

I think about death more than most people my age. At fourteen you're supposed to be dreaming, oblivious to death's ticking clock. For me, time has always felt different - urgent. My dad turned 60 last year, and most fourteen year olds aren't calculating how old their parents will be when they graduate, when they get married, when they reach parts of their lives they just assume their parents will be there for. It's strange growing up dancing to the beat of someone else's clock, measuring your life against theirs. Awareness of time, of loss, wasn't a recent development. It'd begun before I'd possessed the capacity to form a coherent thought.

I was eighteen months old when my mother passed away. As expected, I couldn't remember it. Grief at a young age isn't something tangible or identifiable, there's a feeling something is different; a thought that lingers not in your mind, but in your very being. I didn't feel grief in the way stories and movies portrayed, mostly because I didn't have the memories that grief stemmed from. Her absence was normal, it was simply my life, my world, the way it always had been.

As I got older, I learnt about her through stories, relatives, bits and pieces. I saw her face in photos, her style in hand-me-downs, her life through words. I learnt the truth through the whispers adults would pass to one another when they thought I wasn't listening. For a very long time, it didn't feel like I had *lost* anything. I couldn't miss her, because I never knew her. I couldn't mourn, because I was never given the chance to memorise. Grief came later; overshadowed by the guilt of having not felt. Guilt for the difficulty in which I had felt anything at all.

At seven, a mole appeared on my skin. I couldn't understand much, but I knew it wasn't good. I could see the fear in my dad. Hospitals became a familiar place for me. Antiseptic, stale crackers, and endless waiting rooms became normal. I wasn't scared - exactly. I was more concerned about bragging that I got five days off school. My dad was nervous though. Scared for cancer. I could see it in the tenseness. In the eyes of someone who'd spent way too long in hospital rooms, first for his wife, and now his daughter. My dad has always been stoic. Traditional. Feelings in our house weren't usually a topic of discussion. Care and love was constant, feelings weren't. Through him I learnt feelings were internalized, handled passively, and kept to yourself. In those moments, he kept to himself, and I kept to mine.

At eight I knew I experienced the world differently. My dad told me I was autistic, it made sense but not in a way I understood. I wasn't incapacitated or helpless in the way shows portrayed neurodivergence, I was just different. In this time, I also had practically unrestricted internet access. I had tried to make sense of myself online, but in doing so I became vulnerable to the viciousness of the internet. In specific, a 'friend' called Frankie, taught me that differences should be criticised and outcast, rather than accepted. My uneasiness about my diagnoses and myself took a new form of self criticism and self hatred.

By nine, those thoughts manifested into physical and mental ways. Anxiety became a constant presence, alongside seasonal depression that arrived like clockwork, more often than not accompanied by harsh derealisation episodes. At the same time, my relationship with my body and food was rapidly deteriorating. My struggle was no longer external, other people could no longer clearly see; It was a voice in my head, a whisper in my ear, and a lens covering my eyes. My head - filled with negativity and persistent self hatred - shaped my view of myself, and of the world.

From eleven to twelve, I responded to these feelings by growing up faster than I should have. I pushed myself into school, a cycle of perfectionism and criticism overtaking my life. I pressured myself to do well academically, to be less of a burden. If I could do well in this my dad wouldn't have to worry. He would have one less thing on his plate. At the same time, my brother Angus was.. Less academically inclined. He needed more attention, whereas I was left alone because I was 'coping.' I didn't feel resentment; I had just learnt that while my success was expected, his success would be celebrated. My independence and responsibility was an expectation, a normal. His, once he decides to take it, would

be a choice.

At thirteen, my dad had a brain bleed. It wasn't severe, but the impact was profound. I realised my dad wasn't invincible. I realised time works differently for us all. His parents, still alive while he is 60, is a reality I won't get to experience. I felt the weight of growing up too fast, the pressure of being independent, to be successful, to ease his burden. Time is fragile. I think about it constantly. I measure my life, my consequences, and the people I love, against a clock that never stops. I dance to a beat that always seems too fast.