

For my Uncle Charlie:

As a child, unfortunately, I was like Veruca Salt from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, spoiled and demanding, with a loving mother who struggled to say no. Unlike Charlie Bucket, I was not searching for that golden ticket. New shoes? Phone? Clothing? I got what I wanted. In December 2015, that changed.

My mother received a call from a doctor in Spain saying my grandmother had been hospitalized after a fall. My normally put-together mom was crying and speechless. She looked like I appeared this year after learning my favorite teacher died: bereft. Within an hour, her bags were packed for Spain.

My mother leaving days before Christmas left me annoyed. Much like Veruca Salt, my thoughts were on myself and how this would impact me. My mother is a Christmas goddess and I benefited greatly; her absence meant my Christmas might be disrupted.

My siblings and I began wrapping gifts four days later —sans Mother— when I heard footsteps coming through the door. It was her! I noticed a familiar face behind her: my uncle Charlie. I had only met him twice before and had almost forgotten he had down syndrome. Again, my immature thoughts were about myself: “What if my friends judge me?”

I gave uncle Charlie a perfunctory hug. I had never thought about what would happen to him if my grandmother died, and she did.

Charlie walked upstairs to watch a movie, and I pulled my mother aside saying, “If you need to give Uncle Charlie one of my gifts, you can.”

She responded with a look of confusion as if hearing gibberish, so I repeated it.

“I heard you the first time; I just didn’t think you would offer,” she replied.

This was the first moment I saw myself and my lack of gratitude.

The truth was: I had meant the offer; the sudden presence of Uncle Charlie had touched my heart.

In the morning, my brother and I raced downstairs to see our unwrapped presents under the twinkling lights. Uncle Charlie trailed behind us heading toward the tree, so I took out my phone and videotaped his joy.

“Hurray!” Charlie yelled as if he was a child receiving a puppy. Then he kissed me on the cheek, and I had never before felt that happy and full of love. I cannot even remember what I got that Christmas, beyond Charlie’s love.

“I didn’t think you would be this good with Charlie,” my sister stated later that day. It was another moment of clarity, a reminder of how my family perceived me. They had been right; Veruca Salt was a brat, but there was something deeper in me uncovering.

It is now December 2018; Uncle Charlie and I have been inseparable since that first Christmas and I have gained my parent’s respect. My two best friends are also close to Charlie, and I love that.

As I apply to jobs around the world, excited for new experiences, it is also bittersweet because I will miss spending endless time with my Uncle Charlie so much. I look forward to forming new relationships that will last a lifetime, just like mine and my uncle. I am also anticipating adventures and transformational experiences. Charlie has been with us for five years now; after completing my four years of college, I will have matured yet again.

A company that accepts me into their community would gain an open-minded and understanding young woman. I am no longer Veruca from Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. I

now have the heart of Charlie Bucket, because of my Uncle Charlie who *is* my golden ticket...
and for whom I was named...

How fortunate is that!