My favorite mistake

I was six years old the first time I saw my mother cry. To this day, with painful clarity, I can recall how with complete abandon she let herself go, breaking down in piercing sobs and uncontrollable shaking. It was as if a dam burst after a relentless flood of pent-up emotion, instantly sweeping away her composure. I often saw kids my own age surrender to crying fits, but seeing it happen to an adult, my own mother, utterly terrified me. At the time, I thought my brothers and I, completely enveloped in our world of play and mischief, had been responsible for overwhelming the dam by tuning out her repeated requests for us to stop fighting with each other and to put away our toys, and guilt flooded my entire being. We stopped making noise. We just stood there in shock, unable to comprehend the scene before us. Later on, I came to realize we weren’t completely responsible; we merely provided the last bit of pressure that finally compromised the dam, and in the next few weeks, I learned a great deal about love and empathy.

At the time, our maternal grandmother was hospitalized with a condition that baffled her doctors. For no apparent reason, her mind began slipping away; she didn’t recognize relatives, she couldn’t remember basic facts, she suddenly found *Sesame Street* entertaining, and, perhaps most disturbing of all, she was prone to sudden violent outbursts of profanity. Our mother had been visiting Grandma in the hospital every day, but we were scared to go. Since we’d get better soon after we got sick, we figured the same would happen with Grandma – sure, what was going on with her was weird, but it was an adult problem that would somehow be fixed. Yet Mom knew better. She understood that even if Grandma survived, both of them would never be the same, a painful and overwhelming truth.

After an eternity to us, Mom’s sobbing subsided as she prepared herself to speak. Completely stunned, we were ready to listen. I don’t remember her exact words, but I remember her message. Helplessly watching her mother succumb to a mysterious degenerative illness had devastated her enough, but her inability to explain Grandma’s condition to us frustrated her just as much as our inability to comprehend the gravity of the situation, so our misbehavior and blatant disregard for her authority seemed a mockery of her own grief and overwhelmed her to the point of tears.

The cause of Mom’s breakdown is painfully obvious to me now, but, though Grandma has been gone for over 30 years and time has lessened Mom’s grief, in that moment, as a 6-year-old, new understanding overwhelmed me: Grandma would not get better … adults can cry … other people have feelings that, like my own, are susceptible to damage … my brothers and I had unknowingly been selfish and insensitive. At some point, we all come to realize that the world is bigger than us – that pain, frustration, fear, and anger also exist in others. I still feel bad that my understanding of this concept came at the cost of hurting my mother, but I’m grateful to have learned about empathy so early in my life. Growing up, I tried to understand people’s behaviors and motivations before jumping to conclusions or simply writing someone off as rude, ungrateful, or selfish. I have learned to think as much as possible before I speak and to consider how my own words and actions might come across to others

We came to learn that Grandma had somehow developed Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, a rare brain disorder that causes rapidly progressing dementia-like symptoms and for which there is no cure. Most patients die within a year. Grandma died six months after entering the hospital. Though at the time I couldn’t fully grasp what was happening to Grandma and, by extension, to our family, Mom’s breakdown and the loss of Grandma, mark the loss of some of my childhood innocence. Yet it was precisely this loss that allowed me to begin seeing the scope of the world outside of my own awareness, an enlightenment for which I’ll be forever grateful.