

2014 Cancer Unwrapped Winning Essays

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Black Lungs & the Bic-Lighter Phoenix

Alona Stroup

These veins run wild with witching hour alcohol and cigarette ashes. But they aren't mine. I am not the Bic-lighter phoenix of this dark room. That is my Daddy. There he is at the end of the day, as a pile of ashes in his ashtray. I'm still here, rooted to the hardwood floor, waiting for that phoenix to rise again, instead of burning out.

When they told me his lungs were black like soot, and the tumor was the size of a kitchen sponge, I disappeared into myself. I went to that place where every child hides when they make a castle out of cardboard boxes, that same place that teenagers hide in their headphones when the fighting outside their bedroom door becomes too loud. They tell me I sat in the backyard for hours, pulling the grass up by fat fistfuls like a baby.

Hospital waiting rooms epitomize my childhood. They were my nursery. Their hard, homologous seats were my cradle, copies of "Homes and Gardens", and faded "Highlights" with all the pictures already colored in, were my baby books. Illness was the center of my life. My mother was afflicted with a disease called MSA that took her life when I was fifteen, and my father lost his life to lung cancer a month ago. I am sixteen. I have seen a man and a woman lose all they ever had; homes, families, possessions, abilities, hope, and in one climactic fell swoop, their lives. This has left me with much to contemplate.

First, who was my father? What is it that I lost?

My father had a big, green, dragon tattoo on his left arm. My father made everyone happy. Except, of course, when he didn't. He wore big, red and yellow clown shoes to chemotherapy. He also drank himself to oblivion. He rewrote all the words to every Christmas song to make me laugh, and made friends with every person he met. He also drove my brothers away with his fists and his slurred threats and hate. He took me to the Portland rose gardens and bought me my first guitar. He guzzled beers by the twelve pack at four in the morning as if the meaning of life could be found at the sludgy bottom. He taught me the Tao Te Ching and how to draw. He pounded me into the ground with words so quick, sharp and copious they left me gasping for air. I say these things in all their ugly juxtaposition in an effort to avoid the patterned fallacy of the mourning, this being the tendency to saint the dead, and put aside all their flaws out of misguided "respect". I respected my father for all his utter humanity in the basest sense of the term, encompassing all of its flawed ambit. Though this may have hurt at times, I would still curl up at his feet like a dog for him to tell me he loved me just one more time.

My father's drinking was as old as time and as deeply rooted as an old growth oak. It ran in his blood like wild horses, and came out of his mouth like dirt from a gravedigger's shovel... wrought with gravel and cigarette butts, and muddy with twilight beers. I became lost in a cardboard castle slum, in a sepulcher of mixed values, lost innocence and quickly dissipating naivety. It's an age-old story with a recurring theme of recurring flaws. Father to daughter, father to son, on and on like a mad spiral. Everyone tries to defy it in their own way, yet we all succumb in one way or another to the combined foe that is nature and nurture. My fight has left me with a history of having a flask hidden in my bedroom, burn scars on my arms, and what my

family has coined as “aggressive independence”.

However, as this archetypal apologue was unfurling its archaic wings and preparing to take my family and I off into the world of every poster ever pasted on the back of a high school counselor’s door, there came a twist. My father quit drinking. Cold turkey. Clean cut. Stopped. He looked inside and found himself to be Taoist, and took up painting again. My brothers didn’t trust his newfound change, but I did. Perhaps I am naïve. I put all my faith and love and hope into learning how to be a daughter. In seeing my father rise from the ashes of his own disgrace, I set all that I am on the back of a phoenix, and watched it soar.

He was sober just over a year when he was diagnosed with stage three, non-small cell lung cancer. Irony stomped on my life like a cruel man’s foot on the tail of a fleeing mouse.

With illness comes a breaker of emotions, ready to swallow the mourning and wash them away from all they thought they knew. The cruelest of these emotions is not agony, nor hate, nor despair. The cruelest emotion is hope, and hope relies on blind faith in remainders. The chemo and radiation fails, and all your father’s hair falls out and you see him bald. He now emblemizes his disease, he is now one with his affliction and you are one with a cliché titled “loved ones”. His eyes, full to the brim with love and tears and that cruel hope, like a river swollen from rain...they are the remainders, the stagnant stump of what once was, that hope hooks her claws into. When his legs give out, and you stand taller than a man you had always looked up to, what remains? His hands remain. They hold yours tight; the calluses you are so familiar with from his years of construction work are gone, leaving them cold and soft from lack of circulation. Hope is what makes you cling to these remainders as if they mean something. As if him squeezing your hand is a signifier of the past and the present and the future all balled up into a hard knot of hope in the pit of your stomach, and that means he will get better. No, you’ve been dreaming that he will never see you graduate from high school. No, child, calm down, your Daddy will be there to walk you down the aisle if you get married. It doesn’t end here.

Hope kept me going like that last hit keeps an addict soaring up up up until they come crashing down down down and they need more more more to make it through the hour. I was so stoned on hope that it didn’t hurt me when he became paralyzed from the waist down, because hope whispered in my ear he will walk again. Or when he got bedsores, (hope says he will heal). Or when he received that nice, cushy “comfort pack” of morphine cocktails from hospice to ease the pain (hope says to me his eyes will focus again, he’ll come up through the fog to be my Daddy again). My father’s cancer was a back-burner issue to me for quite a while, because in the midst of all this my mother died. I was convinced that life wouldn’t be so cruel as to take both my parents from me, right? After all, my father and I had just dug ourselves out of the tomb of the past. Our faces were upturned to the future; the morning sun was shining on our tear-stained cheeks. We were going to be happy for the first time.

Eventually, his hands that held mine so tight seemed to crumble away like ashes. His body bent and fell to a pile. His bright blue eyes didn’t burnt quite as hot, though they looked at me with love so whole and all-consuming I became acutely aware of all the time I had spent pretending I wasn’t losing everything.

I don't know why I am not one of those heated advocates of hunting down the "cure for cancer". I don't do lung cancer runs and I don't donate money to organizations. Perhaps, to me, my father was more important than the cancer that took his life. My emphasis was not placed on his illness, but on his being. Perhaps he needed to burn out for some reason that I don't understand yet. I will not say that I don't want anyone else to have to go through what I have gone through. Because there are things that I understand that no one I have met understands. And I would not understand them if my life had not caused me so much grief. This may seem callus, but I am an advocate of raw truth. The raw truth is humans are not kind, no one is good, and life is crueler to some than it is to others. The grotesque and the beautiful are business partners, dealing in the business of life and death. I am not selfless. I am not saintly. I do not shrug off the things that hurt me. I am angry that this is the lot that life has given me, but I am willing to accept that I just don't understand the universe's motives. My mind is swollen with rage and grief, but I am willing to say that I am selfish, unkind, and unthinking.

The aftermath of cancer's victory on a body is an ugly thing. Blame is an invention of those unable to accept the grotesque portions of their own psyche. The scapegoat is the invention of those hopelessly lost in their search for answers. I stayed out of all this. I never asked for a thing. I never looked at the cigarettes my Daddy smoked when his oxygen machine wasn't turned on with anything resembling resentment, hate, or blame. I just handed him his lighter and opened the window to let out the smoke. My father asked me to sit on his bed with him, and he gave me his guitars, because I was the one who should have them. He smiled and warned me that I could have his bomber jacket...but I should just be aware that it would make me look like the Fonz. I laughed, and we watched our favorite movies together. To me, blame wasn't worth the trouble. All I wanted to do was lay in the back room and drink chocolate milk like we did when I was a kid. I got all that I wanted from my Dad before he died. We may not have had the chance to walk off into the horizon of the future, but at least we got to see the sun set on our pasts, and the sun rise on what could have been.

I have tried to find the beauty in death. Where does it hide? After all of this, how does it still elude me? Is it in that last, shallow breath? Is it in the unblinking eyes of a man in a hospital bed, surrounded by those he loves? Is it in a casket with the worms? Is it in that evanescent Xanadu so many people swear exists, with their arthritic feet just itching for a pair of them golden slippers to walk them golden streets? Is death simply a separation of the infinite from the finite? And is that beautiful?

And oh, the universe is so much larger than me and my pain and my thoughts. My father, in all his Buddhist self-contradiction, told me that attachment is the root of all pain. Then he told me he loved me, and told me not to be sad. And I would like to believe that people are phoenixes, and though he may not rise again on this horizon, he will rise again somewhere. I would like to think that it is impossible to burn out entirely.

Brianna

Sara Naughton

Brianna is 18-years old.

I am 18-years old.

Brianna had no hair when I met her. I had hair down to my shoulders when she met me. I was 5-years old when I learned that life isn't fair.

Brianna has always been shy, but I imagine walking into your first day of school with no locks would add a significant amount of nervousness to one's personality. Luckily, I didn't mind Brianna's absence in her appearance, because I knew right away that she would be my friend for life. God works in funny ways; that day, He decided to place an unfathomable amount of acceptance in my 5-year old self.

The cancer started in her stomach. The doctors said that they caught it just in time; that if it had even one more day to grow, she would have been a goner. Countless trips to Pittsburgh for surgeries and treatment were made, and at 5-years old, Brianna would brush her hair before bed and watch clumps of chocolate colored strands fall to the floor after each stroke.

At 5-years old, I would scream and cry while my mom combed my hair before bed, so much so that she made me cut it short, so she wouldn't have to hear my irritating shrieks with each jerk of a tangle.

I don't remember ever talking to Brianna about the cancer. We talked about other things, like horses, and mermaids, and how we would both love to meet Harriet the Spy. I'd like to think that I was Brianna's escape from the pain, but I guess I don't really know. I talk to Brianna a lot. We don't talk about the cancer.

When we celebrated her fifth year "cancer-free" at Splash Lagoon, we were old enough to wear stylish bikinis to show off to the other girls our age. I remember excitedly changing in the dressing room, twisting my long hair into a braid, when I noticed Brianna still hadn't changed. At 12-years old, she was afraid to show her stomach. What would the others think of her nauseating, raw scar? She had regretted buying the bikini, regretted even considering wearing a swimsuit, and regretted having the party at all.

At 12-years old, I was worried other girls would think my stomach roll was gross, or that I was too pale. I was worried about popularity, and how others thought of my image.

But I would roll my eyes at Brianna's worries. "Stop," I said. "You are perfect. Every girl here wishes she had your body! No one will even notice the scar." Brianna winced just at the mention of it.

She overcame her fear, and to this day she rocks a bikini better than anyone I know. Sometimes

though, I will catch her covering her lower belly. I'd like to think that it's out of habit, but I'd be naïve to deny that she may still be fearful of what others will think of her scar. But I wish Brianna knew what people really think when they see her scar. What I think. She is an over-comer. She is full of faith and prideful in achieving her dreams. This girl...there aren't enough words in the world to describe all she is to me. She is inspiration. I have watched her grow up, from a 5-year old, to a 12-year old, to an 18-year old. I have watched her hair grow, and her scar fade. I have watched her take strides in a violin career that is now carrying her to college. I have watched her quietly serve her way through a successful tennis hobby, while maintaining a 4.0 GPA that includes AP and college classes. Did I mention she is a full-time nanny in the summers? "Well-rounded" describes Brianna to a T.

I've watched cancer go from something that defined Brianna, into a question asked by many: "Wait, what? She had cancer?!?" It truly is unbelievable, to look at her bright brown eyes and glowing smile and know that cancer once tried to take her down. Brianna is a fighter; cancer lost.

I've had a few distant family members lose their battle. And of course, I have many friends who've lost countless loved ones to the disease. I have been blessed and fortunate to have somehow escaped the aims of cancer thus far into my life; but I can't say for certain that in the future I will be able to say the same. I can hope, and pray, for myself and others around me, but there's always something. Cancer is a big something in today's world. However, at 5-years old, I learned something about cancer: it isn't invincible. It can be defeated. Brianna will carry the title "cancer-survivor" around for her whole life, and many will look at that fact as a burden. But Brianna, I know, now sees it as a gift. Cancer granted her the inner strength that many will never find. Brianna's cancer granted me a best friend that has taught me the definition of inspiration since day one.

Brianna's cancer is dead now. Brianna is 18-years old.

Flashback

Lorea Gwo

Silence filled the crowd. Anticipation drenched the air. It was a tied game, the bases were loaded, and every fan sat on the edge of their seat. Ichiro Suzuki, one of the greatest hitters of all time, was up next. All eyes were glued to the pitcher's mound, all minds anxiously waiting. All but mine.

I slowly lowered my lids. Complete darkness surrounded me as I sat behind home plate of Safeco field. The combination of the cool breeze gusting in from Puget Sound and the metal benches pressed against the back of my thighs shot goose bumps down my legs and an uncontrollable shiver erupted through my spine. I let my mind slip back ten years. I remembered my dad pulling me out of my third grade class at Somerset Elementary. "Lorea Gwo, please come down to the office. Your dad is waiting for you." My tiny hand stopped drawing, and I looked up to see twenty envious, doe-eyed classmates staring at me. Grinning uncontrollably, I dropped my crayon and grabbed my backpack sprinted out the door. At the end of the hall my dad and older brother waited for me in matching Ichiro jerseys. I broke into a run, almost tripping over my clumsy feet and jumped into my dad's arms as he effortlessly scooped me up and kissed me tenderly on the cheek. Pulled out of class for a Mariners game? I was the luckiest kid in the world. And my dad was unquestionably the coolest dad in the world.

Suddenly, the familiar scent of garlic fries wafted past my nose and jolted me back to the game from this brief reminiscence of my childhood. I closed my eyes again and let my mind travel forward three years. I thought about my dad. It was still tough to think about him without grieving. But here in these rare moments of serenity, I thought about the last moments I spent with him. How watching Mariners games by his hospital bed became more frequent than going to the actual games themselves and how I held his delicate hand at his bedside as we watched countless baseball games on the hospital television. Having the spirit of a young and healthy man, he cheered every time he was wheeled away into chemo and radiation treatments. I remember him sucking up his own fear in front of the family, reassuring us with nothing but smiles before every treatment cycle. It seemed like every day, when I would visit him at the hospital, he grew more unrecognizably emaciated. He would always look up at me with a glint of hope in his eyes, barely strong enough to push out a smile. He would promise me we would be back at Safeco Field soon, with the best seats in the house, the second he was healthy again. Sometimes I would believe him.

It turned out we never that opportunity to go to another family baseball game. Even so, I was grateful for the fifteen years of unforgettable memories. Somehow, through the most difficult times, my dad had raised me into a resilient, independent woman who appreciated every moment with her family. Although I wish my dad were here, I am forever grateful for these experiences, for they forced me to mature and molded me into a young girl precocious beyond my years.

My thoughts were interrupted by the explosion of cheers by the entire Safeco Field. Ichiro had hit a double! Everyone jumped to their feet cheering. We had finally stopped our losing streak!

Ecstatic and relieved, I turned my head and caught a glimpse of my brothers' eyes. At that moment I knew my dad was with us, enjoying the rare win with the whole stadium.

Grandpa's Hands

Hannah Mendro

His hands. That's what I'll always remember about him.

They were big – big enough to completely enclose mine, whether I was a little tiny four-year-old or a “big girl” sixth grader. I always used to call them “puffy,” and while in retrospect that sounds a little rude, to me it was always a compliment, never an insult. They were puffy – soft, gentle, and comfortable in addition to the strength and power I always knew they had.

There were a lot of reasons to hate the chemo, but my chief reason was the way it drained the puffiness from his hands, and covered them in painful sores. It went against all the laws of nature to see my grandpa's hands – his strong, wonderful hands – looking so thin and weak, fingers gruesomely decorated with wounds. Those were the times when I had the most fear.

They were protection, his hands. Whenever I was holding them, I always felt completely safe and taken care of. I'll never forget hiking with him, little four-year-old me scampering after him over gnarled roots and rocks and all the things over which I now tread carefully, fearlessly. And whenever we reached a creek crossing, or a wobbly log or big rock, my tiny hand would disappear inside his as he held me steady and helped me across.

Even when I grew older, and more fearful, his guiding hand never failed to make me feel safe. It helped, after he died, when I got my trekking pole (or, as I then called it, my “hiking crutch”), but it would never be a substitute for the strength and protection that was the grasp of his hand. I wasn't the only one he helped. There is a picture of him, me, and my little brother clambering over driftwood logs on the way to the water, my brother and I both holding tightly to his hands. Knowing he would keep us safe.

But it wasn't only the family, either. The world is a better place, thanks to my grandpa's capable hands. And not only because, in one of his great accomplishments, he created a Washington state beach cleanup which still occurs every year (of which, though I can't take any credit, I am still very proud), but simply because of everything he was willing to do. He was never afraid to work, never unwilling to help out, always ready to lend a helping hand, even if he did get those hands a little dirty in the process.

Those hands, which could handle oars to canoe across vast distances, helped my brother and me to build block towers higher than our heads on the living room floor. Those hands, which could swing a tennis racquet with ease, drew the pictures decorating the front pages of one of my old journals. Those hands held the chains of the swing, pulling me back very slowly and safely (“Holdonholdonholdonholdon . . .”), and then pushed against my back gently but with enough force to send me soaring skyward on the old yellow swing. And whenever I think of hiking, the first image in my mind is always those hands, either wrapped around a thermos of hot chocolate, pouring me a paper cup full, or holding mine, steadying me on the trail as I climb over rocks and logs.

I refuse to remember the hands ravaged by chemo. That wasn't him. That wasn't who he was, ever. All I ever need to think about is how, after every treatment, the strength of his hands always returned. They always filled out again, that puffiness returning, beating back the hurt. That warm puffiness that has always meant safety to me.

It's been years since he died – years since I've seen him, heard him, talked to him. Years since the last time I held his hand.

But that doesn't mean he's not still with me. It never will.

Because every time I'm lonely, in pain, or just standing before the next obstacle life throws at me, struggling to muster up the courage to climb over it, I can still feel his hand, closing around mine, big, puffy, and safe. Helping me to reach the top.

Growing Up Normal

Hannah Stulberg

I grew up in a normal household. Normal is an ambiguous word, encompassing a wide range of possibilities and situations – a word whose definition is defined by each person’s personal experience. For me, normal was being awakened in the middle of a school night to be told that my mother had to go back to the hospital. Normal was attending school the next day without mentioning a word about the previous night’s events to anyone. Normal was rarely consuming a home-cooked dinner, instead opening the refrigerator and freezer to see shelves stacked with shiny tinfoil pans of lasagna – the classic meal given to a family in need. Normal was seeing the wig sitting innocently on the nightstand. Normal was living in a constant state of uncertainty. Normal was growing up with a terminally ill mother, diagnosed with Stage IV ovarian cancer when I was five years old. Looking back, I realize that perhaps my situation was not quite normal at all.

The story of my own life is inexorably tied up in the story of my mother’s. From the minute of her diagnosis, my family’s life revolved almost solely around hers. Afflicted with such advanced cancer, a type with no known cure, the prospects seemed bleak – the prognosis was for her to live less than two years. Confronted with imminent death at such a young age, any possibility of a carefree childhood quickly disintegrated. Cancer is an insidious disease, physically residing in one person but affecting everyone – forcing each family member to undergo a personal struggle against the ailment. Together, my family chose to fight the battle against this illness – each of us contributed to the war-effort in a different manner. My mother subjected herself to numerous experimental drugs in hope that one would pan out. My dad worked tirelessly in a high-pressure job because the health benefits covered expensive treatments that prolonged my mother’s life. Realizing that the extent of their commitments left little time for parenting, I took on the responsibility of raising my younger brother and myself.

From the time I was six years old, I took care of my brother, Noah. The duties increased as I grew older, until it seemed that I was not only his older sister, but his mother as well. Assisting with homework, cooking dinner, organizing the schedule – these tasks became a part of my daily routine. My primary focus was ensuring Noah’s well-being. Though cancer destroyed any aspect of normalcy in our lives, I fought to give Noah a childhood he could remember with fondness. Throughout the dark storm of a story spattered by the poisonous stains of cancer, I tried to be the umbrella that would shield my brother from the harsh onslaught.

The spring of eighth grade began with what seemed to be a routine hospital stay for my mother. Suddenly, without warning, we received a call saying that her condition had worsened. Unexpectedly, our family of four became three. My mother’s death triggered my father’s slide into deep depression. With my father completely consumed by grief, my brother and I were left to fend for ourselves. For two years, I ran the household, attempting to maintain some semblance of normalcy in our tumultuous lives.

The human life is an equation – moments are added together, compounding second by second, until each person remains the sum of their personal experiences. True joy cannot be understood

without unbearable sadness, just as life's greatest struggles provide the backdrop against which to view the most bountiful rewards. Cancer forced me to uncover the deepest depths of myself, gifting me with a sense of maturity and allowing me to cultivate strength, ambition, compassion, and determination. The past defines who I am today, but the future remains a brightly beckoning road. My adolescence may have been unconventional, but I'm sure glad I didn't grow up normal.

I Believe in Miracles

Lidia Chiabai

When you find out that your cousin has cancer it feels scary and devastating and sad. Then when you find out your cousin's cancer is rare and it can't be cured, it feels just hopeless. My cousin Joey Luvera was only twelve years old when he was diagnosed with brain cancer. Joey was suffering from headaches at school and couldn't concentrate. His parents took him to the eye doctor because they thought he probably needed glasses. But, right away, the eye doctor saw something that didn't look normal and referred him to a brain specialist; that was scary.

When his parents took Joey to Children's Hospital in Seattle, there were no doctors who wanted to treat Joey's cancer because our grandpa Paul is a personal injury attorney and he has sued Children's Hospital and their doctors in the past. The doctors were afraid to help Joey because they didn't want to get sued. My Uncle Dan and Aunt Kelli felt devastated and didn't know where to turn. A wonderful doctor, named Dr. Ellenbogen, heard about Joey and offered to treat him. He said his job was to treat and take care of cancer patients and that's what he was going to do.

Dr. Ellenbogen found two tumors behind Joey's right eye in his brain. He helped Joey and my Aunt and Uncle make a treatment plan beginning with Chemo Therapy and Radiation. Joey had to be at Children's Hospital many days each week and his life became a ritual of car rides to the hospital, medical testing and only rare days did he get to attend school with his classmates. The Chemo therapy made him sick and he started to loose weight. It also did not do what it was supposed to do; it did not diminish the cancer. He became sick and could not eat. And, before Joey turned thirteen years old things began to get worse. Joey began to experience back pain and his doctor was concerned. He had to go through many more medical tests and doctor visits. It didn't take long to find out that Joey had another form of cancer. It was a rare cancer in his spinal fluids. Dr. Ellenbogen said there were two tumors shaped like a pencil one on top of the other. They could not operate on the spinal fluid because it was too risky. That was devastating

Dr. Ellenbogen wasn't going to give up. He took Joey's medical case to the Children's Hospital Tumor Board where a group of Oncologists review complex cancer cases and discuss treatment options, care issues and all aspects of cancer care. The Tumor Board recommended gamma knife surgery for Joey's brain cancer tumors and they made plans for the brain surgery right after that. Gamma knife surgery doesn't actually involve cutting out a brain tumor with a scalpel, it is uses high-energy gamma rays to pinpoint and destroy tumors. As a family, we were scared but hopeful of this procedure that could possibly save Joey's life.

When Joey was just fourteen years old he was fighting two types of cancer. One so deep in his brain that it was dangerous to try to get out and one in his spinal fluid that was so rare that not enough research had been done on it to know what to do. Joey was one of six people in North America that had this spinal cancer. When it was close to the time for surgery Joey went bravely to Children's Hospital to get it done, but Dr. Ellenbogen was waiting for him with more bad news. He told Joey that the gamma knife surgery could not be done on his brain tumors. They

were too close to the nerves of his eyes.

After another two years of chemotherapy, Joey saw Dr. Ellenbogen for the last time at Children's Hospital. At seventeen years old he was told that they had done everything that could be done but the cancer would not go away. He was sent home and hospice nurses came every day to help Joey with pain management and to help us as his family with the process of dying. What does it mean when your seventeen year old cousin is going to die? It was sad.

In November Joey got to have a huge party with all of his friends through the Make-A-Wish Foundation. His wish was to go to a Husky football game, but he was too sick to go. Retired Coach Jim Lambright heard about Joey and even though he was battling cancer himself at the time, Coach Lambright came to Joey's party. He gave Joey a Rose Bowl ring, a Husky football helmet and jersey and a football signed by all the Husky players. Joey sat in a chair and held Coach Lambright's hand. All of his friends from high school and his family were there. I think there were about 200 people there.

At Christmas time we had a party with Santa and presents, but I don't think Joey knew that he was even there. He was so thin and his eyes were so big. He lay on the couch and we all kissed him and held his hands. He had blankets piled on him and his favorite Huskies purple and gold ski cap on his bald head to keep him warm. We all took turns saying goodbye to him. We cried and we went home to wait I guess. I wish I knew what is the right thing to say or to do when someone is dying? It is so uncomfortable and scary. Then you feel guilty going home to go to bed to sleep knowing you will probably wake up tomorrow morning just fine, but Joey probably wouldn't wake up ever again.

After a few days, Joey began to eat a little bit. He told his parents that more than anything he wanted to graduate with his senior high school class. It was touching and sad, but the funny thing is that he kept saying it. Every day he told his parents he wanted to graduate with his class and every day he kept eating a little bit. We didn't think he would make it past Christmas Eve, but he kept on living and kept on talking about graduating from high school. How can someone be so strong on the inside that is so weak on the outside? Joey never lost hope. He believed so strongly that he was going to graduate with his class. Joey's mom looked at him and felt like he was getting better. At least she thought so. His parents took Joey back to see Dr. Ellenbogen. Joey had rare forms of cancer; so deadly that one in a million survives. Well Joey was that one in a million.

Dr. Ellenbogen did some tests on Joey and couldn't find the cancer in his brain or in his back. It was gone. After 6 long years of fighting cancer Joey had defeated it. Joey was cancer free and it was a miracle. And of course, Joey got to graduate with his class. His brother Tyler pushed his wheelchair across the podium and the high school Principal handed him his certificate of achievement. She gave the most beautiful speech on how brave and strong Joey was and how he never gave up. His classmates stood up for him and clapped as he held his certificate in his hand with his arm raised up high above his head. He was smiling so brightly that people cried.

After Joey finished his GED he began giving speeches at high schools talking to students about never giving up, to always have hope and to believe in your dreams. Joey made an impact on so

many lives. After he was completely well, he shaved his head in an assembly to raise money for cancer research and he still participates in the Walk for Life every single year. Cancer changed Joey's life; not only by the physical effects of the scoliosis he developed after the chemotherapy, and short-term memory loss caused by the pressure of the brain tumors, but cancer helped Joey find his passion to influence other peoples lives, including mine.

Mom, I See Two of You

Andrew Blumberg

Life was good. I was your average 8 year old boy looking forward to summer so I could ride my bike and hang out with my friends, but then something changed. I started throwing up. At first, it was every couple of days, and then daily. I remember going to countless doctors' appointments and test after test. I remember wishing I would just quit getting sick. Summer was coming, and I had stuff to do!

Then there was the night things took a turn. "Mom, I see two of you." I saw the fear in my mom's eyes. I said it with a small laugh, because it was so weird. My mom just stared at me. At the time, I couldn't quite read the look on her face. Panic, maybe.

I went back to the doctor. The doctor said my stomach biopsy came back normal, but now I was suffering from headaches, like thirty people yelling at me with every whisper, the pain unbearable. My mom spoke of my new symptoms to my doctor and he said we should make an appointment with a neurologist at Mary Bridge. He told her, "If you cannot get in, go to the Emergency Room in Tacoma." My mom called and was told I wouldn't get in until September. I had already lost a significant amount of weight, and was thin to begin with. The next morning my mom and grandma made the trip with me from my home in Cosmopolis to the ER in Tacoma. I remember stopping and throwing up on the way, which had become a routine the past two months. Looking back, I knew how scared my family was.

Within an hour of getting to the hospital, the doctors came in with the results of my tests. I remember lying there. My head hurt so badly and I kept my eyes closed, as even the smallest bit of light was excruciating. "We did find a tumor," the doctor said. My mom collapsed in a puddle of tears.

My diagnosis was medulloblastoma, an aggressive form of childhood brain cancer. I was immediately admitted to the PICU at Mary Bridge and scheduled for brain surgery the next day. The doctors and nurses were great about telling us what to expect after surgery and my first words when coming to were "hey, my neck isn't even sore!" That is me, a silver lining type of kid. Little did I know at that time, the pain medication would soon wear off. Wow, was my neck sore! My head was in a bandage and I had a tube draining the fluid from my brain. I was angry that I was even there in that hospital bed and felt horrible, like I no longer had any control over my mind and body.

Radiation and chemotherapy were next on my list of things to do-- not what I had anticipated for the summer vacation I had so much looked forward to and rightfully earned! I received radiation at UW Medical Center, full cranial and full spinal on my 41 pound body. I remember them telling me I wouldn't be sick the first couple of treatments, but after the very first, I was unable to even lift my head off my pillow.

I didn't think it was possible for me to be any sicker than I was before diagnosis. Wow, was I wrong! Radiation smelled liked rotten eggs. They would lay me face down on the table with my

head in a hard mesh mask. I felt trapped, and I wanted to leap from the bed and run. The smell was so horrible I couldn't get through the treatment without throwing up, so they began sedating me. I would awake with a waffle weave imprint on my face from the mask. I wanted to close my eyes and not wake up.

I had a feeding tube placed, as I was losing so much weight they had concerns I would not make it through the treatment. The feeding tube did help, but I hated it. I felt like people were staring at me. My pale blonde hair had fallen out in chunks and I was a strange shade of gray. I had a tube across my cheek and through my nose. I was no longer able to maintain my balance and was either carried like a toddler or pushed in a wheelchair. I no longer wanted to be in public from the continual stares. Looks of sympathy un-noticed. This is cancer.

Next, I began chemotherapy at Mary Bridge. The first round I was admitted to the hospital to receive chemo through the night; I called this "big shot chemotherapy" which was administered to me overnight instead of in a one-time dose. They woke me every hour to urinate because there were concerns of the chemo sitting in my bladder. The following two weeks we would make the trip to Tacoma for my "small dose" chemo. Then I would get a week "off". To be sick!

48 weeks in all.

I suffer from many long term effects from my battle. I have permanent hearing loss in both ears, cataracts in both eyes, seizures, short-term memory loss, cognitive impairments, severely short stature and recently it has been determined that I am not producing any growth hormone and will require daily injections for life.

All things said, I know I am one of the lucky ones. I am a cancer warrior and will continue to fight for those who no longer can. That is what keeps me going. Even writing this is incredibly difficult for me, because as I said, I am a silver lining type of kid, but I know it is important to get these stories out. You do get past it, and cancer will never define me, but it has definitely molded me into who I am today, and this journey has made me a more compassionate person. I am a guy with a big heart with the desire to succeed and help others through my story.

I once wondered if I would win this fight, if I would ever get to see my baby brother grow up, but almost exactly ten years to the day of my diagnosis, I will receive my high school diploma. I have those answers now. This is me, winning the fight against cancer.

My Angel in the Outfield

Tyler Gartner

What more could a kid ask for? It was a warm summer evening and I was practicing baseball with my 9 year old All-Star team. My dad, “Coach Tim” to everyone else, was leaning against the dugout on the 3rd base line. I knew my mom would be showing up soon to surprise the team with popsicles. Suddenly my dad collapsed and unbeknownst to me, my life was also about to collapse. The other coaches kept my teammates and I away while the paramedics loaded him into the ambulance. The popsicle I was supposed to be enjoying right now, didn’t taste very good.

The doctors told my dad he had a seizure because he had brain cancer. During the next eleven and a half months, he had four brain surgeries, chemotherapy and radiation, but nothing worked. I felt like I was watching my dad die. This is exactly what was happening. Initially the doctor told my dad he had between 5 - 10 years to live. During the next eleven months, the 10 years went down to 5 years, to 1 year and then to a few weeks and hospice.

That spring, my dad had hoped to coach my baseball team, the “Angels”. On Opening Day, I got a huge surprise when a helicopter hovered over the field and two Deputies repelled down with two baseballs. They gave the baseballs to my dad to throw out the first two pitches to my brother and I. At that point, he was weak and his walking was unbalanced, but he threw that ball as hard as he could and I caught it! The day prior, the doctor had told my dad his brain was swelling and he needed to go to the hospital. After learning that the baseball league wanted him to throw out the Opening Day pitches to his sons, the doctors agreed to postpone the hospital for one day. Sadly, after he threw out the pitches, my mom drove him to the hospital in Seattle and he would never come home again.

During those eleven months my dad and I had many conversations. He told me he wouldn’t be here to watch me graduate from high school, get married or meet my children. However, he assured me he would always be my angel and he would be watching me from heaven. He always told me to be strong, make good decisions and follow my dreams.

On June 4, 2006, my mom called the hospital at 5:00 a.m. after waking up from a nightmare that my dad had passed away. She was told that they were wondering if it was too early to call her, because it wasn’t looking good. She notified our Pastor, family and friends that the time was here, and then she gently woke me up saying we needed to be with dad.

I stood in a circle holding hands around my dad’s bed with my mom, brother, Pastor, Grandma, Uncle and a few of my dad’s close friends. My brother and I stood nearest to his head. Pastor Joe read my dad his last rights and made a cross on his forehead. As I watched his breath slow down and become more labored, I said goodbye at 7:50 a.m.

My dad went to the hospital after throwing me the first pitch on Opening Day and he passed away on the last day of the season. On that fateful day after saying goodbye, I went to the ballpark for the final game of the season. With opposing players, coaches and parents cheering me on, I pitched the game of my life.

I have continued to play baseball throughout high school and hope to play in college next year. I contribute my success to my father. He instilled in me his motto of, "All out all the time" and the importance of sportsmanship. These attributes help guide me both on the field and in life. Life is not always easy, but I find strength in my "angel in the outfield."

Sunshine

Keoni Erickson

I still can't believe it. Laying in the dark of my self-induced isolation, barricaded behind an iron wall of solitude, I sit alone, my mind like the first dead leaf of fall, ready to fall at the slightest breeze or whisper. Frightened, I know that once the first leaf falls the rest aren't far behind. It dawns on me. I couldn't hide in the dark any longer. I had to face the day alone, but my Sunshine was gone.

My friend, Chris "Sunshine" Casey, had abruptly passed away three days earlier due to complications of brain cancer.

I awake from another restless night to face the cruel facts of life. My body feels like it's weighed down by the thousands of unsaid words, untold jokes, wasted worries, and even the ghost of my guilt. All the things that seemed arbitrary in the past moments weighed on my mind like an elephant balancing atop a peanut. Guilty thoughts even begin to cloud my mind. "Could I have changed this?" "Could I have made his last days, his best?" He was taken with such speed that I never had the chance to say goodbye. I cringe at the thought that I never got to look, for one last time, into the eyes of my brother that I would never see again.

Clouded in a fog of thought, I find myself absently minded wondering to a forgotten skate park Sunshine and I used to frequent. Sitting on the familiar bench it occurs to me, this is where we had first met. Awestruck, I caught myself watching a few of the younger kids skate. They were laughing and having the best time of their short lives. Reeling in jealousy of their blissful ignorance, I stared and a stray, self-centered thought crossed my mind. Why are they so happy? Don't they know my best friend was just ripped out of the world? Why are they so excited, when the same grim fate will place its cold cruel hand upon each of them?

One of them falls, and his skateboard rolls over towards me. I grab it and slowly walk it over to where the kids stood like angels over the body of their fallen friend. "Are you all right?" I asked. "Ah, it's nothing" says the kid.

After helping him up I handed him his board and say. "Be careful, you could hurt yourself." Quickly he laughs and asks "Why?"

"So you don't get hurt" I said.

"So? If I get hurt at least I had fun doing it."

The rain forces a retreat back to my fortress of solitude. The boy's words still rung in my ears. Is living a long, safe life really living? It dawned on me that happiness is what makes life worth living. You don't know if today could be your last day. Life isn't about being afraid of the dark; life is about finding your joy.

Chris taught me something that day that I will never forget; never take anything for granted.

Your friends and family could be whisked away on a wind, without even a whisper of goodbye or thanks. Appreciate every second you have with them. Even appreciate the small things that seem arbitrary in the moment, but when those moments are gone, the small things are all that's left.

My Sunshine had returned, breaking through the walls I had enclosed myself in. I live because I know it's what Chris would have wanted. I live because it's what I want. I live to help others realize the potential they possess, to help them find their Sunshine, to never let a joke go untold, a song unsung and never let a life go un-lived.

This Is My Story

Cameron Ashton

Every day I walk past a sign hanging in the hallway next to the cafeteria. It's been there, tacked up between two sets of lockers, since the beginning of the school year. Painted in bold white letters on a sheet of black butcher paper, the message is short and to the point: CANCER SUCKS.

Don't I know it.

It has been almost a year since my mom was diagnosed with triple-negative breast cancer. I don't remember much about the moment when my family sat down last Mother's Day and had the long and difficult discussion that marked our plunge into the unknown. A hole was gouged in my heart that day, a gaping expanse of fear, confusion, anxiety, and grief that hasn't yet been completely filled. Metastasis and lymph nodes had started the day as flashcards in my biology notebook, but became a painfully casual part of my vocabulary by the week's end.

Being hit head-on by the truth of life's unpredictability is a curious thing. Until that point, my overwhelming onslaught of honors classes had been the focal point of my existence. My mother's diagnosis served as a reality check that allowed me to see that textbooks and transcripts are unimaginably insignificant when it comes to the ones we love, but it also left me drowning in a veritable flood of unidentifiable emotions. The world around me had shattered, and my heart was breaking along with it. This is my story how I see it, compiled of fragments of good, bad, and bittersweet:

Waking up every morning with an impossibly heavy heart, begging God for the strength to face another day. School felt irrelevant and my friends felt distracting, but still I smiled a smile that felt so tight that I thought my face would snap.

Standing on the deck with my sisters, watching my dad, razor and scissors in hand, cut through the final strands of my mom's hair. The scraps fluttered away with the breeze, and part of us went with them.

Feeling physical pain at the sight of my mom's exhausted and weak condition. Having her call the home phone from her bedroom to request a glass of water, which must always have a bendy straw (the straight ones are hard to drink from while lying down) and never any ice (she'd developed an aversion at her first round of chemo).

Walking through the door after school to find a different relative standing in the kitchen, putting our dishes away on the wrong shelves. It was a comfort to know that our family was so strong, often flying in at absurdly late hours to mop the floor, drive my sisters to school, and do the grocery shopping.

Taking an emergency midnight drive to the pharmacy with my dad. It was raining, but we kept the convertible top down anyways.

Giggling with my sisters as we modeled hats and scarves to take home from the store as a surprise for our mom.

Cringing as “chemo” and “surgery” appeared as the most frequently-used words on my phone, but opening countless messages from concerned friends and family and getting texts from a best friend who knows when to say the right thing and when to say nothing at all.

Waking up one morning to learn that my mom had gone to the hospital in the middle of the night and being filled with a sense of fear that even texted jokes about hospital food couldn't quell.

Answering the door for friends and neighbors toting meals. There's a reason that lasagna is the clichéd “Get Well Soon!” meal.

Clenching my teeth as my mom received injections in the stomach every morning and night for two months and looking at the endless row of prescription bottles lining the bathroom countertop.

Spending summer vacation at home every single day, longing for a true home-cooked meal as I lost touch with my friends and never really regained it with some of them.

Witnessing a tight-knit hospital community, as nurses in Friday Seahawks jerseys conversed with chemotherapy patients. I put a piece in the puzzle that sat on the waiting-room table while my mom was having radiation treatment and felt like I was a part of it.

Taking nightly walks with my mom as she regained her strength, watching the summer sun fade in the sky and hearing nothing but our scuffing footsteps walking in synchrony.

Lingering in the no-man's-land between chatting adults and shrieking children at a barbeque my mom couldn't attend. The hostess showed me a row of family photos and told me her mother's story with tears in her eyes. My bursting heart and choking throat prevented me from ever saying thank you, but I looked at her and knew I didn't have to.

Being the recipient of so many prayers that I felt more blessed than I have in my entire life.

This is my story. This is what has almost filled the gash in my heart and made me whole again. My life is covered in the fingerprints of people who have reached out to my family and left an everlasting impact. This feeling of unity and love has taken the broken fragments of my former life and rearranged them into something new and flawed, and somehow it seems so much more beautiful than before.