

**What Happens After The After by Vivian Nunez
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Start of Transcript

Vivian: So, my grandma had this thing for napkins. She would sit at the edge of her bed and start opening up the 250 count, pack of napkins that we'd get her at the dollar store. She'd take out a stack about this thick and then she'd start turning 90 degrees. So, at this point for some context, my grandmother could pretty much only walk the short distances with her walker and when she was sitting down, she could only really extend her arms as far as back and forward as she can go.

So, this little lady would turn around start taking the stock with her and going as far back as she could extend her arm, just to place this one stack of napkins by the head of her bed right next to her pillow. When she would turn back around, she would more than often than not find herself looking straight at me, with a hundred thousand questions written all over my face. The main question wasn't the one that you're probably asking yourself right now, which is where is this going? I knew that, I knew that she was gonna go and stick her hand right back in the napkins. That the crinkle of the plastic is what I was gonna hear. That she was gonna take out another stack and that she was gonna place it somewhere else. [00:01:00]

That for a few minutes, this is what I was gonna hear. It was gonna be crinkle and stack and crinkle and stack and crinkle and stack. What I was asking myself was if my mom was up in heaven staring at me, judging me for how much I ended up resenting napkins and this habit my grandmother had or if she was staring and standing next to me wondering where this is going long-term. There are probably a million medical reasons that I could explain this habit. But the reality was that for me these napkins just felt like they were getting stocked on my shoulders with every time she placed them. The more that she did that the more apparent it became that it was a frustration for me. At one point my cousin stood by the door of our bedroom and said to me "One day you're gonna miss these napkins" and he was right then and he's right now. [00:02:00]

Because I missed the napkins. I missed the way that she would always place a wooden box crouched under her pillow for some reason and I missed the holes and the cough drops that she had just so. But the reality is for all the nostalgia and good feelings that these napkins remind me of, this memory is actually probably the most vivid example I have that I can point to and say that's when I saw how small her world had become. That's when I realized that where I was sitting right across from her in my twin size bed, that I did not anticipate still sleeping and as the college student. That my world had become just a small. I became my grandmother's caretaker officially when I was 20 years old. It was at that point, that I realized that she was this awesome lady who had had an entire world, who was dependent on her way before she was dependent on me.

So, there's a slide that's gonna come up and this is my grandma and that's my mom and that's me as a baby. Obviously, the resemblance is uncanny. So, my grandmother came to America in the 1960s with her husband and her six children. [00:03:00]

Over the span of her life she raised six kids into adulthood, she saw her husband pass away and she became the matriarch to her family. In 2003 when my mom died, she became my legal guardian. She was 75, I was 10 and it was the first time that I realized that my life was very much molding around the circumstances around me. With that, I ended up realizing that my world had become kind of small and that there was a formula that I was applying to it.

So, it would be like this. There would be something that happened, for the cause and that would be the thing that happened after, the effect. I would wrap that effect in responsibilities and expectations and this unspoken promise that no matter what I would not say out loud how much I did not want to be good at this. How if given the choice, I would happily hand this over to someone else to deal with. [00:04:00]

At 10 years old, that reality for me was grief. I remember the afternoon that my mom passed away, everyone came to my apartment. I went from person to person making sure that everyone was fine. If there were little kids just like me around, I made sure that they were entertained, not once stopping long enough to ask myself how I was feeling or what I was processing in that moment.

Right before everyone walked into my apartment, I was hiding in the bathroom sitting on the toilet seat, essentially pushing all my feelings back and getting myself to the point where I could go out there and serve someone else. It was in that moment that I realized that instead of being asked questions about what I was feeling, because not only was I not asking myself. No one else was asking me. I was getting patted on the head for it. I was being told that "I was so mature for my age". Those words became the thing that I ended up using as a guide in my life and I ended up striving for that. **[00:05:00]**

I wore it as my badge of honor and the reality is that that ends up taking a lot more from me, than it ever gives you and that fake maturity takes a place of so many memories and so many lived experiences that I never got to have.

That maybe I could have had, if I'd loosened my fist long enough to have someone else take the reins. Like for instance, Taco Bell. Amazing, right? I didn't have Taco Bell until two months ago when I told my boyfriend that I'd never had Taco Bell and he could not go in another moment, without making sure that I had a taco within a taco. Or Gushers, what an acquired taste of a candy. But how cool would it have been for me to know that, when I was 12 instead of when I was 26. There are all these moments and examples that I can give you of moments that I probably didn't live because I was being so responsible and so mature for my age. It ended up really coming back to this one question that I started asking myself over the last few years. Which is how do you rewind your life to meet you where you are, once you've lived so many steps ahead and how do you get yourself back to that place? **[00:06:00]**

So, for me it started with making sure that I was finding someone who was validating these experiences. Because no one else around me was and for me, that was my therapist. Probably my longest relationship yet, we've been in this relationship for six years, once a week in meetings. I was in there that I was able to say things that I've never been able to say out loud of anyone else. Like for instance, my grandmother got sick. I started going in and out of ICU during my senior year of college. But before that, it was still hard and there were still moments that were happening that I had no one else to talk about with. I started seeing my therapist a month after my grandmother started going into the hospital. When I was there, I would tell her about how hard it was to know that I was sharing a room with my grandmother. **[00:07:00]**

The commode was in the same room and that every time she had to use the bathroom; I would put my headphones on because it was just too much to process. Then when she got sick and became a fall risk and she was wearing diapers that I had to make sure to change her diaper before I went to class and how tough that was for me.

It was the first place that I was actually heard and listened to and validated that these were things that were actually really hard and that they weren't supposed to be easy, and I wasn't supposed to get patted on the head for them constantly just because I was carrying it well. When I had these moments and this realization and this extra validation, it ended up opening so the second part of how you answer that question of how do you rewind? It's by finding people who get it without you having to explain the nuances. It's finding the relatability factor to your lived experiences because that one person will make you feel less shame than you've probably felt in your whole life. So, for me, that was starting to ask the questions that I'd never been asked before and starting in the place that I knew best. **[00:08:00]**

Which was, "Hey, have you lost someone, and do you want to tell me about it? and that's how toodamnyoung.com was born. Too damn young is a resource in the community for young adults who have lost someone they love. I basically just started asking people that question and we published hundreds of blog posts and essays that show how layered grief is and how diverse it is; and how much community there's actually in that.

One in seven Americans, will lose a parent or a sibling before the age of 20. There are 43.5 million caregivers in U.S. today. 10 million of those are Millennials. I met my first person who had ever lost someone after I started Too Damn Young, ten years after I had lost my mom. I met my first millennial caregiver two days ago. [00:09:00]

So, obviously there's a disconnect happening in the fact that there are millions of us out there and I'm just meeting people randomly. Because I happen to be in this work and so where is that disconnect? Why are we not asking these questions? Why are we not making sure that someone who feels like they have napkins stacked on their shoulders that feels like a boulder, doesn't feel like that and doesn't feel like they're alone. When my grandmother was in and out of ICU, it was the same ICU floor that my mom died in.

I became incredibly familiar with the place I'd already known and every time I would talk to a doctor, I cannot tell you the amount of times they would ask me if I was pre-med. Because I knew words like aspiration and end-of-life directive and all these different key phrases, that made them feel like "Oh, my gosh you must be pre-med". I was a marketing major; I was like three months away from graduating with a business degree. I was the furthest thing from pre-med. But not once did they ever ask me if I was okay being a senior in college and caregiving for my grandmother. When we don't allow this space to have these conversations, we're failing the people and we're failing the people they're caring for and the families around them. [00:10:00]

All it takes is having the guts ask one question that looks beyond the really good facade that someone was putting on and the good way they're carrying something to make sure that you're asking them if they're actually okay. When I had my first break up in my early 20s, I remember standing across from someone and they were talking to me about this. I was telling them this is probably the hardest thing I'd gone through. They said to me "How is that possible? When you've lost your mom, you've done all of this with your grandmother, she passed away. There's so much life here, how is that possible?" [00:11:00]

When my mom's death is the ruler of measuring everything that happens in my life up against, then where am I supposed to live my life and figure out how to be 20-something? Where am I supposed to rewind back to know what it actually is like to go through the things that I'm supposed to be going through at this point in my life.

For every time someone asks you or tells you that you're so mature for your age, at 10 I was not so much sure for my age. I didn't know how to be a kid anymore and when they tell me that I'm must be pre-med and that all these things must happen, the reality is I'm carrying it well because I have to. Because that was what survival looked like at that point and all the different answers, I have to how do you rewind your life? It's because I'm trying not to survive anymore, I'm trying to learn how to live. But you have to make sure you're starting these conversations. About two weeks ago, when I was prepping for this talk. I started crying to my boyfriend about how hard it was gonna be to talk about things here, that some of my friends were watching have never heard of before. [00:12:00]

It's because there's so much shame, in the fact that I didn't feel good throwing out my grandmother's commode, but I didn't enjoy the process of changing her diaper in the morning. That makes you feel like you have to hide it so far back that you forget it's there and you definitely don't want to bring it up to someone else. But when someone else stands here and has this conversation, it's the exact way that we stopped having that silence. That we start making sure, that someone else isn't up there, out there carrying this alone. So, we all have the opportunity today walk outside whether you're a doctor or you just have a friend, to ask the one question that looks beyond what is just on the surface.

Because yeah, I may have been carrying it well but there was one moment where I was a senior in college, five minutes out from giving a group presentation and I got a phone call from the hospital that my grandmother had to be discharged and there was no one to sign for her and my world came up against each other. Because I had to be in there five minutes ago and I had to be somewhere else half an hour ago and I did the only thing I could possibly do in that moment, which was sit on the floor and cry. [00:13:00]

I shouldn't have been in that position, because there were systems around me that could have helped me not.

So, don't tell someone that there's so much here for their age. Let them learn how to be a kid and how to grow up at their own pace and how to figure out life, even if they've lived a lot of life before that. Because really, I can tell you, that's probably all they want. Thank you.