

# 2013 Cancer Unwrapped Winning Essays

## **3 to 11 Months**

*by Josiah Brubaker*

## **Backspace**

*by Rachel Clark*

## **Deteriorate**

*by MirAnnda Sullivan*

## **Dreams can pass through Cancer**

*by Tsehainesh Tilahun*

## **Life Lessons & Silk Underpants**

*by Jacqlyn Sams*

## **Listen**

*by Caitlyn Koester*

## **Strangely Beautiful**

*by Annika Dybevik*

## **The Match of a Lifetime**

*by Thanh Truong*

## **The Perfect Story**

*by Aron Daw*

## **The Wig**

*by Lauren Brigolin*

## **“Watching my Mom go Away”**

*by Bianca Ontiveros*

## 3 to 11 Months

*Josiah Brubaker*

It started out subtle, but eventually my family could tell that something was seriously wrong. For months my father had been acting differently. It began with a lack of motivation. He would lie on the couch late at night, and I would try to tell him to get up and go to bed. He always replied with “okay, I’m getting up”, but couldn't force his body to obey his words. He would sleep through his alarm, usually getting to work late or even skipping it altogether. At this point my family thought that it was just depression as his symptoms seemed to indicate. However, his condition quickly began to worsen. He often became nauseas, throwing up nearly every morning. He experienced chronic headaches, double vision, and an extreme lack of emotion. At this point, the doctors realized that this was something much more severe than depression.

It was a beautiful April day, and I had just gotten home from a high school tennis match. I saw my mother pacing back and forth on the front porch, and I approached her curiously. She looked me in the eyes and said, with difficulty, “we just found out. Your father has a brain tumor.” I quickly hugged her as she began to cry. The breath was forced out of my lungs, and I can honestly say that it was the scariest moment of my life. The next day my dad, mom, brother, sister, and I traveled to the hospital for the official diagnosis from an oncologist. It was an awfully quiet car ride. At the hospital we all crowded into a checkup room, and soon a doctor walked in, closing the door behind. The news wasn't good. My dad was diagnosed with a Glioblastoma multiforme stage 4 brain tumor- the worst kind. The tumor, as big as a tangerine, had formed directly in the center of his brain and surgery wasn't an option. The oncologist explained how there is no cure for this type of cancer, and that my dad could expect to live 3 to 11 months with radiation and chemotherapy treatments. The worst thing was that my dad displayed no emotion while we were told all these dreadful things. While we were all crying and scared, he sat still in his chair with a blank look on his face. We later learned that the tumor had been pressing against the part of his brain responsible for emotions.

For two days after initially hearing the news from my mother I couldn't bring myself to eat anything. I only told my best friend, Jake, about my dad's cancer. My previous concerns: advanced placement chemistry and European History exams, quickly became meaningless to me. I experienced insomnia and had trouble focusing in school. It was difficult to accept the fact that in less than a year, my dad would likely be gone. It was sad that he wouldn't live long enough to see me graduate from high school or become an Eagle Scout.

Within a week my dad had started taking steroids to reduce the swelling in his brain. I was responsible for driving him to and from the hospital for regular radiation treatments which, over time, caused his hair to fall out. The Chemotherapy made his face swell up like a balloon, and after a few months he lost most of the muscle in his arms and legs. My dad who, less than a year earlier had hiked with me on a 50 mile backpacking trip through the Cascade Mountains, was now physically unable to walk up a single flight of stairs.

Soon the news of my dad's cancer spread throughout our local community of Liberty Lake, WA. The amount of support that we received from the community was tremendous. Friends began

cooking meals for us, and our neighbors even built a raised garden in our yard complete with a fireplace. My dad has always enjoyed planting flowers and growing vegetables, so the garden was a source of therapy for him. His coworkers pitched in for a garden shed and a new flat screen television so that he could relax and enjoy watching sports. Fundraisers were organized at the local Athletic Club where my mom works to help pay for some of the medical costs not covered by his medical insurance. Letters from all our distant relatives came pouring in, and people would drop off flowers on the front porch. My dad often joked about the influx saying, "Look at all these flowers people are giving me! It might as well be my funeral!"

It is now 12 months after the original diagnosis, and my father has outlived the 3 to 11 month life expectancy. My family has begun to settle into a new "normal". Dealing with cancer is now a regular, everyday thing. My dad has started going back to work part time after initially taking several months off to "get things in order." He is unable to drive because of the high risk of seizure, so I drop him off and pick him up from work before and after school. Along with Chemotherapy, he takes monthly MRI scans and visits with oncologists and cancer specialists. So far the treatments have held back the tumor's growth, but the doctors have explained that soon the Chemo will stop working. I'm grateful that my dad has survived for so long (he should be able to attend my graduation in June). So far he has managed to beat the odds, but after each MRI the oncologist still gives the same life expectancy: "3 to 11 months."

# Backspace

*Rachel Clark*

I am embarrassed to write this essay.

I feel myself hesitate, fingers wavering suspended in midair over ebony keys.

Even now I picture you, my reader, reading this essay and I cringe. Maybe you have a latte on a rich mahogany table in a chic café of Seattle. Maybe you're in a posterless blank dorm room lying on a lumpy bed. Instinctively I want to cave my chest in, my arms itching as they eagerly strain to cross themselves and fabricate distance between you and I. Habitually I type honest words before my hand compulsively slips forward and I forcefully hit the backspace button, the familiar clacking sound filling my room.

I want you to understand, my old friend, the turmoil that overcame my life senior year; how long I fought, not comprehending the grief that swept through my life again.

But I don't want you, my dear brother, to understand; to know how far I let myself fall down the rabbit hole when I was supposed to be strong, a role model, okay.

My backspace key, smoothed to a reflecting onyx color from use, tempts me.

From the day my mother was diagnosed with cancer we were living on borrowed time. Someone had firmly glued our hourglass to a high table in an empty room. I watched the sand pour like water into pools below. No matter how desperately I clasped my hands together, destructive time flowed between the cracks of my fingers. As steady as the days passed I felt the warm sand grow lighter, losing substance, until I looked down and realized time is deserting me, and I am shivering now, I am terrified as the golden sand slips faster and further away from me, until I can see the impending end and the last grains are slithering out from the palm of my hand, and they are falling, and I am falling, and for a moment everything stops as she passes away. I was left with the overwhelming emptiness as my shocked fingers groped for more.

Now, my unknown reader, we fast forward nine years to my last year of high school as I will try to show you how things fell apart.

It started with an ordinary September; my dad had just remarried and our new lives were unfolding.

I worked harder than I ever had in October. I saw the inevitable end, college, and threw myself into school.

Then November a breath caught in my throat. I always trod on pins and needles, the rare thorn bringing back unexpected memories from my past with cancer, but this year her anniversary slashed into my conscience daily. Suddenly I was afraid and I didn't know what I was afraid of. It was horrible, my neighbor, crying without stop and losing my frayed tether to normal life. I

can still feel the constant pulsing ache I felt in those weeks as I tried to ignore the unexpected turbulence that rocked my world. I desperately searched for routine by vigorously working on applications, telling myself that one more hurdle and I will have made it; all these feelings will dissipate into thin air.

This continued until the early decision for my top college, Duke, came out on a gray December day. One of my friends adored constantly reminding me how many seconds were left until the 3:00pm release and reiterating that it didn't matter because I was going to get in anyway. With prodded anxiety, I scrapped my plan of waiting until I was within the sanctuary of my room, and instead I nervously checked after school as soon as I could. It felt as though my entire life had been rising to this climactic moment of rich accomplishment, so close I could hold out a hand to the radiance and feel the warmth. I was in! Stunned, I stopped at a grocery store parking lot on my way home to let it sink in as I repeated my achievement to myself, looping it through my ears. I sat in my dusty 1996 car and watched people carrying stiff paper bags spilling fruits and greens, watched with a new outlook because I was going to Duke. At least - that's what I thought would happen. But in reality I sat on that uncomfortably neither light nor dark overcast day and frantically searched for that satisfied perspective. I waited for overwhelming joy, beams of sweet sunlight to break through my being. Instead I found myself driving away unaware, pulling into my garage silently, crumpling onto my bed and crying each night. You know what I did, stranger? I told myself they were tears of relief, that this was normal. But what I thought had been a bright light at the end of the tunnel was a train.

January I lost sight of the end because my life goal had ended. I would rip open mail and unfold a letter of nomination for an award, smile, nod, and return to my room to cry. I aimlessly drifted through routine. My dad would go visit his wife, still living in a separate house up north, and I would wait to hear the garage door clank shut and scamper to a window to peer through the blinds as his van pulled away. I wanted to be left to my loneliness and to cry without fearing that he would hear. One night I shut off all the lights, my shadow only illuminated by my laptop's blue screen. I spent hours sitting on my bed clicking on each yellow folder icon in hope of finding any image labeled "mom". I scoured through the hard drive for remnants of her, looked for the charger for our old video camera, searched through our recorded files of her existence. My room is the hottest in my house, but I unsealed a window as the moon rose higher in the sky and that night stretched on. I could feel the tendrils of frigid air clawing towards me, cooling the dampness on my cheeks as I allowed my body to be swallowed by the raw cold. One day, you reader will be my dad, and I want you know that I needed that solitude. I was bitter, I felt cheated on. I had worked so hard and she was still not here. I was reaching milestones and what did it matter? She was still not here.

I battle the strong tug, dear reader, of my ring finger to that soft, easy backspace.

It got worse; I started missing days of school in February, shutting myself in my room for weekends at a time to not talk to anyone. I was brittle, parched clay, my friend, I could feel myself deteriorating as splinters of me shattered off. One stormy afternoon I stopped at my friend's house to talk to her mother. Chinese and not fully fluent in English, we spoke in disjointed phrases in her petite kitchen. She carefully watched me with those sad wondering eyes and told me she had heard my story. I reverted to my usual defensive echo as my eyes drifted

downward to the grape I was stripping of its tough peel, saying I was okay. Still gazing, she responded that it was still sad. The conversation diverged, but I remember leaving in torrents of rain as I ducked back into my car and sitting, trying to count back the days to when I was last sober of tears. I remember the sound of hammering pellets on my tin roof as I drove away, hurtling fast down the freeway and starting to sob. I sped forward, water streaming down my window, allowing myself to not be okay. But my personality had grown around the idyllic role model persona and I refused to sabotage that image. I sucked back my tears and plastered a smile on before arriving at my next destination.

In March I sank like a stone, spiraled further into my cycle. At some point, reader, you will be my friend and know what happened here. One day, I retreated back to my bedroom after school with a heavy face. Slumping onto my floor and letting gravity pull my limbs down, I faced the glow-in-the-dark stars spattered across my ceiling feeling insignificantly small and wondering why my penance had not ended, why I was holding all the tickets and grief was holding all the fines. I got on Facebook to message my friend and we casually chatted about her dress for prom. She asked me if I preferred a lilac mail order ensemble or a classy velvety purple gown. I would weep, dampening my keys, as I gave chirpy advice and used smiling emoticons that smiled patronizingly back at me. Some part of me hoped I would tell her. Everyday, every single day I wrote the same message to my friends asking for help. I would spend ten minutes carefully picking words as my laptop hummed. I stared at the harsh, crude text I had typed until it blurred, until I forced myself to rigidly press the delete button and watch the words ebb into oblivion.

How much I yearn to stiffly punch that backspace once more.

It was my birthday in April and I was turning eighteen, a legal adult. I cried driving to school asking where my mom was now I was all grown up. Stopping at red lights, I yanked down my mirror and frustrated, smeared away the water leaking down my face. I gritted my teeth during my math test to stop the loneliness from coming back, searching for emotionless logic in complex numbers. The day after my birthday I brought myself to visit her grave for the first time since she had been buried. It was a drizzly Saturday afternoon as I worked my way through the old town's traffic, tears uncertainly finding a way from my eyes seeking answers to answerless questions. I drove past the cemetery, U-turned, drove past again until I felt familiar enough to stop in a nearby neighborhood and walk the dirt path to the grassy hill dotted with trees and covered with stones. I floated around the mosaic of engraved granite using my childhood memory to draw me to her grave at the crest of the wave in the hill. I remembered being there at nine years old and not being able to cry, releasing doves by that sooty fence separating those who had passed from those living. I collapsed on the damp grass feeling the water instantly soak through my jeans and again there were no more tears; I had already cried so much. I picked out the mud collected in the smooth grooves of the Swiss Alps on her stone, moved to sweep away an ant crawling on the letters before thinking better of it. I left my college acceptance letter and a birthday card under a weighty pebble and watched the rain speckle on both, slowly filling in the pages until they were dark, saturated with water. I got up and left to write.

What happened next, you ask?

May will be prom. June will be graduation. One day I will finish college, get married, have a child.

I wish I could say that it got better after that, but still I struggle with my grief almost a decade after her death. In writing this essay I hope to understand and sort out my thoughts for you and me. It is seducingly easy for me to say that you, unknown reader, won't understand, mostly because I don't fully comprehend myself the distortion that happened this year. Already I glance up at the words on this document and nitpick at inadequate explanations. Already my fingers feel jumpy, nervously quivering in anticipation of deleting and trying to forget the words I have written. But something in me says: try, make them understand.

I feel my hands again drift to the backspace key, but I will press enter. It's time to move forward.

# Be Your Bravest!

*Kristin Thomas*

I first noticed something was wrong with Steve my Step dad when were goofing off one night. Sitting at opposite ends of the sofa, I had my legs stretched out over the middle cushion. He reached over and slapped my foot, then looked at me as to say, "What are you going to do about it?" I tried to stretch out to kick him in the leg but having short legs made that kind of hard to do. I was barely able to press my big toe against his leg, but he reacted like he had just been stabbed. I did not mean to hurt him, I saw tears in his eyes and I was scared. I wished I could take it back, I wished I had not tried to kick him.

I remember the day that Steve was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL) like it was yesterday. May 28, 2010, it was a Friday and we were getting out of school early for the Memorial Day Weekend. I was so excited; we were supposed to go camping. When I got home from school my grandma was at my house waiting for me. She told me that my mom had taken Steve to the doctor and she was going to be home late. Grandma said she was going to stay with me for awhile and that we would go out to dinner. We ate Mexican food.

When my older brother Tyler came home early I knew something was wrong. Tyler was 19 and he never came home right after work. My grandma and my brother were both sitting in the living room but they were not really talking. They would not tell me what was happening; I was really scared and mad. I wanted to shout at them, "I am 14 years old I am not a baby, tell me what is wrong!" I heard them start talking quietly and I was sure my grandma said "cancer". I really wanted to scream now, "Does Steve have cancer?" The only other person I ever knew with cancer was my Grandpa, but he died when I was only 4 years old. I had heard my mom tell Steve earlier in the week that she was going to make him see the doctor. She told Steve she was worried that he had Leukemia because he was having the same symptoms that her friends husband had when he was diagnosed with Leukemia. I do not think she knew that I had heard them talking. Was Leukemia the same thing as cancer?

Finally my mom called. I could tell that she had been crying and that she was trying to sound cheerful. She asked to talk to my brother first and that made me really mad. I wanted her to talk to me first, I wanted to know what was happening, when was she coming home, were we still going camping or not? I asked if Steve was coming home with her and she got really quiet. She started to cry a little bit and said "no honey, he is not coming home with me today." I literally felt my stomach hit the floor, it felt like everything was spinning. I asked her "why not?" and she told me that he was very sick and the doctor's want to keep him at the hospital for a little while. "What's Leukemia?" I could tell she did not know what to say when I asked that question. "It is cancer of the blood" is all she said.

When mom got home we met her out in the kitchen. Seeing her made me start to cry, Tyler started crying too. She had not said the words yet, she did not have to say them, we already knew. Tyler asked if Steve was going to die. The room started spinning again, I felt my stomach dropping, and it was as if I was under water hearing people talk. "He can't die, he's supposed to be my dad, what about the adoption, what's going to happen to me?" I heard the words but I was

not sure if I was actually saying them or not. This can't be happening, why was this happening? Why do bad things happen to good people?

Steve was legally just my Step dad but to me he was my dad. My real father turned his back on me when I was only 10 years old. I could not lose Steve too. Mom promised me that they would do everything they could to make sure that nothing interfered with Steve adopting me and legally becoming my Dad. I was still going to be Kristin Thomas, she promised.

Mom sat both Tyler and me down at the table and she started explaining what was going on. She explained that Steve had been diagnosed with a very aggressive form of Leukemia. The doctors were going to do everything they could to kill the bad cancer cells. He was already having his first Chemo treatment when she left the hospital to come home. She told us that the next couple of weeks were very critical for Steve and that he needed all of us to be strong for him. She said the best thing we could do for Steve was to take care of everything at home and to take care of each other so he did not have to worry about us.

The next day mom and I went to visit Steve. We took him some of his own clothes so he would not have to wear the hospital stuff all the time. I freaked out a little bit when I saw him. He had these tubes sticking out of his arm with IV bags hooked up to it. Steve told me it was called a PICC line or a "catheter" that went thru his veins all the way from his arm to his heart. This is what they used to give him his Chemotherapy and IV fluids. He looked like an alien! I still did not realize just how much our lives were was going to change.

Twenty Eight days, that's how long Steve was in the hospital. My adoption hearing was set for July 2010 but no one knew if Steve was going to be out of the hospital or not. I was scared he would die; I just knew that he was not going to be able to adopt me. I hated cancer. Cancer was trying to keep me from having a real dad, one that wanted me, one that loved me. I could not believe it when my mom came home one day and told me that our Attorney had talked to the Judge and the Judge had agreed to do the adoption immediately. We were going to the Judge's chambers the next morning and he was going to perform the adoption with Steve over the phone from his hospital bed. June 16, 2010 my wish came true, I had a real dad and I knew that he loved me very much. My last name was changed and now I, my mom and my dad all had the same last name. Cancer did not get to take that away from us.

It has been almost three years since my dad was first diagnosed with ALL. I am now 17 years old and a senior in High School. My dad received a stem cell transplant in January 2011. He has been in remission since that time but he is not free and clear yet. I still haven't fully relaxed. Every time my dad has blood work done we hold our breath until the results come back cancer free. He is suffering from Graft vs. Host Disease (GVHD) of the skin. His donor cells are attacking his body and he is fighting rejection. Some days he looks like he is severely sunburned. Other days it looks like he has extreme cases of Eczema. His appearance has changed so much; he has lost over 70 pounds and he looks like he has aged 10 years.

Every day I still worry about when he is going to get sick again. I spend more time at home than most teenagers do. What if I am out with my friends and he gets sick or my mom needs me to help her with the animals? Even though my parents encourage me to live my life and not to

worry about them, I can't help it. I learned at a young age to worry. I learned to not take my family for granted, to appreciate and love them. When I would leave the hospital after visiting my dad he always said "Be Your Bravest" and I would say it back to him.

As horrible as cancer is, my parents never questioned why? I never heard my dad say "why me?" I remember listening to my mom talk to someone on the phone and she said that she believed this happened to our family because we had what it took to get through this. She said that this was a wake up call that we needed to slow down, we needed to appreciate all the good things we have and to not dwell on the bad things. She always reminded me that no matter how unfair I thought all of this was or how much it all sucked that there would always be someone who had worse things they were dealing with. I learned to have empathy and compassion for others because of this experience. My parents never stopped laughing; they never gave in to the evils of Cancer. I now know that as I begin preparing to move onto the next step in my life that I have the strength to be successful. I have the character to take on any challenge that comes my way. You never know how strong you are until you are forced to be your strongest. Continue to be your bravest dad, I am.

# Deteriorate

*MirAnnda Sullivan*

Have you ever met an independent woman? The kind that wants separate banking from her husband, could live on her own if she needed to, turned down three engagements because she didn't want to settle down, traveled alone while back packing through Europe, or after getting pregnant saying to her future husband, "We could get married but, it's fine if you don't want to I will raise her on my own," without any qualm. That was my mother. She was strong and independent but I won't say this was always a good thing, because it wasn't. I won't say she was a perfect mother, because there is no such thing, but she tried her hardest.

My mom found out she had non Hodgkins lymphoma when I was at the end of my seventh grade year of middle school. I have never been religious, but while my mom had cancer I prayed from time to time, although honestly my prayers often turned to curses by the end, and sometimes even at the beginning. Watching her go through cancer was nothing like I could imagine. I only knew Cancer by what I had seen in the movies. It did not give me hope; there were no profound life realizations that were learned; I was not proud of her bravery in facing her mortality, although I am now, and I did not feel the sudden urge to band together as a family and "get through this." What I wanted to do was run away, and that is exactly what I did in my head.

While my mom suffered from this disease, I thought of nothing but ignoring the reality of it. I had been so afraid of my mom, as kids so often are, but watching this woman, who had been so formidable, waste away and in the end appear as an ancient, shriveled nearly unrecognizable human being, so disturbed me that I could not face her or the disease. While she struggled with all her might, I could not even look her in the eyes. I could not comprehend the immense will it took to fight the disease until it was too late. Even though watching someone go through that was hard, the experience itself was probably heart wrenching for her. She was stripped of the person she had always been and still showed a strong face. A determination and strength I could never imitate. Even with that though, no matter how strong her will seemed, will alone could not stop the cancerous cells. Have you ever seen a piece of paper deteriorate in water? It looks fine as the paper slowly soaks in the liquid. Wet yes, maybe weaker, but not unreadable or usable if it dries, but then the paper starts to tear. If you look away too long it is suddenly ripped into a whole bunch of smaller pieces, and then smaller, until there's almost nothing left resembling the original piece. This is how I saw my mother deteriorate and dissipate when she finally came home to spend her final days. I could smell the stale, sickly death in the room where she lay. When I finally mobilized my own will to look into her eyes, I saw no light, no spark of her former animate self. By this time, she couldn't talk anymore, and her spirit had so withdrawn from her body that I could not recognize her as my mother anymore. I thought back to the day not that long before, when my mom was first admitted to the hospital. At the time it wasn't all that important to me; it was just another day; my mother had been sick and it just did not signify

much at that moment. But now when I think about it, it was one of the only extremely clear memories I have that isn't muddled and clouded with guilt, self-suppression, and regret that so plagued me in the months and years that followed.

As I remember it, once my mom required hospitalization, she was lying in her hospital bed when I arrived with my sister, and after some visiting we heard noise coming from the window. We turned around to see a strange, gangly, large black bird sitting in her window. It really scared me, and I turned around to find my mother smiling from ear to ear and laughing. It seemed that they had built the new wing over a vulture's natural habitat. My mother actually found this harbinger of death to be one of the most hilarious notions ever. When we started laughing about it, it released the tension and I sat there laughing until I cried. It was so stupid, yet the most hilarious thing I had ever heard of-- vultures over a cancer wing. I looked over at my bald, fragile mother and suddenly I felt like she was the bravest and strongest person I had ever seen. She was literally laughing in the face of death. As she talked to the bird with a smile on her face, I felt like they were making a pact--a deal with death, if you will. In that moment I was suddenly placed with an assurance that everything would be fine. She had struck a deal. I just knew she would be ok in the end. It seemed like that, too, for a while. She had a miraculous remission and was looking good, everything seemed better for a month or two, then it all fell to pieces. Time seemed to dissipate like my mother's health. First, the doctors said three months, then a month, then a week, and then a couple days, and then she died. The night she came home with hospice I watched her carefully, finally facing her for the first time in months. I could smell it, see it, I knew it and I felt betrayed and angry with no one to scream at. I watched her dull pleading eyes fade slowly and her skin go cold. I sat there unable to register what had just happened. I sat and held her hand, and I honestly have no idea what happened next. My next real recollection was probably not till months later. I couldn't admit it to myself that if she had made a workable deal to stay alive, that the deal was somehow broken. When my mind had finally cleared I was hit with the fact that my mother had passed after more than a year of painful struggle, and I really had not been spiritually, emotionally or psychologically present to help her at all. In fact, my immaturity and inability to cope probably hurt her. I had no one to blame but myself and my lack of support and that damned vulture that reneged on the deal.

# Dreams can pass through Cancer

*Tsehainesh Tilahun*

I used to live in North Ethiopia, Gonder where it was hotter than the capital city Addis Abeba. Gonder is the place that has a lot of Orthodox Christian believers and has the fourth Ark of the Covenant. People around there were mostly lower class and labor workers. My neighbor Ms. Wubit who was short, medium size, and dark brown skin unemployed woman who also had three children. Her husband was a soldier but he past way eight years ago so Ms. Wubit stopped working since then to raise her children, she gets less money from the government until her all children start working. Her oldest daughter Hiwot was a nineteen years old girl who was tall and skinny with dark, long, soft hair and light brown skin color. She was a freshman in Gonder University in business major. Hiwot was a good daughter and a role model for her family and for people who lived around there because she was a responsible, helpful, understandable, and she was the most successful student. Her mother used to say that her green light is about to shine up soon. Green light represents hope and dream I guess this green light means her future goal and dream to have the better life and to get better education for her children is coming soon. She always thought that Hiwot was very important person in the family. She was the way to get a better life and to get rid of poorness. Everybody used to tell kids to follow her steps. We used to go to her house to get homework help when she came home for the weekend. But for the past two months she did not come home because she had a big test coming up soon so she had to study. After the test she came home, Ms. Wubit was so happy to see her because she didn't see her for two month; she was the only friend of her mother. When she came home for vacation, she usually helped younger kids with their homework and she spent time with her mom. The last time she came home for vacation something had changed, she was not the same person as she was before, because she was not really into helping kids, instead she kept complaining about headaches and she didn't want any one to speak loudly. We knew that too much work and too much studying gives people a headache, but hers was a little different. She was very stressed and worried a lot.

It was 10 o'clock in the morning, beautiful sunshiny morning; Ms. Wubit liked to be out and enjoy the sun. As always she was standing on the balcony thinking about something, I knew that she was not enjoying the sun as always. She was there physically but not mentally, by looking at her I could tell that she was worried about losing her hope, dream and everything, I can tell that the situation that is happening will affect her life a lot. I was walking slowly wondering what happened to her, I asked her but she didn't even notice that I was there. She kept thinking, I asked her again, she woke up and looked at me. Then she cried when she talk her voice come up with shaking and full of sadness "I have been work hard to help my children to let them have better education and to let them have better life more than mine, I have been alone since their father died but when this situation happen to me I couldn't believe it! , I never did something bad to anyone, I never wish something bad to anyone either, I have been praying and asking God to give me a chance to be in the high society." "What happen Ms. Wubit?" She said that her daughter has been complaining about a head ache a lot, she thought that she studied a lot that is why, but it was not, it was something unbelievable. They went to clinic because Hiwot wanted to check with a doctor "I thought she was pregnant that would have been better if she was." She

looked at me and she said, “But it was “Blood Cancer” I gasped, she cried I feel so shocked, I don’t know about blood cancer but the word “blood” scared me. No one had information or idea about blood cancer. It was an unfamiliar disease for the people who lived there. I have heard about skin and breast cancer but not blood cancer. Ms. Wubit asked me what things she should do with her sadness and hopeless voice, but I didn’t know anything either. She told me to go to Hiwot and talk to her. I went in, Hiwot was lying on the bed crying like a little girl, I told her to get up slowly, she woke up, her face was red with tears all over her face, blood coming out of her nose. She cried and cried, I wiped her tears and blood with my sleeves, and I gave her a hug. Then she said, “I have an appointment tomorrow with the doctor to get more information about it and to know about the treatments”. I said, “Everything is going to be ok! Don’t worry about anything. God is always with us” She kept on crying. “Shhh everything will be fine” she smiled and looked at me with sadness in her eyes. Even though she was sad and worried, she knew that her God would not let her down. Her mom came inside and joined us, she hugged her and cried. Later on I went home, my mom came back from work, I told her everything. She couldn’t believe it. Then my mom cooked enjera (Ethiopian food) and took it for them. In my culture if you feel sorry or happy for someone you take enjera to let them know that you care and that you are there for them. The next day Ms. Wubit and Hiwot went to a doctor. He said that blood cancer or Leukemia is actually a group of diseases, each of which impede with the normal functioning of blood cells and progressively weaken the system. The causes of blood cancers are exposure to radiation, exposure to chemicals, Human T-cell Leukemia Virus (HTLV), and genetic factors (chromosomal abnormalities). The symptoms are tiredness, bleeding, bruising, and fever. Hiwot has been struggle with these symptoms for the past three months. They heard all of this from the doctor it was unbelievable. They were wondering about the treatments also. He said “treating people with leukemia is very challenging. Because these are blood cells, leukemia cells are found throughout the body. Therefore, surgery alone cannot be used to treat this disease”. This was horrible news for them. He also said “Chemotherapy is the most effective method of leukemia cancer treatment. This might cost you \$30,000”. They immediately started to cry when they heard the amount of money they needed. It was really bad news for the whole family. My mom did everything she could to help them. After a few days health care members came and interviewed Hiwot. Then the health care worker reported to the whole country so they could give donations. She was on TV for two days asking for money for her treatment. Posters all over the country, everyone feeling sorry and praying for her. But there was not a lot of money donated. It was not enough to cover her treatment. After two weeks, this family heard great news from the capital city. The richest man in Ethiopia named Al Mudi promised to cover all expenses for the medication and for all treatments. This was the greatest news ever. He also came to visit her TV reporters, Journalists, cameramen and any others writers who wanted to interview him, so he gave a speech about the whole situation. He said, “We all have to show how much we care, how much we love someone, I mean she is a university student, we all expected her to be someone one day, so please we should stand up for each other, we should love and care for each other and we all have to have information about cancer, if we don’t know anything about it we will not protect ourselves from it. So please! Let us help our young children our future hope. Tomorrow when we pass they are the one who own the country, so we should take care of them to keep our tradition, culture and religion.” Hiwot got the medication, and all the treatments. Continues to learn, and she changed her major to medical field. She wants to be a cancer doctor. Al Mudi gave money every month for her mother until she graduated from university. Ms. Wubit

was really happy and said, “I knew that my God doesn’t let me down, I knew that my green light will start to glow again.”

I am so happy that Hiwot is still a role model not only her greatness but also a role model for cancer. After six month my family and I came to America then I celebrated my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. Now I know about cancer a lot, I know how it affect many others life, not only Hiwot but many others who did not even get help. I should stand and prepared to prevent this disease. We all have a responsibility to stand and help people. That is why I want to be a doctor. I want to help people and encourage others to stand up and help people.

# Life Lessons & Silk Underpants

*Jacqlyn Sams*

In my first week of Journalism class, I became the most hated writer in the school. My first piece was an opinion piece about a controversial topic, and my opinion did not correspond with the opinion of the general populace. The day the school paper came out, I was not welcomed back into the arms of a high school community proud of a sophomore expressing her opinion so vehemently, no. I was instead swept up in an eruption of angry e-mails, death glares, and the vilest of insults. I was even pulled out of my class to be reprimanded by a teacher and his mob of students, all of them pointing out every way in which my opinion is wrong and I should be ashamed of such wickedness. It got so bad that I just ran to my Journalism class, hid under the teacher's desk, and cried.

Luckily for me, I was visited by an angel. Well, not an angel exactly. His name was Alexander Keck, and he was a sophomore, like me. He was too tall and skinny to be an angel, with a shock of messy brown hair and a crooked smile. He must've heard me, though, for he sought me out, kneeled down, and asked me what's wrong. I explained, and the further I got into my story, the harder it was for the words to leave. I eventually just broke down and started crying again, and he just reached over and pulled me into a hug. He hugged me, a complete and utter stranger.

When I finally calmed down and started hiccupping, he reminded me how to laugh again. He sat next to me the entire hour and told me jokes and stories just to make me laugh. As the bell rung, we exchanged phone numbers, and continued to converse outside of school. He and I immediately became best friends.

As I got to know him better, I learned many things about him. I learned that he had a horrible taste in music, that he loves hot tubs and silk underwear (he prefers boxers), and that he hates the smell of oranges. I also learned that he had been battling liver cancer for five years and was currently in remission. It surprised me, really: he was so lively and energetic, there was no way he could be that sick.

But he was.

My junior year, his cancer returned, and he had to start the battle all over again. I even visited him personally in the Seattle Children's Hospital, and I still could not believe that he was sick. He had multiple IVs in his arms, and couldn't even move from the bed. Yet he still had enough energy to jokingly berate me on how tired I looked. He even had the gall to look me in the eyes and tell me that he was absolutely fine, in an attempt to alleviate my worry for his health.

So, we continued to talk and text; we even dated for a little while. His many hours spent alone in the hospital bed left him much time for musing: he and I would talk about life and death casually, and we would discuss the true nature of life and what it meant to live in a meaningful way. He told me that he wasn't afraid of dying itself, but that his death would hurt his family and

friends. He asked me that if he did die, that I would continue to love and be loved to make up for what he missed. And I promised him I would.

On October 2, 2012, Alexander Keck passed away. In the short time I knew him, Alex lived his life fully, and from that fateful day in Journalism, teleported me into his world and taught me how to be happy, despite the bad news that comes. That one time when we ate an entire gallon of ice cream together in the back of the movie theatre, he taught me how to let loose and live a little each day. During the summer, when we snuck out of our houses in the middle of the night just so we could play on a playground without any kids to get in the way, he taught me how to be both mature and childish. He taught me how to surround myself with things and people that I love when we sat in his backyard for four hours, staring at the stars and discussing how to be happy. But most importantly, as I watched him shiver and suffer in the confines of his hospital bed, he bestowed upon me his “most importantest life lesson ever:” he taught me to always wear nice underwear. Because you never know when you might need a doctor.

Even in his final moments, as I was whispering softly into the phone and his heart monitor kept beat in the background, he taught me to never be afraid of what’s to come, because life and death happen to all of us.

I am glad to say that Alex Keck has influenced my life in a positive way, and I am proud to call him my friend.

And as we were saying good-bye for the last time, he gave me one final life lesson: he said, “Jacqui, I need you to know... Do you remember when we met? What you said? ... Well, your opinion is wrong. Just kidding. I just wanted to remind you to always have the last laugh, otherwise I will.”

# Listen

*Caitlyn Koester*

One day in August 2010, my mother told my brother, father, and me that she thought she had cancer. A shocking statement to hear from any loved one, yet truer than we could have ever imagined at the time. Having felt a lump on her breast, we urged her to schedule an appointment with her doctor immediately. A phone call led to days of waiting, then weeks, then another phone call. More waiting led to the unsatisfying and even demeaning response from a nurse that my mother had just recently gotten a mammogram and it was unnecessary to have another any time soon. But don't they tell us in middle school health and high school biology that we should start doing self-checks from the time we hit puberty? Doesn't the news and television urge us to call our doctors at the slightest sign of something strange? Maybe these voices on the phone never heard those messages; at least, that was a reassuring, pretty little lie to believe at the time.

More time went by as leaves metamorphosed into warm hues of crimson and maize, and the value of the lump's possible threat diminished. "I think I have cancer" seemed to be less intense, less possible when my mother said it. "I know my body" was not heard by my brother and me as tennis, piano, and academics consumed our days and even most of our nights. We didn't hear her; more so, we didn't listen. Yet, along with the changing seasons, my mother noticed more changes in her lump. With renewed urgency in our concern we pleaded that she demand an appointment with a doctor. Once finally in, she was merely told that women her age experience these changes--no need to worry, and no reason to fret. Then why had it changed? Why did it hurt? Why can't this be checked, if only just to be safe? They didn't hear these questions; that is, they didn't hear them well enough act.

Holidays came and went, and on an otherwise regular school day my mother picked my brother and me up from school. "What did you do today?" we probably asked. It's hard to recall exactly what happened, for most vividly I can only recall my mother saying with more gravity than during any of the months previous that she had breast cancer; this time, at her regularly scheduled mammogram, that "women her age" thing turned out to be something that should have been detected by that "unnecessary" mammogram months earlier. It felt foreign to me, and it wasn't even in my body. How could it possibly feel for my mother, a woman who worked so hard to do everything right in life? It finally hit our family how she must have been feeling for the last five months, and sadness and anger set in.

The next five months were filled with events one should never have to watch a loved one endure. My petite 4' 12" mother underwent surgery on Valentines Day, losing the lump and all of the lymph nodes in her left arm. She started chemotherapy that caused her to loose tolerance for food, to loose too much weight, and to loose all of her hair. She was diagnosed with terminal stage-four cancer due to metastasis into her lung, and she went on pain medication and pills to

replenish her blood tissue with white blood cells. In summary, a series of unfortunate events ensued. A daughter should never have to watch her mother vomit at the smell of regular food. A son should never wake up at 5 AM to see his mother cringing and crying in extreme pain because the doctors didn't give her the right pain meds to buffer the bone marrow pills. A husband should never have to tell his wife she needs to let the rest of us do the chores that she adamantly wants to complete, her strong will and determination amazing us all. A family should never see a loved one's bald head, raw from radiation treatment, suddenly become covered in shingles. A woman should never have to be told by a doctor that she only has two to four years left to live. It's hard to see your dad truly cry in front of you for the first time, and it's hard to see your mother, the strongest surest figure in your life, become so vulnerable. These were the times when we listened with the most attentive ears on earth to everything she said; these were the times when doctors, neighbors, sales clerks, and strangers on the streets listened as well. A baldhead does not lie, and such changes in a human being's life and health do not go unnoticed.

Another five months went by, then a whole year. My mother was eventually put on oral cancer medication in place of injected chemotherapy or radiation. All of her hair came back as soft as puppy fur, and her skin and appetite seemed to return to normal. She still had to deal with pain, fatigue, and other side effects of her medications, but on the surface one could start to argue that she was returning to cancerless health. My dad continued on with his six-days-a-week job, my brother went on with tennis and political internships, and I went on with music and finishing my last year and a half of high school. These were the times when we started to listen less. My mother still had cancer—she still has cancer—but we weren't listening like we did when she was bald and vomiting. My mother started to express a lot of sadness, hurt, and anger about this. Arguments and disagreements accomplished nothing but my family feeling guilty and my mother feeling alone. For many months I felt her go emotionally downhill, and I didn't know what to do. Part of me feels like I tried but I didn't know what to do. Another part of me feels like I often didn't listen to what she was feeling—something I am wholeheartedly ashamed of.

Now, in 2013, my mother is still diagnosed with stage-four cancer, but she has built back strength and parts of her life and self that were lost during her first treatments. Nothing can ever make her or the rest of my family like we were before her diagnoses, but we have all learned tremendous lessons thus far. I honestly feel now like the emotional side of dealing with cancer is the hardest part; though the chemotherapy is the ugliest, coming to terms with such a tremendous change in yourself and feeling foreign in your own body is something that I believe no one can ever understand unless they have cancer. In recognition of this I hope every day to listen to my mother more; to truly listen and be the solid rock of assurance or soft pillow of love that she needs at any given time. I am not always successful, but I try to listen every single day.

For the longest time, no one listened to my mother. Not doctors, not strangers—not even her family, despite the unexplainably huge amount of love we have for her. So much good could

have been done if everyone would have listened sooner, and I urge anyone and everyone to listen more in their own lives. Listen to your grandparents and understand how they came to be the people they are; listen to your children and understand the struggles of finding yourself when you're young; listen to your parents and learn the lessons it took them years to realize; listen to the stranger, the friend, the sick and the healthy, the understood and the overlooked. If everyone can listen more, everyone can understand each other better. With understanding comes the ability to help, to mend, to soothe, to love, and to make our world, little by little, a greater place to live. Please; just listen.

# Strangely Beautiful

*Annika Dybevik*

A few years ago I would have thought my greatest achievement would be surviving cancer. Now I see that yet another battle loomed just as treatment ended. I read an article recently that cancer for teens is the “ultimate identify theft.” That was very true for me. My story? The following is a mix of excerpts taken from a diary of sorts I’ve kept about my cancer experience as a teen - from essays I’ve written, thoughts I’ve had and insights gained during my high school years. This will basically be me at varying levels of maturity :) I’m 17 now and see a much broader picture of my experience, and feel my cancer story has come full circle in many ways. I’m finally more of who I remember myself to be BEFORE cancer... yet better! And surprisingly, I’m grateful for the journey. My hope is that someone else going through what I did during the tumultuous teen years might be encouraged and inspired into turning something as negative as cancer into something positive. When a door closes, another is waiting to open...

## Strangely Beautiful

Thirteen, I am a teenager just a year shy of entering high school. Not thinking anything could happen to me, until it does. Cancer. I was diagnosed on New Year’s Eve 2008. Up until then, I was busy preparing for all the things I wanted to do in high school. But all those things were put on hold when the Doctor came in and said three little words that would change my life forever, “You have cancer.” I always knew what cancer was but never really put any real thought to it. When the doctor told me about my diagnosis, the main thing on my mind was “Does this mean I am going to lose my hair?” Being a teenage girl is hard enough, but being a BALD teenager was unheard of. I had a blank look on my face I’m sure. I decided I couldn’t take in anymore so I tuned the doctor’s words out and began to worry about something simpler like “What was I going to do for New Year’s Eve?!” In the back of my mind though, thoughts lingered... I honestly didn’t know what was going to happen to me.

I was diagnosed with Ewing’s Sarcoma, a rare bone cancer. Within 10 days, I found myself waking up at the crack of dawn and heading to Seattle Children’s. I had no idea this hospital existed until it became my second home. I remember walking into the OR where I had learned they were going to put me to sleep to put in a Hickman line (central line) and do a bone marrow tap. Everyone was so cheerful, cracking jokes, acting like nothing was wrong. This relaxed me. The last thing I remember was a nurse putting some weird mask over my face, telling me to breathe in “laughing gas” that didn’t make me laugh at all. Almost magically, I found myself in what seemed to be just moments later in a different wing of the hospital with some other girl named Ashley. I don’t remember her much because she was so sick on her side of the room.

Going into my first inpatient treatment the day after my surgery, I had no idea what to expect. I have to say that being thirteen and not yet touched by anyone's personal cancer experience, I was a very naïve. My mom I'm sure didn't want to scare me by sharing worst case scenarios either... I mean, "Who knows how each individual will respond to treatment?" I remember the nurse explaining what my first "medicine" was going to be and it had some long strange name that to this day I still cannot pronounce, so I just sat there nodding my head acting like I knew what was going on and interested in what she saying. All I really knew was that it was red and it would make me sick... but also save my life. Despite it all, I was weirdly excited to get going. I had new pajamas and fun things to do while I was in the hospital. My friends were going to visit... I was missing school! I remember telling my mom the night before as I was packing my stuff, "This is cool, kinda like going on a vacation!" But little did I know.

About 10 days into treatment, I went through the hair loss thing. I was lucky that my mom's friend Denise had experience helping other cancer patients through this difficult process. She helped me transition over several days with minor cuts and came late at night when I finally just had to have it all off. We laughed and cried through it all, my older sister Anna there too bolstering my spirits. In the days following after losing my hair, it became hard for me to feel "normal." I remember one afternoon my mom and I were watching So You Think You Can Dance? She could tell something was amiss and asked "What's wrong Annika?" But she knew the answer. I hated myself, I hated the way cancer was making me look, I hated feeling sick and most of all, I hated my friends for feeling uncomfortable around me. I didn't want to be treated differently; I just wanted to be "normal."

My life those nine months of treatment did have some perks. I would hear people throwing around the phrase "cancer card." Well, this is a great thing. Yeah, I know I said I didn't want people to feel bad for me... but one day I decided if I could get something out of that card once in awhile, I would totally make people feel bad for me! I first tried it out at a group event for Young Life. We were having an Easter egg hunt all over the neighborhood. If you collected the BIG eggs, you could win a gift card. I was on a mission to find those big eggs because of course I wanted a gift card. The time came when we traded in our eggs for cards and I ended up with Krispy Kreme and Subway. OK... I was not happy. What could be more boring! I wanted iTunes! I wanted Target! This was a bit selfish of me (a lot selfish of me) but I told myself, "No! You deserve iTunes! You are going through so much!" I walked up to the boy that won the iTunes gift card and said "So I can't eat at Subway and Krispy Kreme because of the bacteria in the food there. It will make me sick because I have cancer." That wasn't all true, but close enough. He said he didn't believe I had cancer. This was extremely mean of me but I lifted up my wig and showed him that I had no hair. Walla! He handed over the gift card. I could tell he was so embarrassed, but I was like YEAH! The cancer card works! I will admit I used the "card" a few more times but didn't take advantage of it, because all I really wanted to be was "normal."

I was in treatment from January to September 2009. Being so young and going through something so troublesome at an age where your peers are immature is really challenging. When I finished treatment at Seattle Children's, I began my high school experience a week or so into my freshman year. My friends had been telling me how much fun school was! Little did I know that first semester of 9th grade was going to be the hardest time of my high school experience. I walked into school that first day back with my best friend. We said our goodbyes and went off to our morning classes. After that, I never really saw her again. Yes, we would occasionally glance at one another in the hallways at school, but I knew we would never be the "sisters" we once were. I soon realized my friends from middle school were now strangers who I had memories with in the past. They had moved on. Although I had been given the "two thumbs up" that my cancer was in remission (and don't get me wrong, I truly was grateful) the expectation I had that my life would pick up where it left off 9 months earlier slowly dissolved.

Cancer for teens is indeed the "ultimate identity theft." Aside from friendships forever changed, I found the activities I once loved and helped define who I was were no longer there. Even the school I attended was different, with the teachers and office staff I cared so much about left behind. Before cancer, I was used to having a ton of friends and being really busy! Things such as soccer and leadership had been passions of mine. However due to the surgery I had during my treatment for cancer, I couldn't play soccer for an unsure amount of time and even then my future abilities on the field were uncertain. And because I missed the last 5 1/2 months of 8th grade other than occasional visits to the school, I had not been able to run for a freshman class leadership position. I felt like I only had a memory of who I used to be. I was a teenage girl with no hair, few friends and literally in the hospital one day and sitting in class the next. Things looked bleak. So many doors had slammed unexpectedly in my face.

I took a light schedule of classes my freshman year to help transition back to a "normal." One of the two electives I choose was choir, something I had never taken before. After a few months, thinking that I was ready for some extra-curricular activities, I decided to take voice lessons. I also tried out for the freshman school musical in the spring. These were things I never saw myself doing before cancer. That year I learned that I had a talent for singing and it brought me joy. As I moved on into my sophomore and junior years, I continued to audition for vocal groups and the school musicals, even finding myself as part of a duet that won State! My senior year, I was thrilled to learn that I not only received my first role in a high school musical, I was given the lead role – Maria in the Sound of Music. Being cast as the lead role in your high school play as a senior is an achievement to be proud of; however for me, it was more than that. Playing Maria represented so many things, a sort of reinvention of myself after cancer; finding a new "normal" and ultimately turning something negative into something positive.

I plan to major in Theatre Arts and Communications at college in the fall, and am so thankful to have even received several Visual and Performing Arts scholarships. It's amazing to think I

would have not found this glorious path had it not been for cancer. I am so excited about my future! This is just one of many doors that opened for me after others had closed. Sometimes God has a plan for our lives we don't understand at the time. I am incredibly grateful for the direction my life has taken, the true friendships I have and knowing what is important in life. While cancer is never to be taken lightly as far too many are not as lucky as I am to be a survivor, as I grew as a person in this journey and discovered a new normal, cancer turned into something strangely beautiful.

“We must be willing to let go of the life we have planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us” Joseph Campbell

# The Match of a Lifetime

*Thanh Truong*

I met my best friend Jack in seventh grade. It was at a school dance, and amid the movement of young dancers and covered by the sound of pumping music, he was just standing there. Everyone around him was having fun and grooving to the beat of Soulja boy while he was just standing motionless and had a look of utter confusion on his face. It looked like a field of grain bending at the force of a strong wind with the exception of one lone strand resisting the push of nature. At the time I looked at him and thought he was the weirdest kid I have ever seen in my life.

Two months later, I joined the school's wrestling team and surprisingly so did Jack. Despite my initial impressions of him, Jack and I were quick friends. We had become rivals on the mat. Our competitive natures kept pushing us to become as strong as possible. We were always evenly matched to the point that it drove me crazy that I could not beat him, but we were good friends all the same.

In high school, Jack and I were inseparable, we hung out all the time, his family basically claimed me as their "Asian son", and we were once again trying out for the wrestling team. At the beginning of our tenth grade season, it finally seemed like I was getting the upper hand on him. I was picking up the techniques much more quickly and for some reason Jack was not taking the conditioning as well as the others. Something odd was happening to him, he was getting headaches in the morning all the time and he could not wrestle to the best of his abilities at tournaments. We had ruled out pregnancy as the cause and we were pretty sure puberty was not it either. There was only one source of the problems that were causing Jack so much strife. Justin Bieber. It was a standing joke for a while that Justin Bieber had started Jack's headaches because the morning after we had watched his new movie in 3D, Jack's headaches began. And although we had always joked about his condition, Jack's mom seemed a little more worried than the rest of us.

A couple weeks after the end of wrestling season, Jack was going to the doctor to see what was going on with his head. I said my goodbyes with him and started my journey home. On the way home, I thought I saw Jack's mom's car driving by and as I was about to wave, the car crashed straight into the bumper of the car in front of it and rear ended by the car behind. I was not sure if it was her or not, but I was too scared to get involved and ran away. This was the first of many tragic events that struck Jack's life and one of my biggest regrets. I should have gone back to make sure his mom was okay, but I was too much of a coward. From that point on it seemed like life was a constant uphill battle for Jack.

That night, I received word from his parents saying that he had developed brain cancer and would need to go through surgery and chemo soon. I was shocked. Jack did not show up to school the next day and I was afraid that I had no way to help him through these troubled times he would soon face. How could someone as strong, smart, and energetic as Jack get something as destructive as cancer?

Once word got out about Jack, everyone asked me what was going on and how he was doing, but I was just as in the dark as they were. I felt so useless; everyone thought that I, the best friend, would have all the answers, but cancer had Jack and I pinned. Even though I was not the one diagnosed with it, cancer still affected my life in a negative way. I started to grow bitter towards the world. I found myself constantly asking “Why could not it have been me?” I wanted desperately to shoulder Jack’s burden for him. Unfortunately this was Jack’s match and his alone to wrestle.

Once Jack’s surgery was over, I went to visit him immediately. For some odd reason everyone that visited him felt the need to cry and sympathize for him. They could not tell, but Jack hated it. He was not dead, he was still the same guy everyone knew and loved. When I visited him I still joked around with him even if he could not talk and I got him gifts that really cheered him up. I made sure he still felt like a human being.

About a year later Jack finished his chemo therapy and was on his way to making an awesome recovery. He told me about the event Relay for Life, and I decided to make a team in his honor. I lead the team and we just barely made enough money to stay the night. Since Jack was not strong enough to walk, I made a promise to walk for the both of us and walk the whole 24 hours, a challenge that seemed easy enough. I had never been so wrong in my life.

Relay for Life was one of the hardest things I have ever had to endure. The first 5 hours of walking were pretty easy, but after walking the length of a marathon, your feet start to hurt, a lot. At night, my will seemed completely broken. I was crawling on the track in order to complete laps. I wanted nothing more than to stop and crawl into a ball and sleep. But I knew that cancer never sleeps, so neither should I. I made a promise to Jack to walk all night and I had to keep that promise. Before, I was forced to sit on the sidelines and watch Jack wrestle this demon, but now, I felt we were taking on this foe together. I walked a total of 150 laps that day, around 37.5 miles. I had never felt so tired in my life. But I knew that this tiredness was only a fraction of what Jack had to put up with.

Even though I was not the one who was diagnosed with it, cancer has forever changed my life. I have seen firsthand how destructive it can be to the human body and to the families affected. Jack can’t participate in sports anymore, but he still pushes me to be the best that I can be. I used to think that cancer was the worst thing to have ever happened to him, but I have now realized that it has made Jack even stronger. He may not see it yet, but I can see that the events that have transpired in the past few years will significantly affect his future. He will touch the hearts of many people who are dealing with the same situation he was in. Instead of being defeated by this daunting enemy, he decided to rise up and punch cancer square in the nose. I have never felt so honored to call someone like Jack my friend and brother.

# The Perfect Story

*Aron Daw*

When I was young, my older sister would babysit me. She had a babysitting kit, a carefully decorated box that she would use for all of her babysitting activities in the neighborhood. She would prepare crafts, play crazy games, make meals. And I would hold up my drawing to her and ask if she liked it. She would nod, and smile, and make me feel good about what I had done. And then she would tell me how to make it better. "Try to color in just one direction. It looks neater that way." She taught me how to become better. And I thought, "I'm going to be like my sister. I'm going to teach people how to be better."

As I got older my sister would ask me about school. She asked me what I was learning, talked about how much she enjoyed learning that when she was younger. She would talk to me about my friends and about the games we played at recess. She would talk to me about the cute girl sitting next to me in class. She was always engaged in our conversations, like she really wanted to know what I had to say. Being young, it was hard for me to appreciate her interest, but talking to her made me happy. It made me feel important. And the second grade version of me realized that I wanted to make people happy.

My sister sailed through high school. She was very smart, excelling in all subjects, but she still worked hard. My sister would sit on the couch, looking through Spanish flashcards multiple nights a week. She would do extra math problems until she was confident she could integrate any equation the teacher threw at her. She would go to Cross Country practice, study for Physics, work on an English project, finish her homework, and still be asleep by ten o'clock. Her dedication and work ethic was unmatched by anyone. At the time, I was finishing elementary school, not really understanding what hard work was. But I knew that my sister, who was the smartest person in the world, was working very hard.

My sister left for college and began to more visibly excel. She was one of the top runners on the collegiate team, her professors immediately fell in love with her continuing hard work and intellect, she made friends who grew to love her as much as I did.

And there the perfect story ends.

Suffering from back pain that was ending her running career, my sister went to the hospital. The doctors found a cyst inside of her the size of a small cantaloupe. They removed it successfully, and my sister resumed her focus on finals week at college. Then came a message: malignant cancer. And as fast as a batter hits a ball, those two words changed my sister's life forever. She returned home and met with numerous doctors. The cancer was rare, very rare. And twice as aggressive as it was rare. Chemotherapy began just a couple weeks after. And so my sister, who had raced through forests in the rain, who could run miles on end, who was beloved by professors and teachers alike, my older sister, my only sister, and my hero, was reduced to a hairless woman, hardly able to walk up and down the block, hardly able to focus enough to carry a conversation. For three months the treatment continued. But like a forest after a fire, she rose out of the ashes. Less than six weeks after the last treatment she began an internship. Her

coworkers and bosses praised her efficiency and effort, all the while she still wore scarves to cover her bald head. Less than four months out of chemo she ran a five kilometer race. Slowly, to be sure, but not too slowly; she had completed the race in twenty four minutes. And so she returned to school, a tree that lost its leaves in the winter, but budded anew in the spring.

And I watched my sister take on the world. Her branches spreading, demanding the storm winds to change their path. And I discovered something. Something I didn't know before. That version of me, the one that will stay with me forever, had a model of what trying hard meant. Had a model of what it meant to never give up. Had a model of how to succeed and rise up when something doesn't go right. And I had a model of what not only my sister had achieved, but what I could achieve. In spite of the world, I could achieve.

# The Wig

*Lauren Brigolin*

I was nine years old when my Grammie came to live with us! She gave up her teaching career, her house, and her friends to move from Detroit to Seattle for chemo and radiation after being diagnosed with breast cancer. She bravely underwent a bilateral mastectomy prior to the move. I was thrilled to have my Grammie come live with us but did not really understand what cancer; chemo and radiation were, except it seemed serious.

Prior to starting her treatments, my Grammie found a fantastic wig that looked remarkably like her short salt and peppery colored hair. After Grammie's first round of chemo, her hair started falling out in clumps. I remember her sitting quietly in the kitchen as my mom cut her hair very short so her bald spots would not be as obvious. I know she probably wanted to cry but she smiled at me and reminded me of the awesome wig she had waiting in the bathroom. Around the house she quite often wore a hat or a scarf but for fancy occasions she wore "the wig". It was nearing Christmas and my Grammie was feeling pretty strong, so to lift her spirits my mom and Grammie went downtown to do some holiday shopping. They were browsing in the cosmetics department at Nordstrom when a salesman called my mom over to try a new lipstick. Now, Grammie never wore a stitch of makeup but he called her over and insisted she needed to be pampered. He put some lipstick on my Grammie and said, "Oh, look how beautiful you look, young lady, now the final touches," and then he reached to fluff her hair and... Fhwhoop! He knocked her wig clear off! His face turned the most violent shade of red they had ever seen, and then he got all choked up. He ran around the counter and helped Grammie grab the wig. My mom and Grammie's eyes met, and the strange silence of the scene soon exploded into musical laughter. The joyous sound of a sick old woman mixed with the pure giggle of my mom filled the small make-up counter and interrupted the normal cha-chings, beeps, and murmurs of the Nordstrom store. Anyone who looked upon the two would've have thought they'd gone mad. The salesman, who was still emotional, excused himself for a few minutes to regain his composure, as the laughing attack continued. When he returned, with water daring to break the barrier of his eyelashes, his cheeks still a rosy red; he apologized profusely his voice cracking as he did so. Grammie could still hardly speak and contain herself from all the spontaneous laughter. She assured him that it was the best laugh she had enjoyed in months.

In the weeks following, Grammie returned to Nordstrom and ran into the same salesman. His face still turned the same hue of red and he told her it was one of the worst days of his life but she reassured him that it was one of the best days of hers! Every time my Grammie laughs and recounts her story, it reminds me that laughter is quite often the best medicine and to be careful whose hair you fluff, for it might just be "the wig"!

# “Watching my Mom go Away”

*Bianca Ontiveros*

My name is Bianca Ontiveros the only girl out of four children that my lovely mother had. As tears run down my cheeks I write this essay. October 2011 in the afternoon my mom gets a call from the doctor, my family and I were expecting for it to be good news but then as the time seemed like it slowed down the doctor says “I’m sorry Maria for what I have to tell you but we found cancer in your stomach” there is when time stopped. All of us were in shock and started crying including her, we never thought that my mother would have been diagnosed with cancer she was healthy, but this proves it can happen to anybody.

The first symptoms that my mom had were not being able to eat because as soon as she ate she vomited back the food. My mom started to lose a lot of weight and we started to worry and the doctors said it was a bacterium she had but not a lot could be done because she was pregnant. Sometimes I blame the doctors because they had done some tests on my mom and they said she had nothing. And when she went to a more specialized place they had found cancer in the stomach. The worst thing about this was that the cancer was already on stage four which is the worst stage in cancer; the doctors diagnosed it too late.

The first thing we did was search for help; we contacted doctors who specialize in treating cancer. Luckily we found doctors who were willing to help my mother; the first thing suggested for my mother was to take chemotherapy. As she took chemotherapy there were symptoms that it was just hard for us to see and in some cases it was devastating for my mother. One of the secondary effects of chemotherapy was the falling of hair follicles, feeling dizzy, weakness, nausea, tiredness and more. This was the most difficult part of the stage to get use to the chemotherapy.

A couple months after taking the chemotherapy we saw some improvement; my mom was eating again with no pain and no vomiting. We were happy, and so when the doctors did tests again it had showed the cancer to be reduced. So good were the results that the doctor said she could take a rest from the chemotherapy, I remember seeing my mom’s face with that sparkle again, that moment was beautiful. She was given three months almost four months without chemotherapy. We had faith that she was going to get through this just fine; as the months passed by we were filled with joy because we were sure that she was going to be cured.

Next thing we know the symptoms start to come back and that alarmed us. This time it was worse, the cancer was more advanced. She had to take chemotherapy again but it did not seem to be working as good as it did at the beginning. My mother became weaker and weaker each day, she had no strength and for the first time she fainted. When she told me about it I remember her saying how horrible it felt to faint, and how scared she was. I did not want to show my mom all the pain I was feeling for her, I had to stay strong for her.

Ever since she fainted it was more visits to the hospital my family and I practically lived in the hospital. I would stay with my mom in the hospital even if I had class the next day.

It is hard for me to talk or write about this. My mom was really tired so she decided to stop chemotherapy; the doctors had said that there was no solution anymore and that she only had a couple of months left. That was devastating for me, when they transported her to a Hospice was when I really started to feel even more depressed but I did not want to show it because I did not want my mom to see me suffering. The doctors had to place a tube down my mom's throat so when she vomited the tube would suck in all the liquid. My mom seemed so happy because she did not have to go through the process of vomiting, but the two days after she could not speak. The tube had irritated her throat; it was really sad trying to understand what she wanted to communicate to us.

On March 4th, 2013 at 2am my mom was taking her last breaths, the social worker had told us earlier to not be devastated in front of her because it would worry her. The social worker had told us to show my mom that we let her go in peace and that she has nothing to worry about. I could not take it, I cried so much that my eyes and my head started to hurt and people told me not to show it to my mom, it was easy for them to say it but they had no idea the pain I was feeling. My mom was breathing faster and faster and faster and—I saw her slowly go away from me, right there the world fell on me, I wanted to go with her. I did not want to let go of her, I stayed hugging her not wanting to let go. My mother was the most precious thing I had.

I could not go with my mom because I made a promise that I will take care of her baby Dylan who is 1 year old and Jose who is 9 years old, I was now a mother to them. For the first couple of weeks I was just locked in my room, I did not want to talk to anybody, I did not want to eat and neither go to school. Luckily there were a lot of people helping us with my younger siblings. One day then I realized that my mom does not want to see me suffering and that I need to stay strong for my family. So I got up and went to school, but at the same time I questioned myself "How will I go back to school? With what face? What will teachers and friend do when they see me? Will I be able to do it?" A lot of things went through my head but I know that my mom even though she was not there physically with me she was still helping me spiritually.

My lovely mother Maria Ontiveros, who rests in peace, was somebody to admire, she was seen as a person who stayed strong and never gave up. She was a mother who went through a lot; she came to the United States to give her future children (us) a brighter future. She worked in fields and warehouses and yet she still maintained to give her children all they needed. But the most precious thing that my mom could give us was her love. For many people my mom was a wise woman, the loving mother, the brave sister, the caring daughter, the best friend, she helped a lot of foundations especially St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

Me as a 12th grader, I decided way before my mom went away from me that I was going to dedicate my senior project to her. I decided to do a talent show to raise money for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital that night of March 29th, 2013 I raised almost 300 dollars. I knew my mom would be proud of me by helping out the children with cancer; the talent show was such a success that I people want me to do another one so in the summer I will be doing another talent show for the same cause. As part of my senior project I also am sending the children notes and letters of inspiration telling them to never give up. I plan on helping the children with cancer for the rest of my life; I will be sending them my song album singing them inspirational music. I

really do want to help people who have cancer, that is why I am also going to do Relay for Life in the summer.

I know my mom is proud of me right now. Attending the University of Washington will help me reach my goals and will make my mom feel even more proud of me. I want to go into medicine especially into Pediatrics to become a Pediatrician. I also want to do cancer research and maybe even put up a foundation in memory of my lovely mother. I also want to get maybe a minor in music, singing inspirational songs for the ones who are going through a hard time. I know a lot of people say this but I really mean it "I want to make a difference in the world and peoples lives."