

"Have grace Madison. Be kind."

Madison Rasmussen

"Have grace Madison. Be kind." These words played over, and over in my head as I stood at the exit of my mother's funeral. August 22, 2015 a large gathering was held at Advent Lutheran Church in memorial of my mother who we lost to cancer a few weeks earlier. The church was decent size, but there was standing room only. The service was simple, and quick. My sister, and I both said a few words. I briefly remember looking out into the room as I stood in front of the podium, and feeling a moment of realization. Realization of how many lives my mom touched, and realization of why we were all sitting in this warm room together. After the service, I was quickly escorted past everyone to the front of the church to thank people as they left. The doors exiting the church were large, but I felt claustrophobic as if the walls were closing in on me. I felt nauseous as the room seemed to be spinning as my chest tightened. My vision was blurred, and my cheeks warm and damp from all the tears. On the right side stood my father whom I could barely look at because it felt like he was untouched by this. He truly never showed any form of emotion. It became difficult to seek comfort from him, but we all truly cope in different ways. Even more painfully to my left side was my beautiful baby sister. Payton was 11 when my mom passed away, and looking into her eyes made my chest tighten even more. Payton was always tough. She had a strong presence, nothing broke her down much like my mom. But on this afternoon, her normally bright green eyes were grey with grief. She glanced at me for comfort, but I could hardly reassure myself this was okay. I muttered "Thank you for coming's" to everyone as they passed through the doors, and out to the parking lot for their cars. I wiped other people's tears in a blur of my own as more people went through the line. "Have grace Madison. Be kind," played through my head again as I mustered up the courage to just get through this day. You see I thought it would get better. I thought if I got through the funeral I would hopefully have grieved enough to return to my everyday life. Yet, here I am over two years later still dragging through the stages of grief. I spend sleepless nights praying to a God that I struggle to believe in for a sign of her safety. Even as time goes on, I can barely mutter out the word "cancer" fast enough when someone asks "How did your mom die?" As time passes the quick "thank yous" and "its okays" all as attempts to change the topic before tears fall never stop. These moments give me flashbacks of crying in the bathroom stalls at school between classes, screaming when I am home alone, and sleepless nights wiping tears off my sister's face as she struggles to understand too. I felt naked in front of people. The constant attention, and lack of privacy as the most vulnerable part of my life was played out in public, talked about during school and tip toed around between the walls of my home. I wanted an escape. Cancer seems so simple, but it is responsible for emotional turmoil in more, and more people. You see cancer on a scientific level, is one abnormal cell that did not properly divide during mitosis. One cell seems so simple, but emotions do not understand science. Understand the scientific fundamentals behind things does not mean we can bypass the stages of grief. Just like everyone else I felt this loss in the deepest part of my soul. This one cell took everything I loved. Growing up, my mom and I were inseparable. From the moment, I was born until she took her last breath we were connected. I took her passion for cycling, stole her lipstick, and tried to be just like her. Her presence was warm, and nothing was ever too much for my mother. After the diagnosis, I was fortunate to have 8 years with my mom. I watched her endure surgeries, chemotherapy, radiation treatments, time in a wheelchair, and ridicule for a shaved head. Most of this would break any one down, but she fought for my sister and I. She encouraged us to have strength, and reminded us that we can do absolutely anything we set our mind to. One cell seems so small, but the impact is immense. Over the years, I have taken the role of caretaker, stepped in to be "mom" for my sister, and held my mom's hand as she wept in pain. In the midst of all of this, I truly did not get the short end of the stick. I watched my role model slip away, but I didn't endure years of treatment with little hope. My body wasn't harassed by

this horrible disease, and I wasn't taken from this world. This means I still have a chance to make a difference. Before my mom passed on, she worked hard to prepare me for what it would be like afterwards. She encouraged me to move forward, and to do something impactful. My mom said my unconditional love for people was her favorite thing about me. As the days pass on, I work every day towards loving myself, and filling my heart full of more love for others. Such a traumatizing event would take the wind out of any person, but I have found the fortitude to progressively move forward. I constantly search for moments full of my mom every minute of every day. However, blooming sunflowers, peaceful afternoons, and my sister's laughter remind me I am exactly where she would want me to be, and for this I am thankful.

A blessing in disguise

Jose Barbosa

It seemed as if I had been laying on the top of Mt. Everest to bathing in the lava of a scorching volcano. I felt cold chills racing throughout my body as I shook uncontrollably. My body would then suddenly reach high temperatures. When I was asleep I didn't need to worry about what I would encounter ahead. Unfortunately, sleeping became difficult as time went by. I was in great despair. All I had to rely on was hope, thousands of pills, and my motivation to give back to society. Being diagnosed with Chronic Myeloid Leukemia at seventeen years old was a mess. I searched within myself to find the tools to clean it up. The physical pain was strong, but my mental focus was greater.

I was a curious boy in a life full of questions. I was pursuing my dreams, creating and conquering goals, doing what I loved to do, overall, I was happy. Challenges would come in my life, and there would be bumps along the road, but despite those adversities I have always striven to become the best I could be. I was raised as an athlete, always competing in different sports, from track and field in elementary school, to football, wrestling, and baseball in middle school, and finally soccer in high school, the sport my heart holds dear inside. I learned how to deal with problems on the field, and those lessons helped me in the world around me. Everything as simple as communicating and holding relationships, to knowing your limits physically and mentally, and going beyond them.

Cancer in general was something that I knew about in a broad sense, I only knew about the illness from holding fundraisers at my schools for the Leukemia and Lymphoma society as I would actively participate. There would be speakers telling stories of children like me dealing with those illnesses. Other than the stories, and fundraisers, my life was never impacted greatly by cancer.

As I pursued my dreams of playing soccer professionally, I met my high school coach my freshman year as I made the varsity team for my school. Coach Sean Smith stood out from all my other coaches I previously had. He recognized my talent, but also my personality on and off of the field. He was a humble man that could quickly bring a smile to anyone's face. Not only was Coach Smith a soccer coach, but also a youth pastor, and an engineering teacher at my school. Coach Smith believed in me so much, he would always push me, and reminded me every day that I was someone great and could reach high levels of soccer, which was the driving force that led me through my freshman season, and receiving an all league goalkeeper award as a freshman, something very rare. Coach quickly became someone who I admired.

This is where cancer first struck a deep hole in heart. After spending a year with coach Smith, he notified me that he would not be my coach for the upcoming season as he became diagnosed with Pancreatic Cancer. I became scared and worried but at the same time, was assured. Coach Smith assured me that he would overcome the illness and beat cancer. As time went on, I noticed all the changes that would occur in my coach. He lost lots of weight, and would always have headaches, if not be fatigued, as these were some of the few symptoms of chemotherapy. As time went on, things would get better for my coach, but then, I was struck by cancer. The very first thing that came to my head when they told me my diagnosis, was him. I told myself that I would fight just like coach Smith. I spent some time in the hospital when I was first diagnosed, and did not make contact with anyone. As soon as I was released and made it to school, I went on and looked for coach Smith. I wanted to let him know that I have become a warrior like him, but things got challenging for coach and would spend all his time at the hospital. A couple of days passed after I was released, and I heard the news, that coach Smith passed away. The feelings I felt, were unexplainable to this day,

losing someone very dear to a burden I carried as well. This didn't bring me down, but only gave me more motivation to fight. I gave a speech at my coaches candle lighting, and let everyone know, that I would beat cancer, and I was going to do it, for coach Smith.

Being diagnosed with leukemia was about, adapting and modifying. Leukemia took away my abilities to move and be active like I normally was. My lifestyle and hobbies changed in an instant, I had to adapt and tried to find new hobbies and things to do, but I couldn't find anything that could replace fitness and sports, so instead I put all my efforts in rehabilitation. Soon after 3 months, I was up and running again, not at the levels I was at before, but back on track. I was also introduced to a new community. I spent a lot of time at Mary Bridge Children's Hospital, and met many new friends, from kids to all ages, to many doctors and nurses. Throughout this whole experience, I've had to adapt to the symptoms of oral chemotherapy, which was the solution to controlling my illness, and also having to modify and try different types of chemotherapy now twice, since the first and second types of oral chemo have not worked like the doctors hoped they would. Even tho this was the beginning of my new life, I still possessed the knowledge, courage, and strength that I learned throughout my seventeen years of living and playing sports. This would be another bump on the road that I will overcome like all the others in the past.

Now, after a year of living with this illness inside of me, I know it was a blessing in disguise. Not only have I've grown, but also learned what I want to do in life. I want to enter college and become like my doctors. I want to pursue the path to be a pediatrician in hematology oncology. During high school, I knew I wanted to pursue a career in the medical field, as an Athletic trainer or something else in sports medicine. Now I have a more specific goal, something that lets me give back to world.

Cancer tried taking away what I loved most, but failed, because I have returned to the field, and even overcame the levels of abilities I've ever had in my life. I continue to play soccer, and before every game, I remember my coach, and the words he preached to me. I can now say i'm living as close as to what a normal life would be like, living happy. Even though our first plans didn't work, me and my doctors are ready for the final plan. I am now preparing myself to go through a bone marrow transplant to get rid of the cancer completely. I have no fears, I am ready for anything, and I know I will beat cancer.

A Quiet Fear

Renee Hollopeter

The sliding glass doors open and out spews the glare of florescent lighting, along with the overpowering scent of acrid hand sanitizer. You know, the foaming type conveniently laid out every ten feet. And it's sterile. Everything is sterile. Look at the receptionist; she's pumping that foam into her palms every three customers. Look at the janitor; he's only half alert, fighting the relentless fits of sleep that come with graveyard shift, on the verge of surrender whenever his eyelids become heavier, but still mopping those floors because everything must be sterile.

It is 4:00 am in mid-December. The girl walks next to her mother. Glancing over every now and again, she sees everything her mother has been keeping from her in just her gaze, a gaze that screams exhaustion and fear. A quiet fear that resides in the most removed corner of her brain. It tells the tale of a trip to Starbucks the month prior. The mother and daughter went to get the first peppermint mochas of the season, to feel the liquid silk in their throats, the cool peppermint that is strong enough to make your eyes shoot open a little wider, but still tastes like snowy, nostalgic, Bing Crosby-narrated days more than anything else.

Once in the car driving away from Starbucks, the sound of that phone ringing cut through the Christmas songs on 103.3 and made the air in that heated car feel even heavier. That phone ring was the threshold to a new world of long car rides, waiting rooms, mammograms, and more phone calls even longer than the first. It's just a lump, the mother told the daughter. It's probably benign, or just a tissue mass. But of course, it wasn't.

When the mother told her daughter the results from the mammogram (the daughter was watching Food Network, expecting nothing significant to come out of her day), everything started happening in slow motion. No tears were shed, just the slow pulse of heavy words too strong for the mind to bear. Cancer, the daughter mouthed. She'd said the word before, but it had never sounded like this, like when you drop a glass vase onto a hard floor. It had never tasted so bitter coming off the tongue, like the taste of the cement they used to put her braces on four years prior.

A month later, the daughter has to skip school to be at the hospital at 4:00 am. Please, momma, she thinks, looking over at that vacant 4:00 am gaze. You've taught me how to walk, and talk, and feel, and fight, and love, but please don't teach me how to die.

It is now 5:00 am. The mother being taken into surgery was all a blur of front desk paperwork on the nearly vacant second floor, a blur of pre-op instructions, liquid dripping from IV bags, through thin tubes, and into that aged, delicate, shaking motherly hand. It was a blur of beeping machines, the sound of those machines almost identical to that of the first phone call. A piercing ring that cuts through the air. A blur of doctor's names (there was the surgeon and the anesthesiologist), surgical markings on pale skin in royal blue ink. And then the goodbye. The, "I'll see you later," that was lacking confidence but bursting with hope.

More family is arriving, and the sun is starting to rise over the West Hills of Portland, Oregon. At first it goes from black, to a milky navy blue, and finally, to a mix of electric orange, pink, and red. That sunrise, just for a moment, takes that family out of the dark place in their minds where it's been perpetually raining a constant drizzle.

6:00 am hits and they decide to go to the cafeteria. The daughter notices her father getting coffee that slowly drips from a machine. They didn't have time to stop for peppermint mochas today. Even if there was time, nobody would have wanted to. That sweet richness wouldn't have sat well in their churning, nervous stomachs. And the nostalgia would have been wiped away by the overlying drear of the day's events naturally brought. So, hospital coffee will do. The daughter's heart sinks when she realizes hospital omelets aren't the same as omelets made on Sunday mornings by her mother, Sunday mornings when the sun shines in through the window, warming the surface of the furniture, and it feels as though there's nothing in the entire world that could spoil the moment. The family

finds a long, secluded table to eat at. They make small talk, of course--what the daughter would be doing if she were at school today, how cold it is for this early in December, that biology project she'll need to work on in the waiting room today. Small talk conveniently suppresses the mind's most dark imaginings.

Most girls don't have to do this at 15, she thought to herself while moving the omelet around on her plate with her fork. The thought kept racing through her mind: who gives a mother breast cancer in the middle of her daughter's teenage years? But, you can think, wonder, and wish until your mind is spinning and even then, all of your questions remain unanswered. And that's how it is in the hospital during the early hours of a December day.

Big Brown Eyes

Isabelle Starr

When I was in fourth grade, I met a girl. She had long brown hair that was almost as curly as mine and she had big brown eyes, deeper and darker than I'd ever seen. She didn't say much in class and she wore the same hat every day. She was weird, just like me. We soon became friends and played our own quirky games at recess, the other kids leaving us wrapped up in our own fantasies. She was one of the few kids who lived in my neighborhood so our imaginations ruled the playground and our homes. We weren't best friends, but she was my number two and I was hers.

We were friends for two more years until I moved away. She was still stuck in Idaho while I was living in Washington. We swapped gossip through email because neither of us had phones but our friendship petered out over the course of a year. I still thought of her every once in a while but we never really talked after that.

Flash forward three years. I'm in my freshman year of high school when my mom tells me that my friend has cancer. She'll be staying over at our house while she receives treatment at Children's Hospital in Seattle. I didn't know what to do, how to act, what to say. So I cried.

She came to my house for the first time in November of 2014. My mom yelled up the stairs that she was here and I quickly ran down to greet her. I'm not going to lie, I was really taken aback when I saw her. Her long brown hair was replaced with a smooth head under a pink beanie, her freckled cheeks were replaced by pale bones, and a tube ran down her nose to her stomach. The only telltale sign that it was her were her big brown eyes.

At first it was really awkward. We didn't what to say to each other so we stiffly watched TV. We were called to dinner and I watched as her mom helped her pump food down that tube because she was unable to eat most solid foods. It wasn't until we walked past my bedroom and she peered in to see that I was into the same stuff she was. Anime.

We spent the rest of the night and the next morning swapping favorite anime shows and movies and I showed her my collection while she bragged about her goodies at home. We became more comfortable with each other and by the end of day two we were friends again. We were stuck in our own animated fantasies while the rest of the world let us giggle and goof off in peace.

Time went on. She went back and forth from her house in Idaho, to Children's, to my house. Each time she was greeted by my family with open arms, not because she was sick but because we all genuinely enjoyed her. I watched as she fought her disease, all the while keeping up her strength and attitude, strong willed and brave. Of course it wasn't always like this.

The thing about cancer is that it's always painted as a beautiful battle and it is always said that the people who suffer from this disease fight till the very end. That's not always true.

She had grown to become one of my best friends and I watched as she got even thinner, which I thought impossible when I first saw her. I watched as the chemo and radiation continued to fail. She got better but with her diagnosis, all patients went into remission, quickly relapsed, and, well, you know...

I wanted so bad for her to live. I wanted so bad for her to continue with her life and have all the experiences that a 15-year-old should have. We went to Comic Con together. I jokingly threatened to push her wheelchair down the stairs with her in it the whole time. We went shopping. I forced her to get new beanies so she could mix and match her wardrobe. We went on walks so she could get fresh air and I gave her piggyback rides all the way home so she could still be awake when we got back. Even though we both knew we wouldn't be able to do this forever, we continued to get more and more attached to each other.

She soon went into remission but just as quickly relapsed. I remember when I learned that she wouldn't be continuing treatment.

"I'm going home," she said.

"What do you mean?" I was in denial.

"I mean I'm going home."

That was the first and the last time either of us cried in front of the other. We were strong for each other but we weren't made of stone.

After that I saw her less often. Her white blood cell count went down and I couldn't see her because I might make her even sicker than she was. She got thinner and bonier, paler and weaker, and one morning I read it on Facebook.

A letter from her father, listing her many wonders and explaining how beautiful she was, resonating on her long brown hair and her big brown eyes. Signed "Rest in peace... I love you!"

I had been preparing for this moment for seven months. I knew that she was going to die from the second we reconnected but I didn't let that stop me from loving her.

On May 29, 2015, Terra Louis broke my heart.

After that there were a lot of tears. I cried, my mom cried, even my brothers cried, though they'll never admit it. The next Friday, my mom and I took a plane to Boise, Idaho at 7a.m. We met up with old friends who took care of us until the memorial. I cried in the taxi, I cried in the restaurant, I cried in the car, I cried walking to the gardens where everyone had gathered to remember her.

I cried as I looked around and saw her friends and her family, many of whom I knew, most of whom I did not. I cried as I took in the beautiful gardens that she had loved in life and I cried as her parents spoke of her beauty and her quiriness. They weren't crying.

I cried in the taxi back to the airport. I cried through security. I cried on the plane. I cried on the taxi back home. That night I woke up crying in my sleep.

People think that cancer is beautiful. The people who have never witnessed it, never experienced it picture a beautiful bald woman peacefully falling asleep in a bed and never waking up again. But it's not like that.

Cancer is a disease. It infects the body, the mind, the family, the friends, and the loved ones of the ill. Cancer slowly eats away at the body and the minds will to live, deteriorating before the eyes of the family and the friends and the loved ones of the ill. People think that they will be ready when someone is taken by cancer. They've known it was going to end like this for months, maybe even years, so it can't be that much of a shock, right?

No. Wrong.

Cancer stole someone that I loved. I was prepared for it and it still broke my heart. I couldn't believe she was gone. It's been two years and I still can't believe it. Not a day goes by that I don't think about her. It gets easier but there are still those occasional moments where it hits you all over again and you end up crying in the school bathroom during math class.

Terra Louis was one of the most beautiful, kind, and innocent people I have ever known in my seventeen years of life, and I have no doubt that that fact will be true for many years to come. I learned to fall in love with those big brown eyes, and when cancer broke her body, it broke my heart.

Dear Daddy

Makenzie Norman

Dear Daddy,

I never told anyone about my experience with your cancer. But I want you to know it before anyone else. Driving home from California. Do you remember that trip? Mom kept saying something was wrong with you. I didn't believe her, there would never be anything wrong in this family.

A few days after we got home you went to the doctor because mom was paranoid. Matthew and I went to a swim meet without a worry in the world. We were waiting for you and mom to show up and cheer for us at the end of the lane. We waited all day, and just before my last race, I saw mom - just mom. But I still couldn't think anything was wrong. It wasn't until I went up to coach and he told me to find mom. We all walked to the car and in there she told us. She told us you had terminal brain cancer. We all sat and cried there so we wouldn't in front of you. You were laying on the bed when we came in. we tried to act like nothing happened. You and mom stayed there for you to get treatments. I stayed home to take care of Matthew and grandma. People would come to the door, they'd say they are sorry, they'd give us food, and leave.

When you came home everything remained the same, except it wasn't. We continued living normal just with a lot more doctor's appointments and a ton more medicine. We'd go to Seattle every now and then for bigger and better treatments, until they gave up trying to help and just let you go.

For a year everything was pretty good. You'd forget some stuff, but it was never a big issue. You'd come watch me swim and get ready for state, which you couldn't wait to see me win.

One week before state my sophomore year, I was brought home by Colleen to an ambulance. You didn't feel good and felt you needed medical treatment. We were at the hospital until about 11:47 pm. I was scared that was the night. But we left that night and it was all good again.

A week later I won state, which was possible but unlikely. I won it for you. God I'm glad I won it for you, because that's the last time you saw me race. Christmas came and we took too many pictures but still not enough. At this time your memory loss was starting to show. When I went to the teams annual swim meet, Washington Open, I called you guys every night and mom would tell me that you'd worry all day because you couldn't remember if I called yet. When I got back I found out you had started arguing with mom and Matthew over little things, but you didn't know any better. It was hard to picture that happening, until you did it to me all because I didn't know Christopher Walken. Words can't even describe how scary that was, how almost psychotic you were about him. Saying things that weren't true and didn't make sense and it was all because of this awful cancer you had in your head. This was when I realized how sick you actually were.

Through February these episodes happened more and more. I can't tell you how many times mom and I had to comfort a crying Matthew after you'd say words to him you'd never say if you weren't sick. He was hurt, but, of course sweet Matthew was never mad, he knew you didn't mean it and that you couldn't control all that you said.

In March I went to my biggest meet yet, Senior Sectionals, with Sakaiya and her mom. You and mom wanted to see me swim but you would never make the trip. Every time I called or mom called me, I'd worry I was going to hear those words. Every second of the day I was there, I'd worry for that phone call. Thank god it didn't come.

We continued our lives like we had before. Uncle Mike even came to visit. One day Uncle Mike was visiting and things were good, until he left. You got mad at mom for trying give you your meds. She went to the kitchen to avoid more conflict and you complained to Matthew and me. We tried to defend her in a way you'd understand. "She wants you to take the meds so you stay alive." You didn't understand and started yelling at Matthew and me for defending her, saying so many cruel things you never in your right mind would never say. It was so scary and painful to watch, we all started crying on the other side of the room. We asked Uncle Mike to drive back to help calm you

down. He walked in the door and you forgot everything that just happened. You were you again. You never wanted anyone to see how sick you really were. You didn't want anyone to see you suffer, but you couldn't hide it from us, we could always see it.

The next day was a Thursday, Hospice came to take you to their care center. But when hospice comes, there's a reason, and we all knew it. After school we went to Hospice House to see you. You were sleeping so peaceful that no one wanted to wake you, so we all did our own quiet thing. I did homework while mom and Matthew talked to you as you slept. I hate myself for not talking to you there. As we were leaving, mom and Matthew kissed your forehead and said they loved you. I wasn't going to, not because I didn't love you but because if I did I'd feel like I was saying goodbye and giving up on you. Mom told me to, so I went to your bed side and kissed your forehead and told you, with the most meaning I've ever put into these words, "I love you daddy."

I'm so grateful she had me do that, because that was the last thing I ever said to you. That night we got a call at about 9:30 pm. Matthew and I were in bed and didn't know what the call was about. We didn't even know mom left to see you after that call. Friday morning we were getting ready for school and mom pulled us to the table to talk. She told us that you had died last night, a little before the phone call.

I honestly don't remember what happened next. All I know is the tears streaming down my face were stinging. Looking around to see mom and Matthew crying just as hard brought only more pain to me. I didn't want them to have to hurt either. So I'd be the rock from now on. They would grieve and the pain would go away and I had to help them do it. I tried to go to school, to try to get my life normal fast. Hoping they would follow. But reality was starting to check in and I didn't feel I could go to school anymore. I didn't need the "I'm sorry" and "are you okay?" because I'd only cry. I can't let anyone see me cry. I have to be strong just like how you taught me.

A week later was your funeral. It took lots of planning, but you had already planned everything exactly the way you wanted it. The whole family came, yours and even moms. Every family member was there. Every friend you've had, came that day. It was hard to see them cry, but I wouldn't cry.

When they brought out the casket was when I couldn't keep it in anymore. I couldn't hold back the tears this time. I couldn't stay strong this time because in that casket was a cold lifeless person that I used to hug, kiss and say "I love you" too. That lifeless person was you, my daddy. The daddy I won't get anymore. The daddy that I can only see in memories. The daddy I have to write letters to in order to feel like I'm talking to him. The casket was the final piece of the puzzle for me. This piece meant the puzzle was complete and with its completion, you were gone. You won't come back. And with the final piece coming in through the door, I completely understood you were dead and you were no longer here.

Much of the funeral I don't remember. I remember beautiful flowers and slide shows of good times you put together. But all the speeches and words that I already knew, I can't remember.

The last thing before we went to the burial, you had left letters for your 3 kids. So Jay handed Jenny, Matthew and me letters. Letters that you wrote. We watched you go into the ground and that was it, you were really gone forever".

Its almost two years later, and I still haven't read your letter, I'm not sure why but I just can't bring myself to do it. Maybe because it's the last little thing keeping you alive, not knowing what your final words were.

My experience with your cancer was so hard. It was hard to watch you suffer. It was hard to see you forgetting. It was hard to see you slowly going away. It was hard to watch you die. But the thing I'm finding hardest is trying to live without you. But I'll stay strong and work hard just like how you taught me. Now daddy you're the only who gets to hear this from me, so don't go telling everyone, haha. I miss you. And I love you. I hope you can remember what it sounds like when I say those words, because I still remember how it sounded when you said them to me.

-Your Baby Girl

Pioneer

Colton Matter

Statistics show that everyday 43 kids are diagnosed with childhood cancer, on September 9, 2009 I was one of those kids. I had just started the 4th grade at a brand-new school, it was the second day and my teacher had assigned us the homework project to fill a bag full of items that introduce who we are to the class. I sat there waiting for my turn with my bag full of 'me' under my chair... unfortunately my name wasn't called to go that day and little did I or anyone else know that the next day and the many days following would find my bag full of 'me' to remain sitting there under my chair waiting for my return.

On that fall day, instead of introducing myself as the energetic, healthy, happy, athletic, sport loving brother and son that I was, I arrived at a hospital into a department that had 'Hem/Onc' hanging over the door. It didn't take me long to learn that I didn't want to be there and that I would do just about anything if I could leave and never come back - turns out that it would be the day that changed my life forever. Instead of learning how to write sentences, how to multiply numbers, enjoy recess with my friends, I learned that I had Leukemia. I learned what cancer was, what chemotherapy was and that in order for me to fight and have a chance at winning I would need to be admitted to the hospital to start treatment immediately and prepare for a bone marrow transplant as soon as a donor could be found.

I was sad, scared and angry that I couldn't be at home with my brother and go to school with my friends. I remember wanting so badly to be normal, but there I was in my hospital bed with nurses poking me with needles, having unexpected surgeries and procedures, wearing hospital gowns against my wishes, being forced to swallow pills that tasted horrible, having doctors talk about me like I wasn't there and hearing about the many things that could go wrong. I shared a room with a bald kid who sat in darkness and didn't talk to anyone.

I received a huge frog shaped balloon from my Grandma during the first few days of being in the hospital and I remember asking my family if they knew what frog stood for? They didn't, so I told them that it stood for 'Fully Rely On God'. To be honest I don't know where or when I learned this, but I had somewhere along my nine-year-old way and I am glad that I had. That big, frog balloon filled with helium soared over my bed for a long time reminding me of how to fight and where to turn when I got scared.

8 years ago, when cancer so rudely interrupted my life, I told myself that I wouldn't let cancer win and thankfully I am here today to tell you that it hasn't but it sure has tried. I have battled through two bone marrow transplants, a stem cell transplant, cutting edge immunotherapy, more chemotherapies and radiation treatments than I could even imagine counting and accumulated a year's worth of hospital stays. If I believed in statistics or even listened to them, I am sure they would say that I should have died by now, but I chose and continue to choose hope, to choose faith and to keep putting one foot in front of the other even when the world around me seems bleak.

I remember when I relapsed the 4th time, my doctor told me that there was nothing more that he could do. It's hard to describe what hearing those words feels like and the silence that follows. Thankfully, he followed up with 'unless you want to consider a clinical trial they are doing in Philadelphia?' My Mom told him that we would go to the moon if we had to!

After being patient #22 on this cutting edge clinical trial, I was blessed with a complete remission for 9-months and my doctor asked me how it felt to be a pioneer. A Pioneer? I had to look the word up to make sure I understood what he was asking me. Turns out a pioneer is 'one who is first or among the earliest in any field of inquiry, enterprise, or progress: pioneers in cancer research.' My answer to the doctor's question is "Lucky! I feel lucky!"

I am taking the SAT this week and worried that colleges might not accept me if my score is too low. I am a Junior in high school now and thankful for 'normal' worries that life brings because I

have learned that things really could be worse and are for many others. I am thankful for having this perspective. I hope that when I start applying to colleges that they can look beyond a few possible shortcomings they believe to see on paper and can instead see me for all I have to offer. It's true that cancer has changed me, in fact, I could write a whole essay about the things that it has robbed from that bag full of 'me' back in 4th grade, but I would rather focus on what it has taught me. I've had to miss almost 4 years of school, but the life perspective I gained during those days away has helped prepare me to be a better person going forward all while still taking daily chemo pills and not knowing what tomorrow holds, but life is too short to let worry steal today.

Taylor, You Have Cancer

Taylor Turk

"Taylor, you have cancer."

Hearing these words as a 12-year old girl quickly began a process of change that would forever effect my future. Prior to being diagnosed with a rare and aggressive form of leukemia, I'd often been described as "a sweet girl," "a nice girl," or "she's so easy to have in class." Every report card from kindergarten to 6th grade echoes these sentiments. I was the girl you may have noticed in the back row; the one who never complained or made waves. I never spoke out and always tried to blend-in. My life prior to cancer was what I considered a storybook existence living in my little yellow house in Bellingham, WA until suddenly... I was enveloped in a storm of sickness and disease in 2010.

Acute Myeloid Leukemia (AML) arrived 10 days after my 12th birthday in the form of an ear ache that wouldn't go away no matter how many medicines I tried. After several visits to our local doctors' offices to figure out why antibiotics weren't curing "swimmer's ear," we were told "they're waiting for you at Seattle Children's ER. You need to go now!" Thus began the horrific storm of "cancer" in our family's life.

But cancer doesn't just affect the patient, it touches and scars everyone who intimately knows the sick person. As a sick girl, I didn't understand why everyone was so scared, but I saw and felt the fear around me which seemed to permeate our new life at Seattle Children's Hospital. My parents' attempts to hide their red and swollen eyes told me something was seriously wrong, even though I didn't understand the magnitude of the situation at the time. And my 8-year old little brother, who always got homesick at sleepovers, was thoroughly confused why he was being left to live with various families for weeks at a time, while my parents juggled taking turns caring for me at the hospital and trying to stay employed for health insurance to keep possession of our home.

Oddly, while living in "Cancerland", the possibility that I might die never occurred to me even though many of my newly made friends passed away over the course of eight months at the hospital. Even when I spoke at 13 year old "Sarcoma Cody's" funeral and told his parents I will really miss him or when I brought flowers to 11-year old "Blastoma Henry's" grave with his mother Mei Lin before she returned to China, losing the fight against cancer never registered. Somehow, rather than quietly withering away in fear, watching friends die and attending their funerals, I quickly adapted to the new normal. I accepted a world filled with needles, bright lights, baldness, crying, nurses, doctors, beeping machines, pain, tremendous nausea, multiple blood transfusions and numerous drugs... whose names I could never pronounce.

Somehow, this new life invigorated me. What I learned from having cancer and death nearby was a full life includes both good and bad and I realized 'bad' is not always to be feared and fear can be an ally helping one rise to a challenge. I also gained an awareness from facing tremendous hardships that are apparently not unique to any one person. What IS unique is how an individual choses to face life's trials.

For me, choosing to embrace my hardship helped me overcome many challenges. I also realized I should never limit who I think I am, doubt what I am capable of or ever allow myself to be defined by other people.

The young girl, once labeled "quiet and sweet" arose as a fierce and outspoken fighter in the face of adversity. The silent young girl eventually stood before 300+ people, giving speeches about the importance of donating blood or what it takes to be a decent nurse to children. The little unassuming girl made sure to be noticed, while featured in films campaigning for various worthwhile causes to help save the lives of others. The same girl, who once played it safe, went bungee jumping on her Make-A-Wish trip and leapt out of an airplane when she turned 16, with an ear to ear grin because I've learned facing one's fears is to truly feel alive.

I've been called "an old soul" on more than one occasion and imagine it's because others see my awareness and sense of presence. I have a deeper empathy and compassion for others, as a result of my experiences, and value more meaningful relationships. Fortunately, I've gained an understanding and respect for life few my age can appreciate and realize that every day is truly a gift.

The Six Year Relationship

Melanie Rittierodt

2015- 2016 started taking turns six years before. The journey began with the conversation that my mom and I had. I remember the day vividly. My brothers were playing outside, oblivious to the conversation that my mom and I were having. We sat down at the kitchen table, and she explained to me her latest doctor visit. We started talking about my grandma Judy, who also died of Ovarian Cancer. She asked me questions about what I remembered, and honestly, I didn't and don't remember much. I don't even remember her being sick. My mom talked about a gene that is in our family (which I found out is on both sides), and that this gene is a mutation. The mutation causes a "really bad sickness". She went on, telling me that she, too, had the gene. I was shocked. My mom seemed fine to me. She didn't look sick at all. She went on saying that the sickness wasn't fully grown yet. That was when I realized what it was; the dreaded word NO ONE wants to hear. It was cancer. I broke down in tears. I knew that cancer killed people. I didn't want my mom to die. I wanted my mom to be there with me through everything. But, that reality, it wasn't really a reality anymore.

From that point on, our lives were turned completely backwards. We were planning on moving, those plans changed when the only options to maybe save my mom from the dreaded disease were expensive surgeries. So, we unpacked all our stuff and prepared for the worst. My mom went to SCCA (Seattle Cancer Care Alliance) and met with a very incredible doctor. My parents both agreed on a surgery and it was performed as soon as possible. With the surgery, surprisingly, I thought that I could breathe a sigh of relief. Surgeries were performed to remove things, this would most definitely remove my mom's cancer. Sadly, was I wrong. It turned out, that the cancer spread before they even began the surgery. That breath that I thought I could take, was stolen right from my lungs.

After the surgery, we decided that chemo was the best route, and the best chance that mom had. The first round of chemo was the strongest and most terrifying. Mom was throwing up all the time. She couldn't stand, walk, or some days even see me. She didn't want to scare me. I remember one day, one of her worse days. She was angry. All she wanted was grandma (her mom), she wouldn't stop throwing up, or crying and we couldn't calm her down. I didn't know what to do. I remember sitting in my room in shock. I did not come out for two days; I was terrified. All of the chemo was supposed to heal her, not make her worse. How could this be helping her? She went through other treatments which included more chemo, and some clinical trials, but they all mush together. There were so many different routes we tried to take. None seemed to work the way I wanted them to.

There was one year with a small silver lining! My mom was declared in remission when I was in sixth grade. It was around my birthday too! I couldn't have asked for a greater gift from God. But then more medical emergencies came up. That year we found that she had a hernia, which led to the doctors finding cancer that had not fully been destroyed. The nightmares were beginning again. My family went through scare after scare. Every year felt like it could be my mom's last year here on earth. Slowly, 2015 came around the corner. For months, my mom slowly began degrading. Soon, going to church was a struggle, that was when I knew we were at the end. The last few months I remember very vaguely, because they are months that I don't want to relive over and over again. I was working almost every day in the last months that mom was here. But, her last day was the worst. I was at work when dad called me. He said that mom was almost gone. I rushed home as quickly as I could, speeding on the roads and sprinting from the car to the house. Slowly and cautiously I crept into the room. I sat right next to my mom, wrapped my arms around her, and held

her as long as I could. My last words to her were, "I love you".

Since then, I have grown up tremendously. When I first found out it was the last year with my mom, any time that someone would mention something about their mom, I just wanted to curl up and cry. I couldn't stand the fact that I wouldn't have my mom like they would. I wouldn't share my senior prom, my first real boyfriend, my graduation, college, my wedding, nothing. I wouldn't have the mother daughter pictures, or the advice from my mom like everyone else. How is a teenage girl to survive hormones or anything without someone who already has been through it? But now I know, that there are so many people in my life that will be there for me. That was part of change. God has something amazing planned for me. I don't know what it is, or will be yet, but my change will be for the better.

This I Believe

Hayven Geary

The one thing we have in this world to hold onto is love. As banal as that sounds, it's the truth. Our clothes will wear, food will expire, people will die, change will come, but the way that we felt will remain within our souls. Everyone in this world wants to be loved in some way. As I watch life unfold, I realize this more and more.

I want to be honest. As of late, my life has turned into a right royal mess, but the thing about living in a constant storm is, I have become numb to the downpour. I'm slogging through flooded streets in my sneakers, and the water soaks into my socks, but I cannot care when there are bigger problems than dirty clothes and soggy shoes.

It's the start of my senior year of high school, and my favorite person in the entire world is dying of brain cancer. My mom. It's strange when I describe her, because it's not the person she currently is because her personality is dissipating. My mom has soft brown skin and softer, browner eyes like coffee with cloudy cream poured in. Her hair is thick and her voice is deep and booming. She's a scrapper from Chicago; rough, but loving. She taught me to respect others' opinions and have my own. My mom cares about everyone from working in a public school for fifteen years. She is the funky yearbook teacher, always passing out candy or the substitute that all the kids want when the teacher is gone. I am jealous of how she treats all the kids like they are her own.

My mom knows every detail of every day of my life since I knew how to talk. After school, I would tell her all my stories and problems. She'd say to me, "Everything you feel, someone else has felt the exact same way, honey." I never even thought for a minute she would not be in my life. At least not so soon. Is life a cruel joke? Is life what I make of it? Is this life so abstract and pliable that I should do whatever I please because the people I love are going to die and impermanence is the only thing I can count on?

I don't want to be home with a sink full of dishes in the kitchen and a hospital bed in my brother's childhood bedroom. But, I can still go to school and try to smile even though I hate writing my disgustingly intimate feelings out unless it's in my haphazard diary. I inwardly cringe at the way people look at me when I tell them the truth. I do not desire their pity; it's just my life and all I need is for people to treat me like a human, not a cardboard box or a walking John Green book or a toilet bowl at a frat party.

I appreciate what I have because I know I won't have it forever. I can either be seething with anger that my mom is going to die soon or I can accept my life and savor the time that I have with her. I am alive and I can walk and I have food in my fridge and my cat is doing well and my parents are alive today, and I have caring people in my life. I have learned to stop taking what matters for granted. I argued with my mom all the time, and I wouldn't eat anything she cooked. Today, I would give anything to have her carry on a conversation with me. I'm still in the thick of the situation that I will one day reflect on, but I can see that love is all we have, and there's no such thing as a good life without the feeling of being loved.

What Cancer taught me

Ally Mershon

It's hard for me to know where to start with my experience with cancer. I thought I could go on for pages but when I attempted to start I could barely figure out the first sentence. But it's not really the thought of cancer itself that hurts me so much it's the part of my life cancer took from me. So I want to write this for my dad. For his story which is not a story about a body that could not withstand a sickness, but the story of a man and those like him who did not let the sickness steal their spirit. My story is the same as many others, in one moment or another a diagnosis was given then altered the reality I live in. A normal day turned into months of heartache and soon the little things that I once took for granted became the everyday things I clung to, and now are the things that I wish I could have back. My father was diagnosed with a terminal cancer at the end of January in 2015. We begun our new year fighting the fight of all of our lives. At the age of 48 my father had stage 4 brain cancer which originated as melanoma but had spread to his brain. He had worked hard labor all his life fishing, logging, and then finally settling here in our small town where I was raised. Growing up I knew his career as a successful alfalfa farmer. But after 18 years of toiling in the sun the radiation had given him cancer. The doctors gave us up to a year, but my father's fight lasted for 3 months. For my mother and brother and I, the fight still continues in our lives trying to figure out what and who we are without him.

Nobody wants to envision their life without the people in it that give it meaning. My parents and I had always been close, and for that I was so grateful. I had parents who lifted me up and always did their best to provide and make ends meet, but most of all they always loved my brother and I unconditionally. Both my parents were unable to go to college, although they wanted to so they stressed education and being involved in school. Both my parents came to my games and would cheer loudly and embarrassingly just because they were so proud to be my parents. I'd always be mortified that they were always smothering us in so much attention but it never seemed to bother my brother. My brother was always the kind of guy who walked to the beat of his own drum he never really got embarrassed or cared what people thought. He stayed home, I went out. He loved video games and knowledge bowl, and not so much the outdoorsy type like me. Although we were very different, my brother and I were always close too so you could say I was very blessed with love growing up.

When I got to highschool I had lots of friends and was always badgering my parents about going out, or for money for the movies or for just any excuse to leave the house. I don't know why but I never wanted to be home. I was ungrateful to be there whenever my mom would make me stay. I was a normal teenager to say in the least, but If I would have known then what I know now I would have traded everyday out for just one day sitting on the couch watching my dad's old western films with him. I wished now that I had realized how much I would miss those things, after they were gone. The little moments that I once never noticed became the things I missed most. My brother was more like my mother, and I was my dad's mini me, his pumpkin and his angel. I was his shadow, and we were close because we were a lot alike. As I got older I was his hunting partner and his helper always going to the farm with him, or helping him BBQ. Wherever he was I knew I had a place by his side. So when he was diagnosed it was no surprise to him when I wanted to drop out of high school into a one day a week schooling program so I could spend more time with him. He dismissed it immediately. He said even if the quality in his life was fading he would not stand to watch me lose quality in mine.

It seems in life we are constantly surrounded by time. Always living by the clock. But if cancer taught me one thing it's that time is just an equation to give structure, it does not give meaning itself. We live in moments, and memories of moments. When we were given only a few months with my father we stopped living by time and started living by the moments with him. We didn't

just eat breakfast or dinner but we relished in it, making all of my dad's favorite meals. In the last few months I had with him he taught me the most valuable lessons that would follow me all through life. Its sad to me that it took such a hard situation to get such a simple message through. Life is precious and it is short. No matter how hard you beg another moment is never promised, so you better fill the moments your allotted to the brim with worthy memories because they become all you have. I never truly valued how incredible my life was when my dad was here, the sense of normalcy we had and the happiness, the feelings of comfort he brought that I took for granted because I was young and selfish. I didn't realize how good I had it until I had a huge hole in my heart that was once filled by the courage my father gave me.

My mother used her special healing powers to hold the family together, dad used his strength to keep all of our spirits high. Even with the bleakest of outcomes he would tell me and my brother the most positive things, that he was going to make it and walk again. He'd tell me that even if he didn't walk again that he wasn't going to fall into the "pit of self pity". He was being so strong, and for that I was so proud to be his daughter. His selflessness was astonishing. His ability to cover his own worries, and push away his own pain just to try and make the people he loved feel less of it. I was so proud to be his daughter, and I realized now that his love was my strength as mine was his. When the hard days came, and mentally everyone was shot and broken mom would bury her chest in his shoulder and cry but I couldn't bring myself to do the same. I could see how it hurt him. I wanted to be his strength now so I'd just take his hand and hold my tears until I could shed them alone. I felt like crying was saying goodbye, and that saying goodbye was like giving up; and I couldn't do that to him. He had been my strength for 16 years and It was my turn to hold his head high for the both of us.

Sometimes I catch myself longing for that sad moment of closure, to have cried at his bedside and thanked him for his unconditional love for all of those years. But I think the greatest goodbye I could have given him was none. By not giving up on him I showed him that unconditional love and faith that I had in believing he was not going to leave us. Which in turn I pray that gave him comfort instead of sadness. My experience with cancer changed the very core of who I was. I grew up in a matter of months. The immature things that completely ruled my teenage life dissipated as I was holding my fathers frail hand. My wants changed from money and basketball games to just wanting my father to see me graduate, or to walk me down the aisle of my wedding day. Cancer taught me to wake up in the morning and to give thanks for another opportunity to show the people I love that I value them. I get up every morning now and make my mom coffee it used to be my dad daily routine, but now it's mine. Not because I have to but because I feel blessed to wake up to my mother's beautiful soul everyday. I write letters and thank you cards to my family far away without being told to or forced because those are the people who give my life so much meaning and now I'm grateful for any moment I have to give them the thanks they deserve. Without my father I have had to learn who I was all over again. But luckily the thing that never changed was the passion for life my father bestowed in me. He lives through me now, and I plan to live my life to its greatest capacity every day. Cancer taught me that a body is temporary, but a spirit can continue to fight even when the body cannot. My father's spirit fights on still, fighting for me and my family to never forget the value of life and the importance of the love we have for each other.