

2011 Cancer Unwrapped Winning Essays

Angel in Disguise

by Yelizaveta Baydak

Cancerous Child

by Karina Lucas Fernandez

Omertà

by Marc-Antoine Fontenelle

Personal Essay

by Savannah Krug

Remember This

by Rachel Clark

Roller Coaster

by Guy Simpson

The Recital

by Kaeli Earle

The Unexpected Goodbye

by Blair Ballard

What Cancer Cannot Do

by Rachel Binford

Angel in Disguise

Yelizaveta Baydak

The summer of 2004 was the first time we met. I had just become the owner of a brand new bike and was giving it a try in our new neighborhood, one we had moved into two months earlier. She was watering her front lawn bushes. The same bushes that later became my first job, paid in popsicles. She commented on my bike and asked a few questions about where I was from. Keeping my distance from this new stranger, I politely answered and went on my way. That chat was the beginning of something incredible one can never forget.

Throughout the rest of the summer, we had gotten to know each other in the same way we met: her on one side of the bushes, I on the other. I had told her that I am the sixth of nine children in my family and English was not our first language, but our second. My parents had decided to move to the U.S. in the year of 1998. I found out her name was Linda, a retired woman who had never gotten married nor had any children. On top of that, she was disconnected from what was left of her family: two sisters of which she had no idea still existed. Her father had served in WWII and died her freshmen year of high school. Her mother, a beautiful woman known for her amazing apples pies, died a number of years later. Linda was a baby-boomer, who had retired at a young age due to her diabetes and several other health issues. Not knowing the danger at the time, she had become a continuous smoker at the age of 14. Little did she know, that was the beginning of her end.

Linda became a very good family friend of ours, as well as very good friend of our cousins who were also our next door neighbors. She was like a grandmother to any kid that entered her home. She'd invite all the neighborhood kids to her house for bonfires and slumber parties. She would let us have as much junk food as our young hearts desired and would let us stay up all night if we wanted to. She took us out for ice cream and spoiled us with presents like we were her own grandchildren. We had nicknamed her Babushka, Russian for grandmother. She not only loved it, but started referring to herself as that.

Although we had lived in America for quite some time before meeting her, Linda taught us everything there is to know about the American culture and the American ways. Phrases we would say wrong, she would correct us. Things misunderstood, she would explain to us. Foods we'd never eaten, she introduced to us. In return, we taught her basic Russian words and shared with her traditional Russian foods. She'd say she was in Heaven whenever she ate my mom's "piroshki", a sweet Danish-type roll.

Times spent with Linda were a blast. We would find any excuse we could to go to her house. We would help Linda feed her squirrels and her cats. We helped her paint her fence or wash her car. We would do anything to be with our Babushka. More and more often came times when we would begin to do these things by ourselves because Linda would not want to come outside.

Days that I later learned were due to her depression spells that came around the death anniversaries of friends. Linda had her moments with pain and depression but she was still so kind in every way.

As age caught up with her, so did her bad health. Days came when she couldn't get up out of bed due to body aches and pains. Eventually she had started having trouble breathing. Assuming that her seasonal asthma was getting worse, she went to the doctor. Never will I forget the moment I found out that Linda had cancer. I was at home working on a homework assignment when the phone rang. It was my cousin. She was bawling on the other end of the line. Understanding only bits and pieces of what she was trying to say, I managed to recognize these words: lung cancer, six months to a year to live. That was it. I didn't have a reaction. I didn't even cry. Part of me wanted to blame Linda and tell her that it was her fault because she had been smoking for the majority of her life. Granted, she tried many times to quit, but still I saw it as her fault. Within weeks Linda was bald and weighed almost nothing. Feeling guilty for my nasty thoughts, I felt sorry for her and did everything I could to make her feel comfortable and happy. With the help of my cousins and siblings, I would keep up with Linda's lawn, mail, cats, and whatever it is she needed getting done.

She would be embarrassed about her inability to do things. She would resist the help, saying she can do these things by herself. At first she would try to pay us as if we were doing this to get something out of her. Of course, we would never take the money. It was a bit offensive to us that she thought we did this for the money. We didn't understand why she always felt obligated to give us something in return. And it wasn't until I asked that she told us why.

Scarred by her sisters' greedy ways of living, Linda swore them off and promised she would never let anyone take advantage of her again. I don't know all the details of their story, but that was enough for me. It became obvious to me that Linda had spent most of her life alone and was used to getting everything done by herself. She wasn't comfortable with the idea of being dependent on someone after all these years of living alone. Towards the end, she had no choice. We refused to leave her alone in her suffering. We explained to her that we were doing this because this is the way our parents taught us. If someone is in need of help, help them with good intentions. Being Christian, we lived by the Golden Rule in our family: "Treat others the way you would like to be treated." It was just the Christian thing to do. It was up to us to be there for her. She had no one else. So it came to be that the more we were there to help her, the more she got used to the idea.

Checking up on her became a daily routine after school. There were days when I would find her haven fallen asleep over the sink with the water running. Most times she'd forget where she was when I'd wake her up. I would reassure her and lead her back to her room. I remember one time when two of my sisters found Linda lying unconsciously on the floor. They awoke her and found her to be completely out of her mind. She screamed at them, confused at her whereabouts.

Not knowing what to do, they called the paramedics. They immediately came and calmed her down.

She was overwhelmed at what this cancer brought her. She was becoming more depressed and eventually signed a DNR that was hung on the refrigerator door. Do Not Resuscitate: Do Not Save, Do Not Revive. I couldn't wrap my hand around it. I asked myself why she wouldn't want her life to be saved. I didn't understand for the longest time *why*. Why would someone not want another chance at life? I was in shock at first seeing the sign, so I mentioned it to Linda. She told me that is was misery what she was living. She asked me to put myself in her shoes and try to imagine my life with cancer. Chemotherapy, throwing up, hospitals, hair loss, you name it. Who wants to live like that? Just hearing those words made me sick. But I understood. I also understood that with the signing of the DNR, she was signing her life away. Walking home that night, tears streaming down my face, I realized that that was the first time I cried since finding out about Linda's cancer. It hit me that her life was coming to an end. It hit me *hard*. Linda was dying.

Hospice came three times a week to check up on her. Every time they left they would warn us that there's not much time left. By this time, Linda was bed ridden with an oxygen tank by her side. My last real memory of her was before she lost her memory and started talking nonsense, which was the last two weeks of her life. I was lying next to her in bed, talking to her and trying to distract her away from the pain. Although being a sophomore at the time, we were talking about my graduation. Out of nowhere, Linda asked me if I believed in angels. I was confused for a second and with slight hesitation said, "I do." In return, I asked her the same thing. Tears forming in her eyes, she said, "I do, now."

She continued saying, "I never believed in angels until I met your family. No one has shown as much care and love for me as you all have. God must have sent you here to watch over me. Who knows, maybe you're my guardian angel. An angel in disguise."

With these words she went to sleep, not knowing that I now carry these words with me wherever I go.

Linda died a short week later. She died at one in the morning on the last day of my sophomore year in high school. Although I still had to go to school, I got up and walked over to see her for the last time. I had always wanted her to be there for me when I graduate. And with her death, a result of lung cancer, I believed she wouldn't be. Now, with graduation day soon approaching, I know she'll be there for me. Right in the very first row.

Cancerous Child

Karina Lucas Fernandez

It all started back a while
When I was just a child
Dancing, laughing
Learning, growing
Was what my life was about
I would go to school
Where things weren't very cool
Then there was karate work
Followed by the swimming strokes
Then everything had to change
Nothing would ever be the same
I knew things were bad before then
But not as bad as they would end
It all started with the back pains
Then yelling to go eat
Followed by the many car lights
Illuminating our lane
Heading down the freeway
Our destination was nothing more than the emergency entrance
Where everything would be in a trance
When we heard the news
My life would then end
Not fast
But slowly
Taking its time
Making it last
Wanting nothing more than for it to end
Knowing better that it will always be there
Followed were the;
Blood drains
Spill stains
Needles in my skin
Surgeries every week
Making my body grow weak
The wheelchairs
Many hibernating days
Beatings at home

Everything going wrong
My mom being called a whore
When Carlos arrived from work
Hating life
For everything that it had caused
And for my bad life
I wanted nothing more
Than to be happy
Like every other kid.
Later came the divorce
Where my stage made everything worse
I wasn't a child anymore
Instead an experiment
Where things could always go wrong
Soon after we moved
And took a different name
Trying to head a different way
While becoming someone new
If it hadn't been for me
Nothing would've changed
I would now be the same
Instead life lead me
Through the cancerous path
Where I became a cancerous child
Carrying bad luck
And forever will hate my life
Because a cancerous child
Will never be loved
Because a cancerous child
Will always make mistakes
Because a cancerous child
Will always complain
Of the constant pains
Because a cancerous child
Will always be hated
Because a cancerous child
Will never be understood
Because a cancerous child
Will always be an outsider
Because a cancerous child
Is too hard to take care of
Because a cancerous child

Will never be what a parent wants
Because a cancerous child
Is the life that I lead
Because a cancerous child
Is what I will always be.

Omertà

Marc-Antoine Fontenelle

Six years have already passed. Six years during which she made a vow to this code of silence. If in Sicily, one does not speak of the crimes committed by the mafia, a code known as omertà; here in my house, my mother never brings up the terrorist attacks committed by those deadly cells in her breasts. Few words, even fewer tears, nothing of the internal struggles she faced. Every morning, she would take care of our lunch sandwiches as usual, dressed and wearing makeup, sometimes with a drain under her sweatshirt.

In two years, my mother entered the operating room a dozen times, at first for a mastectomy, then for several reconstructions. Each time, apart from the mastectomy, my brothers and I knew nothing. The only trace of an operation: an occasional oven-baked pizza cooked by my father.

It was only while growing older that the word cancer began to take meaning, associated with death, mental and physical suffering, and treatments as mutilating for the body as for the pocketbook. Ashamed, I barely dare to admit that I, at 11 years of age, had hardly noticed my mother's fears, sufferings, and her mental battle against the disease. What had she truly lived through? Did she ever crack from the isolation and the silence that she imposed upon herself?

I imagine that due to her own fears of the uncertain future, she only wanted to protect her children by avoiding the subject, and preserving our usual, daily routine. Maybe it was also her approach to battling the cancer: denying it, refusing to be the patient in the wheelchair, waiting desperately in the lobby. I vividly remember seeing her furious against the absurdity of her friends, astonished to see her active around the house, telling her to take time to rest. She never allowed anyone to look upon her as "condemned". In fact, to this day she still has trouble accepting her status of survivor, as if someone sought to brand her as having once been doomed to this horrible fate.

Nevertheless, her omertà is slowly chipping away. She sometimes brings up this passage of her life as a positive experience, having taught her the frailty of life, and to savor the small moments in life: a meal with her best friend, listening to my little brother practicing the same song for the hundredth time on his cello, reading a book, or nibbling on a chocolate bar hidden in the cupboard.

Someday she might read this essay. Maybe this scholarship will give me the strength to break the vow of silence she made concerning the disease. I hope she will understand that it is not by insensible voyeurism that I am writing this, but rather to convey an experience that I lived somewhat as a tourist and now shames me. A shame of not having been more present, a shame of

not having held her in my arms more often, a shame of not having told her how much I love her.

Six years ago, my mother was 38, and I was 11. I didn't see anything. I didn't hear anything. Most of all, I didn't say anything.

Personal Essay

Savannah Krug

Tumor- the word held little meaning at first. Bone tumor meant even less. Both terms were foreign until I entered high school.

It started when I was coming back from snowboarding. The car was cold and I was busying myself finger painting murals on the frosted windows. Suddenly I realized my left thumb was hurting. It didn't bother me much. As a distance runner, I'm used to strange aches and pains. Usually, whatever is bothering me goes away after a few weeks.

The pain in my thumb didn't leave. It did recede some, but then it would build back up to a crescendo of agony. Throughout the last half of eighth grade, this was the pattern. A lull, followed by a roar.

Soon, there was no lull. There was always a constant roar. My thumb had also started to swell. At first it was hardly noticeable. Soon, however, my thumb could be spotted by orbiting satellites. It got so big, I lost all movement. Not that I wanted to move it, because every jerk tripled the pain.

My first doctor's appointment was at the end of April, before I became a Vashon High School freshman. The doctor, a polite brunette, told me at some point, I must have broken or sprained my thumb. She gave me a few shots of cortisone and told me to come back in 90 days if it still hurt.

While the pain grew progressively more alarming during the next 90 days, I began participating in summer Cross-Country. Cross-Country is wonderful. I love running. It is an integral part of my life. When my thumb started becoming more sensitive, practices were difficult without stopping and icing it. There was a time when I had to sit out for half a practice because my thumb was so painful.

Ninety days later, my thumb had swelled even further. There was no Tylenol in the house because I was using all of it. We made another doctor's appointment.

June rolled around and I turned 15. I went to the doctor for the second time. This time, the doctor was a nice, balding man from Children's Hospital. He inquired about the pain and how long I'd endured it. He also asked me general questions about my life. Then several X-rays were taken. I went home that day feeling like something was finally being done about my hand.

The doctor called back for another appointment rather quickly. I was subjected to more poking and prodding than ever before. Twice a week, we would take the ferry from Vashon to Seattle, to Children's Hospital for more tests. For awhile, every appointment was with a different doctor. It was a very uncertain summer.

Through all of this, I was still trying to run as often as I could. Running was a comfort. I didn't worry about my hand when I was trying to summit a steep hill. The roads around my house soon became a personal sanctuary and Cross-Country became my temple. I loved it, I loved the team, I loved our workouts and I loved the bonds that came with shared hardship. The

Cross-Country team was my extended family. We were that close, even in the summer when we were only just beginning to know each other.

Still, I didn't tell anyone about my thumb. I wanted to focus on running and I wanted the team to focus on running. I felt, at the time, that my hand was an unnecessary distraction.

In July, the doctors told me I had a bone tumor. They were unsure if it was benign or malignant and wouldn't biopsy because they said the pain would be too excruciating. I didn't know what to think. My heart, mind and soul did circus tricks to stop my racing thoughts. I thought of my brother, who has asthma and hemophilia C and has battled them his whole life. I calmed myself by thinking if he could do it, I could do it. My parents of course, were having a very difficult time. One of their children had a bone tumor and there was no way of knowing whether or not it was cancer. We discussed moving into a therapist's office.

The doctors told me to come in for surgery on September 14, 2007. I would probably miss a Cross-Country meet and a few practices after I had the operation. I still wasn't going to tell the team but I did let the coaches know. They promised they wouldn't tell the team about my operation until after it was over.

In the weeks leading up to operation, I felt strangely calm. Cross-Country was a huge part of that. Running kept me tired enough to not freak out over my hand.

On the day of the operation, my mom took me in to Harborview Medical Center. We got up around midnight to catch the 3:00 AM ferry off the Island. There aren't many things I remember leading up to the operation. I remember on the way there, seeing a car flipped on its side in a ditch. I remember the man who gave me the I.V., who introduced himself by saying,

“Wow- this is so exciting! I've never done this before!”

I remember being wheeled into the operating room and being surprised by the huge fluorescent lights and the nurse placing a mask over my face, telling me to count back from 100. 100, 99, 98, 87...

An interminable time later, I woke up with a huge casing of plaster and gauze around my left arm, coming all the way up to my elbow. It was monstrous- three times the size of my regular arm! My parents were there to take me home. I remember absolutely nothing of the car ride back, only being settled on the couch once we got home.

I did miss that week's meet and a day of practice. But a cast, this monstrosity attached to my arm, and a tumor were not stopping me from going to practice. After four days rest, I was back. I must have looked absurd, with this big white thing on my left arm. My workouts were the same as the rest of team. I did have to be very careful with my cast. When we were doing stretches, I almost hit a few people by accident.

It would take me a moment, sometimes, to process the past few months and my current state.

The doctor had contacted us a day or two after the operation and told my parents that no, their daughter did not have bone cancer. That was the highlight of the entire operation.

The first meet after the surgery was a home meet, on September 27th. It was a nice day, sunny but not too warm. Lining up for the start was nerve-wracking. I wasn't sure

if I would finish. Then the gun went off and I didn't care anymore. As the race went on, my cast grew heavier and heavier. But even a 200 lb. cast wouldn't stop me. When finally, after an eternity, I crossed the finish line, I had placed 11th out of 45-50 runners. The race was not my best. I did not set a new personal record nor did I place in the top three. However, I still look to that race as one of my greatest performances. It showed me that I am a powerful person.

My name is Savannah Krug. I endured the pain of a bone tumor for almost a year. I ran a race only 13 days after general anesthetic. I can push myself to the limit for the sport I love.

Remember This

Rachel Clark

To My Future Self,

I hope you are reading this some time in the future. I am 16 now, and there are some important things I need to tell you that I don't want you to forget.

We studied the human brain today in school. I learned how your memory is not a neat film strip of events, but a reconstruction of unorganized pieces that are scraped together by your brain. It is influenced by your own opinions, and can have added shapes or changed colors produced by your own imagination. Most importantly, a considerable part of your recollections will dwindle away. Sometimes, I focus really hard, and strain to try and remember what her voice sounded like. Or the way she held me on her lap brushing my hair, and kissed my forehead with a smile. But I can't, because I was so young the memory has either vanished or become barely graspable, and it is the most debilitating feeling to lose the mental picture of the one person you want to clutch on to more than life. I am scared of how my memory has ebbed away, and of how the mental chalk picture I have of her is being rained on by time. Staring at a still photo in a wooden frame and not being able to recall the person in it is one of the most unsatisfying and devastating feelings I have ever felt. Lifeless pictures can't fill the gap in my memory or my heart. How can I have so little left of my mom?

My teacher said that your brain can purposefully blot out recollections of stress you want to forget, or accurately remember traumatic experiences. I only get vague and blurry images scattered around, a doorknob that I was assigned to sanitize to keep mom healthy, or the sherbet ice cream the hospice gave me when I visited. All of them are objects and not her, except for the day she passed away which is engrained in my head and as vivid as reality.

It was just over 8 months after my mom had been diagnosed with cancer, and the middle of November, when we prepared for a birthday gathering in the hospice for my mom. Seven years ago I spent that sunny morning at my friend's house, and we cut out dozens of bright red paper links that each guest could sign to join into a chain for her room. I arrived at the hospice excited to celebrate but my mom lay frail and very still, breathing heavily in a bed surrounded by humming machines. The party was cancelled. I knew, everyone knew, that this was it, that this birthday candle was beginning to flicker and dim. I was asked to go stand by her bed and talk to her, and was told that though she could not respond, she could hear my voice. There is no way to prepare for the last words you can say to your mom. I was an awkward and confused third grader, and there was nowhere to begin the final things I could let her know, of how much I loved her and would miss her, and how we would be okay. I don't remember if I said anything at all, but oh how my heart screams every time I think of the endless words that would flow out of

me like rain now. I sat on a couch in her room with my family and waited an agonizing wait of watching her slip from me, until she passed away. We wept and wept, huddled together, and I gripped on to them to try and fight the loneliness that overcame me. Watching her body wheeled out was the last time I would see her, I would never get to feel that kiss on my forehead or that stroke of her hand again. It was as if someone had come in uninvited, given you little to no warning, ripped away a chunk of your heart, and then sent you back to reality. The world unbelievably was the same, but I now had an empty and hollow wound burdening me, making me wonder how life could keep going when I felt so injured. Everywhere I only saw where she used to be, and I cried for days.

What I want you to know though, are the lessons that come with cancer.

I know that there is a grave fear of being different from those around you, and of not having a “normal” life. Let me tell you that not one other person in my elementary school class had lost a parent, or even understood the meaning and complexity of the word cancer. I remember that about a week after my mom died, my well-intended teacher had everyone in my class of 60 kids write me a letter saying they were sorry for my loss, that would later be delivered in a woven basket to my door. I took one look at the crayon colored cards and broke into hysterical tears. I wanted more than anything to go back to a sense of normality and be a regular student, and each letter of condolences only reminded me of how I was different. I was so frustrated that people treated me with a sense of pity and sadness, when I was still a child, wanting to look forward to recess like everyone else. After so much chaos, I needed a schedule, a routine, a lunch time, and some, dare I say it, homework. But wanting life to be normal wasn't enough, and the fact was that life wasn't the same. Rather, I learned that part of living is things changing, becoming different, and that it will always be okay. Remember that when things seem in chaos, that your new “regular” schedule will form, you will accept yourself for who you become, and the sun will keep rising, however impossible it seems.

There is usually only one reaction to “My mom died of cancer”. It involves a muffled apology, a blushing “sorry for your loss”, and an awkward change of subject. I remember the first and only time I actually had a friend ask me about what happened. We were sitting in a restaurant when I first told of her of my mom, and she calmly picked up a French fry and asked me about my experience. I think I did a double take in surprise. I was honestly so stunned that I didn't know what to say, being directly confronted by the ominous subject that is usually never brought up. It was at that moment of eating a hamburger when I realized that I wanted to talk to someone, I wanted to confide in someone, and I wanted to let someone in. People assume that I am depressed, angry, and defensive about cancer. And I am, but that ignores that I might also be lost, confused, and alone, and don't want to talk. It's like a hole inside of me that everyone felt too awkward to try and fill, though if they did it would help smooth and sooth my heart. Why is cancer unintentionally awkward, when it effects so many of us? I think people really give the word cancer a more fearful and destructive meaning by not want to talk about it, a he-who-must-not-be-named in Harry Potter type thing. I learned the difference between being

polite and being a friend. You should strive to not avoid awkward topics, but instead to be open to talking to people about how they feel, so you can get to know them better. Not ignoring an aspect of someone's person and being able to talk to and understand that part of their life is a skill you can use to help others around you, as well as yourself.

Cancer is something that is telling you to shut down. It's a hurricane; it throws your world around a little, puts in some 180 degree spins, and levels it out for you to face the destruction. It was so easy to feel lonely. One year, I spent a week staying with my neighbors. My brothers were at college and my dad was on a business trip, so I was living alone at home by day and sleeping at my kind, yet slightly dysfunctional neighbors by night. This particular night was the anniversary of my mom's death, and I was awake at midnight on a lumpy futon in a foreign house. My neighbors didn't understand that day's meaning to me, my friends didn't know of it, my family was all miles away, and I felt desperately alone. I missed my mom so much that day that it hurt and it ached; I felt as if my heart had caved in to leave a vacant void that would never be filled by her, but only the empty misery of her absence. I was in an unfamiliar house, trying to be quiet as I sobbed, planning to run away back home, and I truthfully needed some help. So I made a conscious decision to pick up my phone and call my best friend. Granted she was awake, and after hearing me pour my emotions out, got me feeling alive again in minutes. I realized then that I couldn't always wait for people to come help me people don't know if I'm struggling unless I tell them and let them in. It was difficult to show someone that maybe I was not as strong as I thought, but I know it took courage. You need to know that you have to make an effort to welcome love, and to open up to people for support. Life isn't mean to be fought alone, and if life is telling you to close off and run away, I am telling you to go call a friend.

Though memories fade, I know in my mind somewhere there is a bank of knowledge. Every time someone tells me a detail about my mom, or I read a little snippet about her from an old letter, I collect and file it into a large cabinet I have up in my brain, which I treasure with all my heart. My recollection of her is weak, but she is not gone. She raised me to be how I am now, and due to her and the experiences I have had after her death, I know I am a better person. I think of her everyday, and know she is with me and part of every action and decision I make, and the ones you are making too. Remember these things, hold on to them, and cherish them, as they are part of you as well as me.

Rachel

Roller Coaster

Guy Simpson

There is a loud metallic *clack-clack-clack* as a the roller coaster car begins to climb to its dizzying apex of the first perilously high hill on the track, followed by a moment of fear and apprehension as the track drops into the far distance below, and with a rush of air and the chorus of screams the car plummets downward and your stomach hangs in the balance. When a son learns that their beautiful, supportive mother who has always been there for him has been diagnosed with this disease called cancer, that strikes fear into so many, the only way I can describe it that makes any sense at all, is a roller coaster. The past year and a half has been a constant deluge of fear, apprehension, unconditional love, and uncertainty for my family and I know we will never be the same. In October of 2009 my mother went in to the doctor to get her abdominal pain checked and came away with a diagnosis of colon cancer. She had emergency surgery to remove the tumors from her colon and lumps from her ovaries.

That week, the amusement ride conductor in my life said, “Keep your arms and legs inside the car, I hope you enjoy the ride.”

clack-clack-clack

My two older sisters, who were in their freshmen and sophomore years of college respectfully, and I watched our strong, independent mother waste away little by little and there was nothing we could do to help her. It was so unfair to have this happen, there was no history of colon cancer in my mom’s family, and she was so healthy and vital. My mother started chemotherapy right before Christmas and she handled it like a trooper, the regimen did put her in the hospital a couple times in the New Year as she got weaker. The roller coaster was whizzing at a rapid pace by then, but there was another monstrous hill looming on the horizon.

clack-clack-clack

Things changed when she started radiation. It completely broke her down and she spent the next month and a half in the hospital. Throughout it all, my father worked day and night to try to make our lives normal. He did his best to continue working as a middle school teacher and coach, while still finding time to prepare the meals, do our laundry, take us shopping and help us with our homework but it wore him thin doing all those things and spending time in the hospital visiting Mom till the wee hours of the night. We would do our best to go to school and work during the day and then rush off to the hospital to spend time with Mom, trying to make the most out of each visit. Each of us handled the twists and turns of the roller coaster track in our own unique ways. My dad has long been my role model, and my hero. He rose up to a new level beyond those titles during our early time on the roller coaster. He stayed strong and showed very little emotion towards us or Mom. As a child he was told by his uncle that crying made it hurt worse. He was thirteen when his uncle died. He has never cried for the loss of his uncle, and he did his best to hold it all together despite his own worries and fears for our benefit. He was a rock that we all relied on in the stormy seas. He never, ever gave up on my mom. He kept telling her to fight. He kept reminding her how much he loved her and how much we all needed

her. Dad handled Mom's cancer by stepping up and taking care of the family. My mom calls him her knight in shining armor, always there to protect her. His quirky sense of humor kept us going on some very dark days. He teased Mom about the Power Port her surgeon installed on the middle of her chest, saying she was just like Ironman. It was his love and support that kept us together and held us on the track as we rocketed through loops and dangerous obstacles.

My oldest sister, Taylor, remained very stoic through it all. As an intellectual, she researched it and then she simply said, "It's only cancer, it's beatable, and it won't kill you". She never outwardly thought twice about it. She never really shared with us how much she was hurting inside or how scared she truly was. However, the stress she was feeling became evident one day when she called my mom while she was in the hospital and cried because she could not find a parking space in the hospital parking lot. My mom talked with the nurse and they figured out a place for Taylor to park. Her endless sobbing actually made my mom laugh and it made my mom feel good that she could help her daughter, even from her hospital bed. Taylor dealt with my mother's illness by trying to avoid it and focus on other things; she still claims she never once doubted that Mom would win her battle with cancer.

My other sister, Katie, had the hardest time. Katie has wanted to be a doctor since third grade. So she was very supportive of Mom through this whole roller coaster ride. She was in the office when my mother got the news that she had cancer. Katie and Mom sat in the doctor's office and simply cried. I think Mom sent the rest of us a text message telling us it was not good news. Katie was with Mom and Dad for almost everything, her first CT scan, her first labs, her first consult with the surgeon and the oncologist, and she was there for Mom when Dad could not be. I look back on it now and am so glad that Mom did not have to go through all of that alone; she needed one of us there by her side. Katie would be the one to shuttle Mom to her radiation appointments as Mom could not drive as she got weaker and weaker. Katie was also the one that cleaned up the throw up and the diarrhea messes without ever complaining. There was one time when my mom had an incontinent bowel accident and her clothes were covered in yuck. Mom just stood there and cried not knowing what to do, but Katie jumped in, put two garbage bags over Mom's feet and walked her into the shower. Katie told Mom that it would be their little secret as she cleaned up the mess. Katie managed to get through Mom's struggle by being her caretaker and finding oncology as her first choice when she goes off to medical school.

I struggled with my mother's diagnosis in my own way. My mom kept asking me how I felt and I kept silent. I did not talk about it. Academically I faltered, losing focus in many of my classes and falling hopelessly behind in my pre-calculus class, drowning in my Advanced Placement courses. Athletically I struggled due to my lack of focus. Socially I was at a new school, having transferred just months before from Rainier to Yelm, and found myself adrift in a sea of unfamiliar faces. My mother's cancer buried me so deep I could not see daylight anymore. Roller coasters are supposed to be fun, a thrill ride, but for me this one was anything but that. I had been relying on my online social network, my friends from my old school, and the few new friends I had made at Yelm to express my feelings about my mother. I was posting on Facebook to my friends about how sick my mother was, how horrible it was to deal with a loved one fighting cancer, and how scared I was that I might actually lose my mother. It was not until my dad set up a Facebook account for my mother so that she would have something to do as she

sat during her pain ridden days. My mom, of course, friended my sisters and I. In time, my mom saw my Facebook postings which read like a painful open diary of my account with her cancer diagnosis, and we were finally able to talk. I told her that it is not fair that a child has to think about losing a parent before I had even really begun to live. It was during this time that we found how physically challenging it was for my mom to comfort me. She used to hold her baby boy close to her heart but now that I am six feet eight inches tall it is not so easy. It sounds kind of silly but I found it was easier to text her or email her sometimes as it was hard to sit and talk about how I was feeling. I was trying to stay strong like my hero, my dad. But in the end I did not do either very well. I dealt with my mom's cancer and the possibility of losing her by talking to others first through the emotionless safety of the Internet.

A family cancer diagnosis truly is like a roller coaster, with its highs and lows. We have experienced a slew of frightening times, only to find ourselves in the midst of unconditional love from our parents, or the growing apprehension for what twist or turn might lay ahead on the course, just out of sight.

I know that everybody deals with stress in different ways. This past year has tested my family to the very core. Some say that cancer can divide a family. We are fortunate; colon cancer brought my family even closer together, but one truth seems to stand out after all of this. Once you board the roller coaster of a cancer diagnosis, you can never get off, the ride just continues, and all you can do is learn to love your time together and enjoy the special hidden moments that happen along the way.

As for my mother, *clack-clack-clack*, Mom's last CT scan shows no active cancer in her colon—thank God—but, she has a spot on her lung that we are watching very closely. Cancer has taught us to appreciate life, to stop and smell the roses when we had been used to living life in the fast lane. As a family, we try to spend more time together and cherish the memories we have created. Individually, we are beginning to heal. My father and I even shared a long, cathartic tearful hug. I know I will never take my family for granted. My sisters and parents are too important to me. As I near the end of my high school career, my mother's cancer now has given me focus. Like my sister before me, I too, have decided to pursue the study of medicine in college because of this ordeal.

The Recital

Kaeli Earle

I am 12 years old and looking for a cello teacher. My mom has been taking me to one potential teacher after another, hoping I will find one that “clicks”. So far, none of them have been very appealing to me. One cello teacher has a house that smelled like cats; another makes me sit and listen to her play a solo before she even introduces herself. Most aggravating, though, is the way they have of talking directly to my mother and not me. What am I, chopped liver?? I am just about ready to give up when I met Pall.

Pall stands out immediately. His thick Icelandic accent and his shock of bushy white hair hint at a non-conformity that I instantly like. Best of all, he speaks to me—to my grimy, gangly, grumpy 12 year-old self. He makes me feel as though my opinions matter; as though I am just as important as any grown-up. He even asks me if I’d prefer to talk without my mother in the room, saying, “Sometimes, for independent children, parents can be embarrassing, no?” He’s so friendly. He’s so European! Right there, I decide that I like this stodgy, devil-may-care figure.

Fast-forward six years. It’s my senior year in high school, and after a tremendous amount of practicing, I am busy preparing for my upcoming senior recital. Everything is on-track. Everything is heading for success.

Except...

“You have what?” I jolt forward in my seat. The small room, where I’ve spent one hour per week for what seems like a lifetime, takes on a blackish tinge in my peripheral. I can’t believe this. It’s too much. It isn’t happening; it can’t happen; it is impossible, impossible, impossible. Not Pall. Not Pall. Not Pall.

“Pancreatic cancer. It’s a little late in the game—“ and here he pauses to chuckle, his blue eyes crinkling as if everything were all right—“but I am old anyway, so hey. Small loss, right? I am starting treatment next month. We will see. Don’t worry, Kaeli, I will still be able to get you ready for your senior recital.”

The contrast between what he says and what I feel couldn’t be greater. Who cares about the recital?! Never mind how much attention I’ve given it in the past. This is more important; much more important! In the time I’ve taken lessons from him, I have grown closer to him than I have to any other teacher. He has become more of a father to me than an instructor; someone I can talk to about everything—not only about music theory and bow technique, but about science, and

philosophy, and politics and religion and about how I am feeling. And now—? My brain goes silent. I had never, ever thought anything would ever happen to Pall, least of all cancer. This isn't happening. This can't happen. And yet despite how much I want it to go away, the cancer isn't going anywhere. There is nothing I can do.

Once he is diagnosed, his symptoms seem more and more frequent. I go home from every lesson in a worried fog, trying to focus on the upcoming recital only to come back the next week to find him even worse. Each hour brings a fresh wave of observations: he cuts our lessons off earlier; he is short on breath; he loses pound after pound until he seems like a crude model of his earlier self, his pale face all but disappearing into his patchy white beard. "I'm fine," he tells me. "It's just the treatment, you know. It takes all my energy. How is your practicing going?" How many people has he reassured? Does he really believe it himself? How long is this going to go on? I'm not sure whether to believe him or not, so I do what any other person would do in the face of a loved one's disease: I panic. I start bringing cookies to our lessons to "fatten him up". I make cards and write letters to him, wanting to give him hope. I pray.

And I practice. My senior recital suddenly becomes the most important thing in the world. I get home at four every day and head up to my room where my cello is waiting. I spend three hours a day, door closed, metronome ticking, in order to perfect a chromatic run, or to nail a three-octave shift. I try and remember everything I've ever learned from Pall: "The fastest way to learn to play fast is to play slow." "Play rule number one: stop. Play rule number two: don't stop." "You have a knack for interpretation, Kaeli, but you need to pay more attention to the notes." "French music? French music is dramatic, and light, and full of rubato! Save the strict tempos for the German music, like the Brahms. I do like the way you play the Brahms sonata, but the Saint-Saens concerto needs more work." I do as he says, working the sonatas, concertos, scherzos, allegrettos and trios 'til my fingers are rubbed black from the ebony fingerboard. Everything else fades away. I want nothing more than to give a top-notch performance for Pall, as though the music I make will erase the cancer growing inside him.

But not even the most piercing high note or the best treatment can eradicate it. The doctors caught the cancer too late. It has become metastatic, spreading throughout his lymphatic system and making a full recovery impossible. That much I know for certain; Pall won't tell me exactly how much longer he has because he doesn't want me to worry. In some ways, though, I worry more because that way I can only guess how he's doing. He starts using a wheelchair, telling me that it's "only because of the treatment". We skip lessons on days when he has to go to the hospital, and on days when we do have lessons they become shorter and shorter. He struggles to catch his breathe sometimes, and I wonder if the cancer has spread to his lungs. I don't know anything. I don't know anything.

I can't know anything; I am utterly in the dark, I am helpless, I cannot prevent this from happening to Pall, I cannot, I cannot, I cannot. I keep a close eye on him. Some days are better than others, while others—others, oh god, others are worse. I am no longer in denial, that's for sure. The ugly reality of cancer is right in front of me and there can be no avoiding it.

It is the day of my senior recital.

I am in the concert hall of the local Baptist church, dressed in black and white and greeting friends and family. I am nervous beyond measure. Pall hasn't shown up yet, and the program starts in 30 minutes. I will be playing pieces by Saint-Saens, Summer, Goens and Brahms; music I've worked for months to perfect. The room is buzzing with excitement, growing louder by the minute as more and more people enter—but where is Pall? I see my grandparents over by the door, chatting to themselves, and I am just about to greet them when he wheels in, pushed by his wife, Jane. He is gaunt, his eyes sunken into his white face, yet he breaks into a huge smile when he sees me and I can't help but smile back. "Congratulations, Kaeli!" he says. "Are you ready for your recital?" I can't say anything because suddenly there is a huge lump in my throat that is struggling to choke me. I give him a big hug and don't let go.

The concert is a huge success. I can hardly believe it: I hit the final note of the final piece and let the silence ricochet back and forth throughout the hall, lost in the quiet until the applause starts, small and pattering at first and then growing into an enormous roar of approval. It is deafening. The audience stands up whistling and cheering and yelling. For a moment I am disoriented until a wave of happiness hits me, nearly bowling me over: They liked it. They really liked it! They really, really liked it! The second I step off the stage I am surrounded by well-wishers who want to hug me and shake my hand and tell me how wonderful it was, and as much as I want to stay and absorb the praise, I want to see Pall more.

He is sitting in the back with Jane. They are talking quietly, but when he sees me approach he breaks it off and turns toward me. His smile is bigger than ever, stretching into his beard. His eyes are sunken but bright. His crows' feet crinkle, making his whole face light up. I don't even try to speak. What is there to say? Language is irrelevant at this point. There are no words to express how I feel: the passion of the music, the exhilaration of the applause, the gratitude I feel for Pall and the stinging sadness I feel at Pall's cancer. I am his musician. I am his student. I am his daughter.

"I'm proud of you, Kaeli," he tells me, "I am so proud of you." I cannot hold it in this time: I cry.

The Unexpected Goodbye

Blair Ballard

It doesn't happen how you think it would: no Hollywood dramatization, no flatline buzz, no hectic rush, no noticeable change; except everything is suddenly different. The wheezing stops and along with it, a sharp throbbing pain from inside my own body begins. No relief is felt; only the steady, pounding, crushing wave of grief as I struggle to clear my mind against the chaos bubbling inside and pressing in around me.

Whispers echo through the tightly compressed room, bounce off pastel wall paper, and seep into the flower printed cushions. Each rhythmic, uneven gasp of breath seems to be a painstaking journey to a minuscule and pointless sense of relief. I kneel on the cold tile floor and grasp my father's equally icy hand. Every last ounce of strength I thought I possessed seems to be leaving me. No longer attempting to choke back tears I gaze up at my father's hollow and sunken eyes. His breathing slows, signaling a closer end than I had ever imagined. I take a deep unsteady breath and try to speak, knowing that I have to be the strong one.

My last words to my father force their way through my lips. Its okay, you can go now, we'll be okay, you can go. His chest rises and shutters to a stop, the gasping no longer fills the room. Nothing feels real; theatrically my fingers rise up to my father's face, settling high on his neck, just below the jawbone. They search for a pulse, any last throbbing sign of life, but none is found.

I turn to stand feeling weak but no longer being able to handle the proximity to the cold, lifeless corpse beside me. Life seems to blur for awhile, thoughts passing at a million miles an hour, and then nothing at all. Gliding from one embrace to another, exhaustion surrounds me, but is overcome by endless raw emotion.

Finally some sort of comprehension returns and my mind settles into a steady stream of flashbacks. My father trying to help me during arts and crafts at an Indian Princess Meeting, before being hurried away by a 3'6" five year old me, because he was "messing it up" and "I [could] do it myself." Dad, ironically trying to teach typing to my second grade class, while he was a notorious two-finger-typer himself. My father picking me up in the middle of the day for a surprise 13th birthday lunch, and me striding out of the cafeteria like I was on top of the world, or at least the envy all of my peanut butter and jelly eating peers.

I come back to reality as I step outside into the warm sunshine to clear my head. I feel cold, a kind of unsettling chill that comes from within. The heat only barely penetrates the surface of my skin. A breeze sifts through the rose garden and I shiver as it passes over me. Arms wrap around me, but don't register who it is, my mind still a rush of grief and worry as I run through possible

future situations that now are missing a main character. My father, no longer beside me as I walk down the aisle; an empty chair at my high school graduation; taken from me as a young teenager and forever lost to cancer.

I think back over the past few months, from when both my father and I came down with the usual winter cough, to the monumental Thursday night we realized his “cold” was something more. My thoughts glide over the ironic birthday-gift diagnosis two short months before and settle on a steady beat of small moments; visiting nights in the hospital, consoling cards from my classmates, getting the call that daddy was finally coming home to our temporarily transformed TV room now with the help of hospice an at-home hospital. Coming back into the moment the familiar arms, still around my shoulders, guide me away from where I stand, moving me towards the car, towards reality, towards my future.

What Cancer Cannot Do

Rachel Binford

There is a saying that there are many things that cancer cannot do. It cannot cripple love, shatter hope, kill friendship, erode the spirit, take away faith, silence courage, destroy peace, suppress memories, or conquer the soul. I have found these things to be true.

It was in June of my 7th grade year, just as we were all looking forward to the freedom of summer in the coming weeks, that I was first diagnosed with leukemia. There had been signs, for instance, the bruises and the blood when I brushed my teeth. Those had seemed like such minor things. After all, what were a few unidentified bruises in someone as active as I was? I was always running around with my friends and I had just successfully finished my first year in gymnastics on the varsity team. I had good grades, everything was going great.

Then my mom started noticing the bruises. She is a nurse and she immediately thought the worst. I scoffed at the idea of going to the doctor. It was silly. She was just being paranoid from seeing too many cases in the E.R. She prevailed, however, and we went.

From the blood sample, they found that my platelets, or the blood cells that clot to prevent bleeding, were very low. They didn't suspect anything serious. It looked like a certain condition that could be treated overnight with an I.V. I would have to go to Children's Hospital in Seattle for the treatment.

I was not very happy about this. I had never had an I.V. It sounded bad. On top of this, I hated hospitals. How was I going to spend a whole night in one? I comforted myself with the thought of spending the next day in Seattle. I never would have imagined that I wouldn't leave the hospital again for two months.

When we first arrived at the hospital, they placed the I.V. and took their own blood sample just to confirm the diagnosis of the local doctor's office. It wasn't quite as bad as I expected. They gave us snacks and drinks and it was nice to just sit for a while together with my family.

Then a man walked into the room where we were waiting. His grim expression is still etched clearly in my mind. He said that they had found abnormal white blood cells, which almost always meant leukemia. My mom was bawling as he explained it to us. I was too stunned for anything. My throat was so thick I couldn't speak, couldn't swallow. They talked about chemo. They said my hair would fall out. I wasn't really understanding. My hair was long and blonde. I had been growing it out for years and it reached all the way down to my waist. The thought of cutting it was enough to make me cringe, but to fall out? Completely? Insanity. How could

they expect me to do this? I remember going up the elevator to the room my parents and I would share that night, I.V. pole in tow. A lady escorted us. I don't remember her face. I just remember that she was kind, and she was talking, but I couldn't understand her. One thing that she said sprang out at me. She told us that there was a camp in the summer for people like me, who had cancer. Cancer? What?

None of us got any sleep that night. It is true that we shared our room with a screaming baby, but it wouldn't have mattered. As I stared at the I.V. in my hand and the foam board taped to my arm to keep it straight, those words kept playing through my mind. It's cancer. I have cancer.

The doctors wanted to start treatment immediately, so I stayed in the hospital and my parents brought the things I needed from home. I wasn't allowed to go outside because my immune system was being knocked out. Just being in the outside air could give me a fungal infection. I wasn't even allowed to leave the floor because they kept the area so controlled. I couldn't believe I was supposed to spend my summer this way.

I got sick, couldn't eat, and lost weight. However, during that time, I found out how many friends I really had. The people at my school put together a poster that they all signed, which I hung in my room. Then they raised enough money to bring me a new iPod. My three best friends and my teacher came and surprised me with it. One of my dad's friends was able to get me a laptop. It was more than that though. It was how much people cared and the dear friends from my church who came to visit week after week. I was surrounded by love and truly blessed.

The cancer could not cripple love, it could not shatter hope, and it most certainly could not kill friendship.

After about seven months of treatment with week long breaks in between, we were finished. I had spent Thanksgiving, Christmas, and my 13th birthday in the hospital but I had gotten through. For Thanksgiving, my grandparents cooked food and brought it over on hot bricks so we could eat it warm. For Christmas, we brought over our fake mini tree for the room. I missed the most snow we had ever had at home, about 6 inches, but Seattle also received some snow, which I enjoyed from my window. For my birthday, all the nurses signed a poster and we celebrated from my room. Cancer cannot erode the spirit.

After everything was over, my life went back to normal; as close to normal as could be expected anyway. My hair grew back in, only now it was dark, curly, and short. I went to school and church. I had energy again. The only traces left were a scar from my line, basically an I.V. to my heart, and the doctor appointments to make sure that the cancer was still gone.

I was in the 10th grade when the cancer came back. It was a shock. I had been looking forward to having long hair for senior pictures in a few years. Not again!

This time I had to get radiation and chemo for a bone marrow transplant. We found, not one, but four perfect matches for the transplant. It was scheduled for March 17th, Saint Patrick's Day. I needed total body radiation and for me, this turned out to be much more difficult than the chemo, but luckily, also shorter. The transplant went well and I didn't have too many rejection issues. It was hard to go through all of this and often humiliating. This time I was also missing out on my high school years. It just didn't seem right.

During this time I relied heavily on God. My relationship with Him became so much sweeter and He gave me strength and peace. No, cancer cannot erode faith, silence courage or destroy peace.

The bone marrow transplant completely wiped out my immune system. I no longer had immunity to anything. Every cold or flu that I had caught, it was all gone. I had to start over. I had to get all of my shots again and miss my junior year of high school also. I was glad I didn't have to miss my senior year, though. I continued with my school work and I kept my memories close. The cancer could not suppress them.

Now I'm back in school for my senior year. Some things have changed. It's not the same. I haven't bounced back like the first time. The bone marrow transplant and other consequences from the treatment still make me tired and fatigued, even a year later. They told me it would be hard. Many things would become more difficult. They said that I might just want to take it easy and realize that I'm not going to be capable of some things as I used to be.

As I'm afraid is sometimes the case, I didn't quite believe them. I'm now taking half of my classes at college through the Running Start program and in high school I am taking all of the Advance Placement classes available for the courses I need. After missing so much, I am still on track to graduate with my class and am one of the top students in each of my courses, finishing my first college quarter with a 3.9 GPA. Working at a stable, riding horses in show jumping competitions, and volunteering at a rescue mission have been just a few of my extra activities. I am doing more now than ever before, not because it is easier but because I am stronger. I have a new determination and an appreciation for life and what really matters. I am so blessed to have discovered this early on and I believe that I can do more with my life now that I understand its value. Cancer has not conquered my soul.

There are many things that cancer cannot do. Yet ironically, there are many things that it has done for me. These are things that I would not trade, even to take it away. I have known true love and friendship, gained greater strength and faith, and I have learned to love life and to truly live it to the fullest. So in the end, what is won is of much greater worth than what was lost.