

2008 Cancer Unwrapped Winning Essays

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296 Days

Morgan Smuck

Four year ago, I was a high school freshman, simply a member of the crowd, excited about academia and activities. At that time my goals were to graduate from high school, attend a good college, and enjoy a career and a family. Typical, comfortable and predictable.

When I first heard my dad was sick it didn't really register. Dads are strong. Dads will always be there. Dads take care of kids. That was my world. My dad was first diagnosed with Myelodysplastic Syndrome which meant that he would receive blood transfusions and be a little tired. That fit into my world. There was a possibility that the syndrome would transition into Leukemia, but after having genetic work done, the absence of a particular gene indicated that it wouldn't. Just thirty days, and one blood test later, my dad had full blown Leukemia.

My dad checked into Virginia Mason Hospital on May 23, 2005. He was to receive continuous chemo treatments for seven days, and then stay in the hospital for another twenty-one days as he dealt with the side effects from the drugs.

My dad was in the hospital for my last few weeks of school. Every single day I took the number ten bus from school to the hospital. I studied sitting in the window sill balancing my books and binders on my lap. Daily, I watched as my dad progressed through his treatments and side effects. The nurses posted a large graph on the wall where we watched his daily blood counts decline, almost to the point where it seemed he had none. I never knew what to expect when I entered his room. Some days he would be tired, other days we would talk. One day his hair was gone. At first, I thought it was ridiculous that he would remain in the hospital for twenty-one days after completing chemo, but we watched the side effects attack with hideous consequences. My dad dealt with necrotizing fasciitis, two emergency surgeries, three trips to the Intensive Care Unit, two hyperbaric treatments and serious infections. Cancer is not just a disease, it's a plague.

At first, I didn't want my friends to know. I didn't want to be the one to tell them. I didn't want to have constant attention and sympathy from people who didn't know what I was dealing with or what I was going through. I didn't want my friends to ask me how I was feeling, or if I needed anything. Most of all, I didn't want people to tell me they were sorry, because I didn't know how to respond. I still don't. Then, a close friend of mine made phone calls to my friends telling them my situation. I was so relieved. People finally knew about my dad, and I was surrounded by silent support and unconditional love that never ceased.

Leukemia claimed by dad's life. But this is what I really want you to know about him. That at age 60 (he waited a long time to have me), he could still water ski on a single. He could out snow ski all of us in both speed and grace, and he sculled in a rowing shell. When we rode bikes together, he always pedaled up hills without stopping. When I was out of breath hiking up Tiger Mountain, he was a hundred steps ahead. My dad taught me to play tennis, helped me with math, and was always there. Before he had me, he served in Vietnam, summited Mount Rainier, sailed to Tahiti, and restored a classic car. My dad loved to golf.

My dad passed about on December 16, 2005, the first day of my Christmas break. We had very little warning. My mom told him I was on my way home and although he wasn't able to acknowledge that, I think he waited for me. He passed away about fifteen minutes after I got home.

Living through my father's battle with Leukemia taught me that life is too short and too precious for the typical or predictable. No matter how dedicated or organized we make ourselves, our typical, comfortable and predictable worlds can change in an instant.

I now look at my future through a vastly different lens, one that is in a sense broader, and at the same time more focused. Unlike most of my peers, I have been exposed to a much larger world that includes medicine, law, and the incredible compassion of professionals, friends and even strangers. I have learned how to support others, and how to accept the support of others in return.

I am now learning the importance of living an intentional life. I don't believe that I will ever get over the loss of my dad, but I am learning to live with it. After my dad's funeral, I received a letter from my high school English teacher that read, "Remember that your dad received what all fathers dream of: the love of kind and caring children. That is a love that he will always have." And that is what I hold on to.

I'm Not Afraid

Lydia Teegan

What does it mean to have cancer? I struggle to grasp the answer. Something I blame when I don't feel well? Something labeled as 'the enemy'? Something that's hardly recognizable in scans? Something I never imagined I could have.

It's 4:30 am. An emotional, dizzy day turned sleepless night. Despite all of that, I feel absolutely wonderful.

Tomorrow I will exercise, read some Henry James, call a bunch of friends, volunteer for something, think up a new outfit, and sign up for classes. Once I get up. For now, I've stuck to writing this essay. That's my life. The life that now includes this thing called cancer, but I'm not afraid.

I'm not afraid of cancer. I'm afraid people won't believe me when I say that. I'm afraid they'll think my smile is just a happy mask. It's not. I mean it. I'm afraid people will just think of me as "that girl," the one with cancer. I'm not, no more than people at school are just "that boy with a lisp" or "that girl with an eating disorder." I'm afraid of wanting to tell people I'm sick. I'm afraid of trying to hide that I'm sick. I'm afraid of making people feel sorry for me when I don't need it. I have so much.

I'm not afraid of cancer. I'm afraid of the toll time takes. Time when I work first by taking pills and then by learning. I'm afraid of losing touch of the world where I become an adult, get a job, live independently. I should start now, so I can make it. I'm afraid of using cancer as an excuse not to work, an excuse not to try my hardest, and an excuse to give up. So I have to push myself and pretend I don't have an excuse.

I'm not afraid of cancer. I'm afraid of making people think I'm not okay, when I am. I'm afraid of complaining about something too small. But I do it anyway. Just in case. I'm afraid of expectations. The expectations that cancer will make me some great person make me wonder. Have I really changed? I still feel normal. Am I supposed to change?

I'm not afraid of cancer. I'm afraid of statistics. I'm afraid of thinking that so many of the people I see around me will have cancer later according to statistics. I'm afraid cancer will prevent me from helping people. I can't donate my blood. I can't sign up to donate my organs. I can only talk.

I'm not afraid of cancer. I'm afraid of getting mad at my mom. And then I might be mean to her. But I don't mean it. I love her. I'm afraid of how my little sister is taking it; that

it's harder on her than she lets on. How much of it does she understand? Her life seems to be the same. But I can't tell. I'm afraid of using cancer to make my Dad do too much for me. My dad works so hard, he doesn't need more.

I'm not afraid of cancer. I'm afraid of my parents watching me in pain. Pain that I forget about the minute it ends. But they might not. I'm afraid of what cancer could do to my family. I'm afraid of a grieving family. But I won't let them. They love me. I'll live.

I'm not afraid of cancer. I'm afraid of being immature. I'm afraid of the immature sense of invincibility. I'm afraid of that being the reason I'm not afraid of cancer. But then again maybe it's good for me.

I'm not afraid of cancer. I'm afraid that by now I've used too many "I's".

Those are my fears; fears I only think about at a time like 4:30 am. They began a year ago when I was diagnosed with liver cancer. I'm sixteen now. My story is incomplete, but I'm happy with what's there.

I've had chemotherapy, but my oncologist counters back. A chemo rash versus the full body brace he wore in high school. I'm not sure which is worse. I stay at home a lot. At home, my mom confides her wish to change places with me for my sake. I compare the me with some control and a young body to the me worrying about Mom, not knowing what to do. I'm glad for the way it is. I've had an eleven hour surgery. I undergo a successful surgery in a sunny, shop-filled, food-filled San Francisco while my classmate vacations in Italy. I'm not sure which is better. I've stayed in hospitals. At hospitals, nurses, the ones who do the 'dirty work' on long shifts, take care of my every need while smiling. At the hospital, J.P., a bright, confident resident, is the first to calm me down during episodes of hyperventilation with a chest and abdominal incision. I meet my first role models while my friend meets Justin Timberlake, with a thousand raving fans in-between. I win.

I've gone through something you can't imagine, a pretentious voice whispers in my head. It's perfectly in sync with the band belting out, "No you don't know what it's like/ To be like me," on the radio. The song ends. "Come down to Macy's for a...", the following advertisement begins. I remember. I need to get new jeans... and something neon... maybe leggings. Neon and sheers have been all over the runway for spring. My mind eagerly starts listing. The wall around me crumbles. I'm human just like any other.

I'm not someone to feel sorry for. To me, cancer is just something that happened in my life. It's not my life. My life is my family and friends. My life is my dreams: realistic and unrealistic dreams, achieved and bandaged dreams. I wouldn't give any of these up even to be cancer-free. I'm grateful. I'm happy.

Life After Haircuts...Is Too Short

Hilary Severin

Today my friend Becca got a haircut. It was strange to watch. My friends and I gathered around her and watched as her beautiful blonde locks fell to the ground. It was the most heart-wrenching haircut I have ever witnessed. It seems so petty to cry over something as silly as hair, but as I watched the tears fall down Becca's face, I was filled with sadness for her. It seems so cruel that cancer would happen to her. Not only is it her senior year in high school, but hair is an exceptionally integral aspect of her life. Not only does her hair look absolutely perfect everyday, but she's always the one that does all my friends' hair before dances. I kid you not; her room is filled with the largest assortment of hair products ever known to man. As she undergoes chemotherapy, her hair is now starting to fall out.

It began last week. I was sitting in class next to her and she was picking stray hairs off her clothing. I reached to help and she sighed and told me it was no use, that her hair would all be gone soon anyway. I was caught so off guard, I didn't even know how to respond. She seemed so sad but resigned, not the normal happy, silly Becca I have come to know and love. Today she asked me whether I thought she should cut it all off and start using the wig she had bought in case this happened. I couldn't think of what to say. I told her that if I were her, I'd want to hold on to my hair as long as possible. She agreed but wondered aloud whether it was even worth it to wait. She told me of how scared she was to wash her hair. "It comes out in huge chunks when I wash it," she sighed. "I don't know if it's even worth it to wait for it anymore." To most people this may seem trivial, but to a girl in high school, or any girl for that matter, losing your hair is a frightening thought, terrifying even. I've thought about cutting my hair in support of Becca, to let her know that she's not alone in her battle. I can't get myself to do it though. My selfish vanity won't allow me, and I am ashamed to admit this.

Becca encourages me to live my life to the fullest each day. I see her struggle to understand why this has happened to her, especially right now, when she has so much to look forward to. She is one of the bravest people I know and I am continually inspired by her choice to embrace her situation with such a positive attitude. Her resilient spirit and giving personality amaze me everyday. Even though she has Lymphoma, she never misses her tradition of making cupcakes for her friends on their birthday. For as long as I have known Becca, she has always been a person who cares deeply about her friends. If she and a friend get in a fight, she won't rest until peace is reached. Her ability to be empathetic is a quality I admire her for. Even though she struggles to understand why cancer has happened to her, she lives each day with arms wide open and motivates those around her to do the same.

“It’s always something,” cynics may say. I have to admit, I sometimes find myself agreeing with them. I just don’t understand why such bad stuff can happen to such good people, especially people who devote as much time to helping others as she does. Becca volunteers not only within our high school, but within the surrounding community as well. She is a member of a local relay for life team along with several of our friends. Last year, she walked as a volunteer, raising money to help others with cancer. This year she will walk as a survivor, hopefully done with her chemotherapy and radiation treatment by then. I am excited for her to be able to resume her normal life. The life she lived before cancer.

Even though she is losing her hair, I know Becca is going to be okay. She takes whatever life throws at her and makes the best of it. It may be hard for her to watch something so important to her being taken away from her, but I know one day she will have her beautiful hair back, when she is finally healthy and cancer-free again. Until then, my friends and I will be there for her. We’ll be there to stay up late with her, try on wigs with her, and cry with her when she’s upset. She is one of my best friends and I will be there for her whenever she needs me. She is not alone in her fight.

Ma Chère Grand-mère

Laura Hoover

Ma Chère Grand-mère,

I think I am a lot like you, or at least becoming a lot like you. You are in every note I sing or read or play, every stitch I sew, every song that runs through my head and every scrap of fabric I run under my fingers. You are around my head and waist and wrist and neck, on my fingers and in my eyes, mind, heart. I wear you in bulky sweaters that keep me warm on nights when I feel like there is ice in the marrow of my bones, gripping cold from my past/present/future that won't go away until I'm home. I wear you in the silk scarves that make my clothes fit tighter so the world can see how I'm wasting away without life, without you. I miss your butterscotch cookies, sitting in your kitchen and talking before piano lessons.

I don't remember the last time I saw you, but I remember the time we came to visit when I didn't come in. I just sat in the hall. Maybe I was scared to see you sick, or maybe I... I can't remember. I remember waking up to her standing there and the words I'd been dreading for months, the words I never wanted to hear, the ones that should have never been said but especially not by my nine year old sister. I want to wake up instead to you sitting on my bed tomorrow morning, soft hand on my head, fingers so used to piano keys stroking my hair instead.

They said it was because of me you lived as long as you did, anyway. The day I was born you came to see me and you slipped on the steps of the hospital because it was raining. When they took x-rays, they didn't find broken bones but they did find the cancer. When you started chemo, your hair fell out and was replaced by soft gold silk. You already looked like an angel to me. They gave you two years to live, and you took seven.

But I couldn't cry when you died, grandma. I didn't have any tears, they were dammed up behind the eyes that nobody's ever seen through, the ones that maybe you would have understood. I didn't let one single drop of water down until you were there, beautiful like you always were, but not there. Not until I was supposed to stand up and sing. They told me I didn't have to, if it was too hard, but I wanted to. I was only seven, grandma. I sang with all my heart for you because I wanted to sing life back into you, bring you back so I could smell the Avon perfume on your dress when you kissed me and told me it was wonderful.

I still sing for you. It's always been for you and maybe I just didn't know it before, hadn't realized that the reason I have a voice and a passion and a talent is all because you gave it to me... Maybe the voice I have inside me is really yours, and I inherited it when you left with your costume jewelry, music books, bulky sweaters, scarf collection. I sew for you, too. You left all

those scraps of amazing fabric and antique buttons and twenty seven million kinds of thread and patterns and ribbon. I use your sewing machine, and I'm not very good yet but someday I will be, because you were and I am becoming you.

When I prayed after that, I asked God to tell you I said hi and that I loved you. Now, in a way, I pray to you instead. I wonder if you were still here, if we would have been closer than anyone because we are so much alike and so much each other, or if I would have treated you like you were just a grandma, like you didn't know anything about what it was like to be me.

But you know everything, don't you? From wherever you are, you can see me when I cry smile laugh die want need fear change am live and you know why. You know everything about me, understand things nobody else knows, and maybe will ever know. Except when I fall in love the real time, the forever time, I want them to know me like you do. And I think they will, I think you will be right there to help them understand every angle in my face, every scar on my skin, every streak of colour in my eyes.

And then, with you home love me all together,

I will be real.

I will be whole.

I will be you and me both, forever.

Your Laura

Pins and Needles

Rebekah Liebermann

I sometimes wonder what an alien would think if they studied human life from our movies. Their idea of human emotion would be warped by countless runaway fathers, dying mothers, and desperate kisses in hospital rooms.

Us humans, we love our tragedies. The drama! The passion! Sometimes I wish my life were a movie because then the emotions would be so straightforward. I would always know how to feel.

At first I was reluctant to write this essay for a couple reasons. First off, I felt ashamed sharing my story when it is my dad who has leukemia; he is the one who's been through so much, not me. Second, I have never really talked in length about how my dad's cancer has affected me. I've told the (deep breath) two-bone-marrow-transplants-three-relapses-interferon-prednisonecyclosporin-gleevec story countless times and heard it so many more that my medical vocabulary could shame a few doctors. But about me- my experience with cancer- I have remained unintentionally silent.

I have become rather numb to the pain and/or fear and/or bitterness that I may or may not have experienced over the years. The problem is that I have seen so many movies about how I should feel that I can hardly recognize my own feelings on this subject. This is a strange realization because my eyes are usually quick to fill with tears, my heart to fill with anger. I have realized that I have experienced emotion a lot less than I have studied it. And I'm not even from another planet.

What really compelled me to write this essay is that its readers will mostly be people who I do not know and therefore will not have the opportunity to compare what I write- sincerely here to what I have observably expressed throughout my life.

I do not remember exactly when my parents told me that my dad was sick, only that it must have occurred sometime between the "the tooth fairy is not real" talk and the sex talk. The first five years of my life were ones of moderate interest in my dad's life. I was particularly drawn to the picture in my dad's office of him holding me right after I was born. He was about to have his second bone marrow transplant (BMT) and had a weak immune system. He was in a laminar air flow (LAF) room and held me with plastic gloves from the other side of a transparent plastic wall. The picture was also on display at the Hutch and I was so proud of my dad for being so "famous".

When I was in kindergarten my dad relapsed. One evening I came downstairs and watched from around the corner as my dad injected himself in the thigh. A little bit of bright red blood seeped up around the injection site. For the next few months and then once in a while since then, this film-clip like memory has consumed my dreams. I watch over and over again the needle puncturing his skin and the blood ooze. Sometimes I see myself watching him and sometimes it is a close up of his leg as if I was leaning over him. His pant leg is rolled up, his skinny thigh exposed, the odd tint of his skin is disguised by the dim light, and somewhere between dark hair follicles a little red dot appears and it covers my vision. Everyday for a year my dad injected himself with interferon to enhance his immune system. What I thought of then was how these daily shots turned jovial santa-clause daddy into irritable depressed. My parents think that my severe fear of needles today is fear of pain. They think I don't remember the interferon days.

A year or two later, when my dad was finally off the interferon and put on an experimental drug, he had an allergic reaction. He was rushed to the hospital in the middle of the night and I was driven to my best friend's house. I was not worried because my parents told me not to be, but I was terribly confused as to why I was allowed to sleep at Hannah's house on a school night. I have two vivid memories of that night. The first is being terrified that someone was going to jump in through the window next to the bed I was sleeping in. The second is being at the hospital peeking through curtains at my dad. There were yellow-tinted tubes shrouding his face and that's all I could see of him. Apparently I was never at the hospital that night and wasn't told until later what was going on. But that image was as really terrifying to me as lying in bed looking out into the dark.

Mostly leukemia has been a constant weight on our backs; we always have to carry it, but sometimes forget that it is there. When I was younger I saw my dad's perseverance as nothing but strength and endurance. But as I grew older, entered middle school and got ideas of how things should be I considered that perhaps my dad was really just being pulled along. I saw a weakness in him that before I hadn't perceived. And I was disturbed by this new realization. In 7th grade my family went through a rough patch as my dad was put on a new medicine. I continued to mistake his humanness for weakness. Not only was I embarrassed and a little bit disgusted with his... failure, so contrasting to what I had perceived before, but I was even more disgusted with myself for feeling that way and acting upon it. In order to show my dad that he was wrong (about what I don't know), I acted like a complete and obnoxious brat to my parents. They didn't understand it and I didn't either. To everyone else I was sweet, self-motivated, and conscientious. I've always thought that the impossible side of myself I showed in middle school was my real and true self. I have reasoned that I simply wasn't afraid to show my genuine personality to my parents because I knew they would always love me. This is my deepest secret, my deepest shame, something I try not to think about, knowing I will cringe inside and out when I do. But writing about this, being forced to think about it, I must come to the conclusion that that better side of me I yearned for was not fake at all. I see now that my dad's cancer had permeated

me as well, polluting my blood, too, and it held me in its grasp so tight that I couldn't see anything around me, or feel myself at all.

Eventually I snapped out of it. My mom thought it was because of the psychologist we went to once as a family when my parents were afraid that I wouldn't be able to cope with my dad's cancer. Really, that only made me angrier. I got so angry about the shrink, about everything, and I couldn't be in that place anymore, so I changed. It was the most conscious decision I have ever made. I was so heartbroken by the fact that I couldn't honestly call myself mature or compassionate even though ninety-nine percent of the time I was the epitome of these qualities. After I made that decision, I was so proud of myself for the first time in years for taking responsibility. I realized then that I had control over aspects of my life that my dad didn't. I saw that what the cruelty of leukemia had taken from my dad in physical and mental strength was compensated for (and then plus some) with his love for me and my mom, and family and friends.

I have always denied that my dad's cancer has affected me in any big way; it is just one aspect of my life. It is one zit on a face of porcelain skin, one C- amongst a hundred A+s. But I am kidding myself here, because although my life is happy happy happy, it doesn't mean that some things don't hurt. OUCH. What hurts the most is it not hurting the way it is supposed to. My fear of weakness and of the non-ideal hasn't gone away. But I have finally learned to find other strengths in people and in myself. My dad forgave me a long time ago and I would finally like to forgive myself so that I can appreciate my dad for how cool he is. He's no energizer bunny, but he has a zest for love and a love for life that embody exactly the santa-clause daddy of my childhood. I am not governed by cancer, but sometimes I feel it pulling me in a direction I would prefer not to go and thank God, thank Someone, thank Something, thank You that my dad is strong enough to pull us both the other way. And my legs are starting to tingle, pins and needles; I can feel myself feeling again.