

## The Strange Beautiful Side Of Death

by Leah Pearlman

It's no surprise to anyone who knows my family well (or perhaps anyone who has a teenage daughter themselves) that growing up, my mom and I had a strained relationship.

Simply put, she insisted that I sit at the table for dinner, go to bed at nine, periodically clean my room and go to church. She ran the whole house, had a full time job, and was frequently stressed. My dad, on the other hand, seemed totally relaxed to my child eyes. He would secretly take me for donuts before school, or McDonald's after. He would let me stay up late when mom was gone. He cracked hilarious jokes with waiters, librarians, flight attendants, and everyone else, which both delighted and embarrassed me.

I was a total daddy's girl.

I still don't know why this meant I had to push against my mom so hard, but I did. So much of my "becoming" involved push, push, and more push. I was boundaried, defensive, critical, closed. And I was usually harsh about all of it. The fastest way for me to resist doing something was if my mom asked me to do it. I was so desperate for my independence that I built walls about a mile high and a mile in every direction. Plus thorns. Plus moats. Plus crocodiles (with fangs).

Sometime in college, when distance gave me the space the walls had meant to create, I began to take them down; brick by tedious brick. I wish I could say it was for my mom's sake, or even for my dad who asked me frequently to be nicer. But it was for my own sake. I knew that my mom loved me, and I knew that I loved her too. It felt absolutely terrible to be jerk to her. But jerk is exactly what I was, because the things that came out of my mouth jerked out faster than I had any control over. I'd had a decade of practice at that point, which, in Malcolm Gladwell terms, made me a master jerk.

Throughout my twenties, she and I steadily but incredibly slowly began healing our relationship. Imagine two ancient turtles moving toward each other from opposite sides of the country...in slow motion. Actually, the reality was probably that I was the slow motion turtle and my mom was patiently waiting, as she always had, for something to change.

And then, something did change. My dad died.

Until that happened, I couldn't imagine anything worse. Besides all the other ways I would miss him, what would it be like at home? What would my mom and I do? What would we have to talk about? It had always been the three of us, I'd made sure of it. His presence always made things so much more comfortable for me.

I mean, he and I had everything in common, and she and I were so different...right?

Well it was awkward at first. But at least she and I liked the same kinds of restaurants and the same kind of food. My dad had often complained about those things.

We also both enjoyed traveling, so we took a few trips together. My dad had always found traveling a chore so bringing him along could be like dragging extra luggage. It was sort of nice, to be just the two of us.

Around that time, I started learning to cook, so I would call my mom every now and then for a recipe, or advice about how to make something. She always had the answer.

Together, we brainstormed what to do with a lot of my dad's stuff. He was a collector. He kept everything. She and I, on the other hand, love to live light, getting rid of things we no longer need.

And suddenly, really, suddenly, it occurred to me: I AM SO MUCH LIKE MY MOM.

When had this happened? Had it always been true, and I hadn't noticed? Had I been changing? Had something shifted when he died? Yes. Yes. And Yes.

For my whole life, I had believed a story that I was way more like my dad than my mom. Because I believed it, I would see the evidence to support it, and even create new evidence to reinforce it. But when he was gone, and I no longer had him to impress or constantly try to align with, I started opening up whole other parts of myself I had been ignoring, repressing, or denying, because they did not match my story of who I thought I was.

Growing up, I loved my dad as much or more than any child could, I'm very sure of that. I wouldn't trade a single moment of that for anything in the whole world. And yet, now that he's gone, it's like I get a whole new favorite parent to take his place.

Now, three years later, my mom and I have just about everything in common. How we travel, how we love, what we wear, how we exercise, our relationship with food, art, play, and spirituality, gratitude, friendships, and family, how social we are, and how introverted, how much we love to learn, and get things done, how we treat ourselves, and relax well. It's like every seed she ever planted in me just took 30 years to sprout, and now I honestly don't know how I could be any MORE like her.

And wouldn't you know, this all is happening at the same time I am truly falling in love with who I am. Coincidence? Doubt it.

Recently, a new friend asked me how my mom and I get along. I hesitated for a moment, and then said with finality, "GREAT." It was the first time I'd ever answered that way; the old stories, of "strained" or "we're working on it" or "getting better", officially retired. I told him that too, how it was the first time I'd ever answered that way. I suppose I felt

guilty that something so positive came out of my dad's death.

"Way to go, dad!" My new friend said, "Getting things right, even in death."