have the easiest relationship." Little did I know how much was there, until I had to face that day.

**Thawing**

At 1:30am on a cold fall night, that day came. He was gone.

In a moment, death cleared me of my delusion that I had nothing held. There I was, alone, looking down at all the baggage I was still carrying. After years of pleasantries and holiday meals, all the pent up hurt and anger I'd harbored towards my Grandpa started to pour out of me. I was so hurt, feeling like he only ever told me how I should be, never he was proud of me. The depth of that hurt had been hiding a deep relationship that had shaped me.

As the pain started to crack apart my icy numbness, the warmth came rushing in too. Memories flooded in of all the time I spent at his house playing, all the conversations in his smokey den. I started to see how he loved me all those years - in his own way. Each piece of criticism and advice - was him trying to share his love. He wanted me to be safe and loved, to learn the most important lessons he had.

As the veil fell away, I started to see my own role in this - my own half of the equation. I had guarded myself so tightly from the sting of his rejection, that I didn't realize I had guarded against his love. I needed to be seen and loved. Finally, at that moment, I was.

For so many years, it had been "easy" to pretend that depth wasn't there. But death is like an earthquake, it started shaking loose everything that wasn't settled. The grief had softened me and soon, I realized it wasn't just my Grandpa I was grieving. After 24 years, I found I wasn't done grieving my Dad.

**Rivers**

Months later, I sat listening to cheesy music at a wedding. I watched as the father-daughter dance started and it clicks that I'll never have that. My heart twisted realizing how much I wish I could dance with my dad at my wedding one day. A flash of shame, thinking that I was over this whole dead dad thing. Then back into the waves of longing to feel small and held at a time when

things are so big and so much is changing. I'm two, giggling on your shoulders, as you belt out Roxanne. I felt so safe.

As I feel the waves of grief, down my chest - the deep river bed where your love flowed runs bare. I travel down them and trace the imprint you left on me. I feel every little bit of me that you touched and shaped. It's a lot. I see all the places and spaces I left for you. All the hopes and expectations I had of the future. I'm struck by the absence of you.

I'm left feeling sober at how much impact you had on me in six years. So often the urge is to not let anything affect me, to be indifferent, tough and strong. But here, at this moment, I find myself feeling the opposite. I find such gratitude for the imprint you left on me, woven into the fabric of my being. And with a bittersweet warmth, I see I'm holding myself the way I wish you were.

With each wave I'm given the chance to give myself what I needed all those years ago. Grief doesn't seem to end - it comes in waves. I just try to ride the waves as they come. I worry less about being done and look for the pointers all around me.

**Waves**

I look at my relationships a little bit differently now. I find myself wanting to look in the mirror before someone dies. My eyes are more open to the places I'm avoiding. I call it blind spotting. It tends to point to where I need to go.

With each new wave, I'm pointed toward parts of myself I hadn't fully seen. Then as I zoom out, I start to see they are a map to the things that matter most to me. The things that I need. And with that map, I can chart a whole new course. One where I don't have to wait until someone dies to see.

**Aftermath**

A few months ago I startled awake in a cold sweat, clawing out of a dream where I sat helpless to the side as I watched my sister die. It struck me, this is someone that matters so much to me that I'm already missing her - this time I have time.

A few messages and months later, I was in Boston visiting her for a week. One night as my sister and I were chatting at the table, I nervously shared with her my dream. I shared how much she meant to me and how grateful I was to have her in my life. She teared up and said, "I've had the same dream, but of you." In an instant, it was clear how much she cared about me. I saw the ways I'd been avoiding calling as to not be a burden, the ways she tried to support me by trying to stay out of my way. Tears cleared the way through and I was left with a message - this person matters to me and I want to show up for them.