

2025 EDITION

A collection of heartfelt stories written by teens facing cancer.

For 19 years we have been asking teens to tell us how cancer has impacted their lives through our Teen Writing Contest. Over 9,000 teens across the U.S. have taken the time to put their experience in honest and heartfelt writing. Each story is unique. We hear stories of triumph and stories of great loss, stories written in times of turbulence, and stories written in times of quiet reflection.

We are incredibly moved by each teen's experience. Every essay took courage, vulnerability, and guts to write. Thanks to all the teens for sharing their stories.

We've been a leader in empowering and educating teens on healthy behavior and choices that can reduce their cancer risk and improve health. For 19 years we've provided a platform for teens to wield the power of the pen to change the world so we can better understand each person's encounter with cancer.

Over the past 22 years, Cancer Pathways has been a champion of those touched by cancer — kids and adults — standing by them as they celebrate their lives, share their stories, connect with others with similar experiences and grieve the loss of loved ones. We've partnered with local organizations to support people impacted by cancer. Visit us online at:

www.cancerpathways.org

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From the Proud Owner of Half of Two Matching Necklaces by Cate A.

12th grade, Washington State

For my 8th birthday, I got the best gift someone could possibly receive: I met Amarah Kendall. Since then, my life has never been the same. Amarah and I clicked instantly in a way that I had never experienced before and haven't since. She was my other half; we fit together like puzzle pieces. I was a young, bubbly girl who got along with everyone, but I grasped from a very early age that I didn't necessarily fit in with the other kids around me. We liked each other, but we didn't understand each other. Amarah, however, got me in the way that I had been waiting my whole, albeit short, life for. I never had to explain myself; most of the time I didn't even have to say a word; she just looked at me and saw me. Really saw me.

We spent the next four years ruining our carpets with slime and bruising our knees at the retention pond across from my house that we treated as our home base. Every day, we would get off the bus, run into our houses one street down from one another, drop off our backpacks, and meet at that retention pond. We would stay there until it got dark with my older sister and her younger brother. If it started to rain, we would go to her house. If we wanted snacks, we would walk to the gas station. It was a perfect system. We came up with whole worlds, playing superheroes or zombie apocalypse or real-life Minecraft. One of the houses next to the pond had this giant pear tree that went over the fence, bearing beautiful blossoms and less than delicious pears that, to us, were the pinnacle of produce. I lost shoes trekking through the mud, Amarah almost re-broke her arm jumping from rock to rock, but to us this place was paradise.

At the end of 5th grade, Amarah had an intense pain in her hip. She went to the doctor, where they found a tumor. The next day, she got a biopsy. It was cancer. In two short days, our paradise came crashing down. She spent the summer getting radiation therapy. Multiple surgeries followed. They would remove the tumor, and then the cancer would pop up somewhere else. It took about 8 months of intense radiation, medication, and hospital stays for her to actually start looking sick. We couldn't spend our days running around outside anymore; she now spent them in bleak hospitals where I would come and visit when I felt strong enough to not burst into tears at the sight of the tubes in her arms. Something I did both ways on every car ride anyways.

Amarah, in her natural obsession with the macabre, was fascinated by the thing that was killing her. She had the doctors and nurses explain every medication, procedure, and diagnosis to her. She did research, to the best of her tween capabilities, and reported back every detail to me. I still

remember the sparkle in her eye showing me pictures of her heavily radiated tumor after they removed it, insisting it looked like fried chicken. I did not share her fascination, and I still can't eat fried chicken.

Watching the brightest, kindest person I have ever had the pleasure of meeting slowly fade was the hardest thing I have ever had to do, and something no one should ever have to do. Amarah stayed hopeful until the very end, but she could only hide her pain so well. It was clear to everyone that this time, she wasn't going to beat it. The first week of May in 2019, she was put into a medically induced coma to ease the incredible amount of pain she was in. It was easily the worst week of my life; we knew that any day could be the day. It wasn't a matter of if; it was a matter of when. On May 7th, 364 days after her diagnosis, Amarah passed.

I came home from a dance class, and my house was the quietest it has ever been. I looked at my dad, and he gave me the slightest nod, a nod engraved in my brain forever. I immediately broke down before my mom could actually get the words out. I found out the next day, through intermittent bouts of weeping, when my homeroom teacher read out an official announcement to my class, that Amarah's parents had contacted mine before she actually died. For a few hours I grieved a girl who was still alive.

No one knew how to act around me or what to say. My own sister and I barely spoke for weeks. We didn't know how to navigate the mutual loss that we experienced so differently. Eventually, after random snapping and breakdowns, I figured out how to keep living my life.

I wouldn't say the pain ever lessened. My life, experiences, endurance, and heart just grew bigger. I learned how to go on and enjoy things even with the most important aspect of my life missing. Whenever something noteworthy happened, I would text her Instagram account. I still do. Sometimes it's life updates, sometimes it's funny moments, sometimes it's happy birthdays, and sometimes it's not so happy anniversaries. It's how I keep her in my life. When something happens, Amarah is still the first person I want to tell. So I do. Of course, I know she'll never see those texts, but it helps me cope with the fact that a girl who once knew everything about my life won't ever know how the majority of it went.

It's been almost six years since Amarah died, so I like to think I've reached the acceptance stage of grief. The truth is, my senior year has held some of the hardest moments to navigate without her. It is difficult to reach all of these milestones that she never got to do. Senior sunrise, last homecoming dance, 18th birthday, college applications, college acceptances. Of course, I know the hardest moments are still ahead of me. Senior prom and graduation were things Amarah and I had talked about in the back of the bus for years. To walk across that stage and move across the country without her is something I never thought I would have to do.

While I have spent more years missing Amarah than being with her, I will never get used to going through life without her at my side. I look for her in everyone and everything. I see her zest for life in the little girls I teach ballet. I see her compassion in my mother and her determination in my sister. A piece of her shines through all of my friends, despite most of them never having the pleasure of knowing her. Most importantly, I see her hopes and dreams in me. Amarah was so certain the world and everyone in it could be better if they were given enough love and attention. It is because of her that I try to see the best in the world. Every beautiful, kind, loving thing in my life, I contribute to Amarah. Cancer may have taken my best friend from me, but it can never take the love she had for me and everyone else.



Remembering My Great Grandfather by Zoe A.

9th grade, Alabama

Losing a loved one is one of the most profound challenges anyone can face, especially when that person has played a pivotal role in your life. For me, my great grandfather was much more than a relative; he was a father figure, a mentor, and a symbol of unwavering strength. The journey of watching him battle throat cancer was not just a medical struggle; it was a heartbreaking experience that forever altered my perspective on life, love, and the inexorable passage of time.

Having lived with my great grandfather and great grandmother for as long as I can remember, I was fortunate to bask in the warmth of their love and wisdom. The home we shared was a sanctuary characterized by laughter, stories, and the rich aroma of my great grandmother's cooking. My great grandfather had a way of making every interaction meaningful. He imparted life lessons with a gentle touch, guiding me through my formative years with patience and care. When I think back on those days, I can still hear his voice, rich and full of life, recounting tales of his youth or sharing his thoughts on the world. He was a storyteller, a sage, and in many ways, he was my anchor.

When he was diagnosed with throat cancer, the news sent shockwaves through our family. The word "cancer" was cloaked in fear and uncertainty, and while I tried to be strong, the prospect of losing him felt unimaginable. I witnessed his initial determination to fight the disease, his spirit unbroken despite the challenges that lay ahead. At first, he approached treatment with optimism, always reassuring us with his trademark smile. Our family rallied around him, holding onto the hope that he would overcome this battle.

However, as the months unfolded, the reality of his illness grew darker. Watching someone who had been a pillar of strength slowly succumb to pain left me grappling with feelings of helplessness. In those moments, I found myself reflecting on our relationship and the many memories we shared. I could no longer simply see him as the strong figure who guided my childhood; I now watched him struggle to perform simple tasks that once defined his daily life. The disease robbed us all of precious moments, but it also underscored the strength of our bond. We navigated this painful journey together, leaning on one another during moments of despair.

Living together made the experience of his illness even more poignant. I was there to witness the small victories—the moments when he would finish a meal, laugh at a joke, or tell a story, however breathlessly. Each shared meal became a celebration, each moment of connection a treasure. His

determination to remain engaged and present taught me resilience in the face of adversity. I held onto those moments tightly, realizing that they were slipping away far too quickly.

As the cancer progressed, it became increasingly difficult for him to speak. I watched helplessly as his voice faded, replaced by a silent struggle. It was in those quiet moments that I tried to communicate my love for him in every way possible—through my gaze, my touch, and the stories I recounted. I wanted him to know he was not alone. I would sit by his bedside, reminiscing about our shared experiences, hoping that the familiar words would bring him solace. I wanted to reassure him that the lessons he imparted remained deeply ingrained in my heart.

The impact of watching someone I loved so deeply endure such suffering weighed heavily on my spirit. In many ways, I felt like I was losing a part of myself. My great grandfather's strength had long been my guiding light, and without him, the world felt a little dimmer. However, as he faced his final days, I began to understand that true love is not just about physical presence but about the legacy we leave behind.

The day he passed away remains etched in my memory. It was a serene morning; the sun streamed through the window, casting a warm glow over his bed. I remember holding his hand, feeling its warmth one last time. In that moment, I couldn't find the words to express the depth of my gratitude or the sorrow of saying goodbye. We sat in silence, surrounded by the memories that filled our home. I was grateful for every lesson learned, every moment shared, but it was painful to realize that the man who had been like a father to me was slipping away.

In the aftermath of his passing, the void he left was palpable. Yet, I found comfort in the memories we created together. His love and guidance continue to shape who I am today. Each story he told, every lesson he offered, resonates with me, serving as a compass in my life. His spirit is woven into the fabric of my identity, and I strive to honor his legacy in everything I do.

Losing my great grandfather was one of the most challenging experiences of my life, but it also taught me invaluable lessons about love, resilience, and the importance of family. While I mourned the loss of a father figure, I also celebrated the life he lived and the impact he had on me. Though he is no longer physically present, his spirit continues to guide me, and the love we shared will forever remain a cherished part of my heart. Through the memories, I keep him alive, ensuring that his legacy endures in every story I pass down and every lesson I teach.



<u>Defining Physics: When Time Moved So Fast It Stood Still</u> by Emily C.

9th grade, Arizona

In elementary school, students learn about Newton's three laws of motion; his first law states that an object in motion will stay in motion—until acted upon by an unbalanced force. I believed that life—an endless ripple in a current, the steady beat of a heart, and the rise and fall of a breath—moved with unwavering momentum, unchanged until an unrelenting force brought it to a halt. However, I never expected the force in my life to manifest itself as a diagnosis. Squished together letters on a piece of paper rewriting the laws of my existence and my image of the future. My Mami, Papi, and I sat in a cold and bland cream-colored room. We prepared for the worst yet held onto hope as red petechiae—tiny traces of broken blood vessels—spread across my skin, moving like turtles carried by the rhythm of the current. It felt as if I was staring at a clock waiting for class to be over with how long those few minutes expanded to be.

My brain scratched at my skull, demanding reason and freedom. Before I could make sense of the incoherent chaos, heavy footsteps cut through my thoughts. Each step was slow and sounded as if it had a purpose. I looked to my Mami and saw as she sat up straight—I copied her posture to look strong. I glanced at my Papi and saw his attentive gaze towards the door—I mimicked his gaze to seem polite. Footsteps stopped in front of the room, and the door creaked open. The doctor entered and met my gaze, a beat, then stepped beside me to look at my parents. My Mami's fingers curled in her lap, and Papi's head hung low as the doctor spoke. His words sounded static, filtering through one ear and out the other. I needn't hear his words as his eyes expressed what native tongue could not. It was at this moment I realized this was a new momentum; one I couldn't control.

The air felt heavier; the room smaller. I could feel a beat in my throat, my heart rapidly striking the walls of my pharynx—forcing my silence. The irregular, chaotic rhythm within my head stilled as metallic assaulted my nostrils. My finger grazed just above my lip, and I glanced at my fingertips; crimson liquid contrasted with my then-pale and sickly skin. Time bent and warped like a melting clock, its hands spinning before I could grasp where I was. A machine whirred softly, calculating, analyzing—seeing parts of me even I could not see. I lay still, listening to its beeping, feeling like a puzzle being taken apart piece by piece. It knew more about me in that moment than I did about myself, and that terrified me. I held my breath when told, as if I could somehow hold back whatever truth it was about to uncover. I was being scanned, dissected, and reduced to monotone shadows on a screen.

Falling. Not the kind where you plummet downward, but the kind where the floor disappears and there's no sense of up or down anymore. Disoriented and lost in time. One moment, I was somewhere else. The next, I was weightless, shifting through space with no memory of how I got there. The world around me twisted, sounds stretching in and out of focus. A red light flashed in my peripheral vision like a fading star flickering at the edge of space. Then a grounding force of cold press on my back and a buckle strapping me in place brought me back to reality. The growl of an engine and tremor of the vehicle told me that we began moving. I had no memory of stepping inside. No memory of transition. Just the realization that I was in an ambulance vehicle, and time had already moved on without me.

I entered the hospital, but the moment slipped from my recollection. My mind drifted in a state of uncertainty, shifting and warping like something not fully formed. Flickers of memory resurfaced, although not chronologically. The beeping of monitors, comforting when steady, like a clicking clock resuming moments I couldn't understand. Gentle hands covered in latex adjusted my IV lines—cold metal pricked my skin—and distant, kind voices told me I was okay. The surgeries blurred together, their weight pressing down on my body, folding time in on itself. My mind floated in the aftershock of anesthesia, but through it all, kindness remained an undeniable force. My Mami's unrelenting determination, spreading herself thin with making ends meet and to me, and Papi's commitment to make me feel comfortable during our stays in the hospital by bringing stuff from our home. The nurses adjusted my blanket with the gentleness of someone cradling a fragile thing. The doctors spoke to me even when I was too far away to answer. In a world where time stretched and space distorted, their presence was the only thing that felt real. The only proof that I was still here, still tethered to this world, even as time threatened to pull me away.

The concern and kindness I felt from the people and professionals were undeniably there, reminding me where I was and, although sometimes worrying, they were honest. However, outside the sterile walls, the world continued to move—unaware of how much had changed for me. My doctor had told me that the chemotherapy may cause me to have a learning disability. That I would fall behind and struggle to catch up when I went back to eighth grade in the middle of the year, especially having missed two years of school. I believed her; I didn't see a way it couldn't happen with the heaviness of recovery, and my mind felt like it was working twice as hard to keep up. Even through this, the nurses' patience and the doctors' unwavering encouragement and kindness had kept me anchored in my most fragile state. My Mami and Papi pushed me to harbor a belief—belief in myself, in my ability to adapt—that I could move forward. Strength was never just about muscle, never just about endurance. It was about will. About belief. About knowing that momentum is not just a law of physics—it is a choice. It taught me that a positive mindset isn't just wishful thinking. It's a force, like gravity, pulling you forward even when the world says you should be falling.

Diary of a Cancer Patient by Amanda H.

12th grade, Florida

Going to school from a hospital bed led me to be an independent self-starter constantly researching on my own, exploring new topics, and learning from experience. The experimental nature of my treatment lent me further towards an open mindedness about research and oncology that sticks with me to this day. When it comes to reflecting on this topic, I'd like to share what that journey was like.

Subject—Amanda Hill

Diagnosis—Leukemia-B-ALL (acute-lymphoblastic-leukemia-b-cell)

Treatment—Experimental.

Dear Teenage Amanda in a Hospital Gown,

Take a Polaroid picture of your long hair now. Soon your body will no longer be yours. It will instead belong to researchers, oncologists, nurses, heart monitors, needles, test tubes. Your name will disappear from attendance sheets, school lockers, varsity uniforms; instead, she will appear on countless medical forms: vacutainer tubes, doctor's clipboards, pill-bottles...You'll grow-up wondering: will you ever see it on a high-school diploma?

Dear 127-pound Amanda,

There's no grade, no certificate for what you're enduring now—but you'll receive exams and numbers: blood-cells...platelet counts... 98% (bone-marrow cancer-cell prevalence).

Report Card:

Dec 1st, 2020: First Bone Marrow Extraction.

Begin intensive, experimental chemo. Blood infections. Hair-loss. They say you'll be done in 9 months in time for Freshman year (giving you Summer for "Return-To-Normalcy"). Don't google "cute buzzcuts." Start googling "Acute-Lymphoblastic-Leukemia."

Dec 27th, 2020: Second Bone Marrow Extraction.

Cycle through countless medicines, IV-solutions, bullet sized horse-pills...Throw up a lot. It won't feel like it, but it's progress. Hard truths to swallow.

Dear 109-pound Amanda,

You'll learn: you're too stubborn to let scissors touch your head. "Let it fall out on its own," you'll tell mom—and she'll let you. Grab that Polaroid from earlier to ease things. Only eight more months.

February 22, 2021: Put the Polaroid away.

"Eight more months" was a lie. Now it's fourteen. Remember when Cicero said "it's foolish to tear out one's hair in grief—as though sorrow would be made less by baldness?" Well, you won't have to choose.

March 30th, 2021: Third Bone Marrow Extraction.

Overhear your oncologist's muffled words: "high-risk...cell counts too low...variables outside our control...we don't know how long..." what they mean is Twenty-Two more months...Tip: don't pin your hopes on "Return To Normalcy" Summer. Google "Blinatumomab—experimental." Dear 98-pound Amanda,

Summer's over—Freshman year's here. There will be nothing glamorous about being "Cancer Kid" going into high-school. You'll be Six-foot 90lb Gangly Bald Girl: wig shopping, pill choking, hallway stumbling. While classmates vacation on summer beaches, you'll be confined to hospital beds, looking at ocean pictures through hazes of medical equipment. While classmates try homecoming dresses, you'll be imaginarily window-shopping from your hospital gown, making friends with ceilings and beeping machines. Don't google "cute-bob-cuts", instead google BiTEs (Bi-specific-T-cell-Engagers).

You'll want to spiral into what-ifs. I won't stop you. But push through these fears and anxieties; you'll emerge stronger and more resilient.

Dear Amanda in a wig,

Let your body be your syllabus: each time something happens to your body, teach your mind to be inspired—to document—to research—to learn. Soon you'll become adept at reading CBCs, gauging blood counts based on feel: fatigue: low hemoglobin; petechiae: low platelets; neutropenic fevers: ER visit. You'll gain insights from LLS—Leukemia-and-Lymphoma-Society, and by eleventh grade, you'll be working alongside them—organizing events, speaking at panels, leading workshops, spreading awareness about blood cancer. You'll raise funds for research (\$114,133 and counting), supporting advancements that once experimental for you, are now standard global treatments.

You'll master skills: drawing blood, inserting IVs, accessing PICC-lines through pure observation. You'll practice these techniques on stuffed animals in hospital beds, performing mock procedures on fake-ports to simulate accompanying someone through the process.

May 18th, 2023: Chemo Port Removal.

Dear Amanda in a cranky mood,

Don't be dissuaded when you first receive children's hospital "sick-kid" care-packages—blankets...socks...coloring...books...paint...cherish them—eventually, you'll be the one donating to kids like you. You'll forge new connections with young patients. You'll meet six-year-old Colton from your neighborhood, diagnosed with leukemia the same time as you. As he struggles with port accesses as you once did, you'll take videos of your own port access to offer him hope. You'll eagerly interrogate CRNAs, anesthesiologists—asking about careers. They'll let you administer your own anesthesia—glimpses into your many future internship roles (administering anesthesia for children's surgeries). Your firsthand experience with the procedures allows you to naturally empathize with patients undergoing heart surgeries or port-placements—sharing insights from your own experiences, providing comfort, reassurance, letting patients know what progress looks like—even when port-insertions feel like being dragged on a leash. As you grow to understand your body—the human body—each page of your journey will bring you closer to reclaiming your strength.

Report Card:0% (bone marrow cancer cell prevalence).

Six-foot long hair Varsity Volleyball Starter.

October 25th, 2023: Last Day of Treatment.

Dear 140-pound Amanda,

Hug your nurses. Hug the doctors. Hug mom and dad. One day, you'll eventually return to the operating room, but this time, as the doctor (or nurse). (Or at least that's the plan.)

Dear College Amanda,

Don't worry if things don't go according to plan. One day, you'll look back at everything you've learned, and smile.



Written in Blood by David K.

12th grade, California

If you looked inside the relatively unassuming Inova Fair Oaks Hospital on March 30th, 2016, you'd find my mother—exhausted, yet smiling, as she underwent the first in a series of dozens of surgeries. She'd be wrapped in tubes and wires, with a pulse so faint it barely qualified as life. Type A+ blood flowed from artificial veins, and machines did the work her body couldn't.

A month prior, in February of that year, my father knocked on the door of my room, gently, as he always had before. In whispers, he told me about my mother's breast cancer, and even as young as I was, I remember playing with the word in my mouth.

Cancer.

It felt foreign, yet strangely familiar, like a word I had always known—with whispers of it being spread with hushed voices, like taboo—but something I had never truly understood. It lingered on my tongue, with syllables heavy and deliberate, creeping and spreading as it does within the body.

Cancer.

The "C" curls like a grasping and relentless claw on its onset. The "A" stretches the mouth, as if bracing for impact, while the "N" and "C" tense together, uncertain, like family members huddling around. It slips into the final "E-R," like a whisper. A relapse, or a final breath. The word settled on my tongue and those around our family, refusing to be swallowed or spat out. It was a word that gave you the taste and scent of metallic blood.

Blood had always been a symbol of life for our family. At two years old, a tumble onto the edge of a curb left my sister's forehead split open. Her hair was soaked in red, her vision blurred, and her body was delivered to the indifferent fluorescence of an emergency room, but blood was the life-force that kept her alive. Blood sustained me when I was in that same hospital, born three months premature, and not breathing. Now, with my mother's cancer, it became a symbol of loss. It was in the bruises that blossomed across my mother's skin; in the deep red syringes that determined whether she would see another month—another year. Blood was in the quiet moments when we would press trembling hands to her chest, feeling the heartbeat she fought so hard to keep steady. Cancer was a thief that infested her body, energy, and blood.

I remember sitting at her bedside, now understanding why she wouldn't play with my sister and me anymore, or why she couldn't watch us tumble down the big hill by the house like she used to. I watched the slow drip of the IV, tracing the blue lines of her veins with my eyes, trying to

memorize the details of her hands—the hands that once held me close, now almost skeletal and cold. The blood in these veins soon became interchangeable with everything we stood to lose. I remember how she would squeeze my fingers in reassurance that she was still there, still fighting, under everything that plagued her. The smell of antiseptic, the soft beeping of monitors, and the worried whispers of doctors, nurses, and oncologists—it all became my childhood.

Even as the disease progressed, my mother never let cancer define her. She smiled through the pain, laughed when she could, and held onto hope long after some around her stopped offering it. She endured every test and surgery with a determination that I didn't understand at the time, and still fully don't, even today. It wasn't until I found myself standing in the emergency room years later, pulling on a pair of blue gloves, that I realized what she had been teaching me throughout her treatment and my childhood—she found strength through the blood in her veins. To her, blood meant family, and we were worth fighting for, with every single breath.

When it came time to give back to the healthcare system that had saved my mother, blood, once a symbol of fear and cancer and surgeries, became a call to action—a patient in distress, or a life that could still be saved. I soon began emergency room volunteering, paramedic and EMT training, and other professional medical experiences, fueled by the same Type A+ blood in my heart from my mother. When I'm in the back of an ambulance with my stethoscope in hand, I sometimes remember the young cancer patient too weak to lift her arm we once treated, and in her I see my mother's quiet strength. Like her, blood binds all of us together. It is not just life coursing through veins—it's a connection, a shared humanity, and a reminder of the battles fought and the ones still to come.

Today, with the lessons from my mother, I know blood means many things beyond cancer. It means hardship, and the patients who will continue to fight with blood coursing through their veins. It means resilience—the quiet courage to endure, even in the face of impossible odds. As I prepare for the rigors of medical school and a future where I can make a difference in the fight against cancer, I know I will give more than sweat and tears. I will devote every drop of my blood, because that is what this calling demands.

So, cancer.

Even as it weaves itself into the fabric of our families, leaving devastation and bloodstains, we shouldn't be afraid to say its name louder than whispers. Because just like blood, our voices carry life—and as long as we keep speaking, advocating, and fighting, cancer will never have the final word.

What The Chickens Know by Manasseh M.

12th grade, Connecticut

Chickens are curious creatures. Pecking around aimlessly with their flight depressingly suppressed, they appear simple and naive. While one might think they're silly, not all chickens are as ignorant as they seem. There are 17 chickens in particular that are privy to secrets, secrets I wish I knew.

My father's job was being our chicken tender. I'm not sure if he desired that title, or even that role, but he didn't have much choice: he found it hard enough being "disabled" and he certainly wouldn't let himself become unemployed. With each passing day he spent increased lengths of time sitting among our seventeen chickens, imprinting them with his love and personality. I watched as they gathered around him, and, whether aware or not, submitted to hours of his stories, wisdom and thoughts. He only cared to name two: Tiny, the smallest chicken, and Whitey, I assume, the whitest chicken. While only these two were given permanent distinction, he knew each of them, and those 17 chickens, in turn, knew him. What my dad told the chickens, with a hen perched on his shoulder and another on his lap, remains a mystery.

My relationship with my father didn't falter and never dwindled; if anything it had been rekindled since his diagnosis in 2023. But, even as our love grew stronger, our ability to communicate diminished, and my hope to know these secrets went with it. Separation was not in the least intentional, rather it existed as a result of our foolish masculine conviction that an affirming nod or pat on the back could replace deep conversations. I pretend as though my refrain from such discussion was to avoid suggesting the possibility of death to my father, that maybe questions of great emotional weight suggested impending emotional loss, or that questions that required time suggested we didn't have much time left. As I paint myself in this awfully considerate and fantastical light, I know in truth, I was not nearly as thoughtful as I was scared. I was scared that such discussion made me appear vulnerable or unstable. I was scared of what might surface in such talks. And I was scared that discussion had the power to actualize. While yes, that masculine nod and pat were enough to know and feel our love for one another, I am still left with questions whose answer I never dared learn. For these secrets I turn now, in desperation, to those I imagine are the only to know the answer: those 17 lucky birds.

What do you chickens know? What did he tell you?

Did he tell you he was ready to leave? Was he ready to be received by his heavenly father? There exists few absolutes in life: that one is never prepared for a loved one's death, I like to think, is among them. This, I hope, excuses my indecision the night I stood before my father, competing with the ventilator for his ear. Can I ask my father to fight if he's ready to go? If I don't, have I

given up? Sure I had hope, but what good is a hope that convicts? As I watched my father suffer, I began to adopt a terrifying perspective: cancer has a funny way of taking someone's life too soon, but taking too long to do it. And yet, my father was a fighter, a man of resilience. Dare I discredit his resolve? I hope my father was ready to leave but I can never hope to know. Only you, the chickens, know.

Did my dad say he was content with himself? Did he know he did enough? A simple "I love you", I fear, didn't translate my gratitude and admiration. This wasn't all that I had or all that I thought I should have. This was, however, more often than not, all that I said. Hospitals are cruel in that they give us those last few minutes to be with your loved one, a small bite for a hungry soul. I, of course, hold no real anger toward the hospital, only a frustration with my predicament. How do I make 18 years become 5 minutes? I feared more the audacity to attempt this feat, and less the odds of success. Regardless of my words, the ventilator offered little in response. Did he know his worth to me? I know he loved me, and I him, I worry only that he left with regret. I'll never know. Only you, the chickens know.

Was he proud of me, chickens? Now I know in the conventional way my father was proud of all his kids. Indeed, he's said those exact words. But, did he have the kind of pride that made him happy that I carried his name forward. The kind of pride that's content not just with who I am, but proud of who I might become. More than the pride that makes one stay, did he have the pride that lets ones leave. Only you, the chickens know.

What those chickens will do with all that information evades me. I bring out their food every morning and return each time with no shared insight, no new knowledge, and no resolved questions: selfish creatures those chickens are. Only in a world where cancer exists do 17 chickens know more of my father than me.

I cannot reduce my father's death to a convenient moral or promising precept, but there does exist a sentiment that comforts my soul: while I can't know entirely what my father thought of himself or others, I do know what I and others thought of him. And it is that true image of compassion, dedication, care, and love that I will aspire to someday assume.

Will I succeed, who knows?

Well, maybe the chickens know.



A Letter To My Mom by Nickolas N.

12th grade, Texas

Dear mom,

On the day you passed away the sun set, just like it always does, except this time it felt more like my entire world had gone with it. You are the toughest and smartest person I have ever known, and before you were diagnosed with stage 4 metastatic melanoma, you knew something was wrong. That scared me because you never complained, and when you said something was wrong, I took you at your word.

I thought we had more time, Mom. I thought you would overcome this like you had overcome everything else in your life. You never gave up, you helped us find the silver lining even when the clouds were darkest. It didn't add up — how could something so cruel happen to someone so full of light? But there you were, battling as hard as you could, and I never saw you really quit, even though the pain was getting worse and your body weaker.

You taught me what resilience truly is. I saw it in the way you handled every treatment, every doctor's visit, every sleepless night. You never let it define you, never let it steal your spirit. But in the quiet moments, when no one was around to see, I saw the fear in your eyes. The kind of fear that only comes when you know the inevitable is close, and no amount of bravery can outrun it.

When you passed away, it felt as if time stood still. After losing Dad eight years prior to your passing, I have never felt so all alone. The world kept turning, but it was like I had slipped into another universe, one where you no longer existed. I could not fathom the emptiness, the silence in the spaces where you used to be. Every day, I felt like a little piece of my soul was missing. There were moments when I would reach for the phone to call you, or walk into a room expecting to see you there. But each time, reality hit harder. You weren't there.

Since you left us, it feels like both yesterday and a lifetime ago. Since that day, so much has changed, but so much of what you built into our lives remains consistent, just like you always were. We honored you with a beautiful celebration of life, a gathering filled with love, laughter, and the kind of warmth that only you could inspire.

We've kept the traditions alive, just as you would have wanted. The holidays are different without you, but we carry on, honoring the spirit of what we shared together. We still gather around the

table, still decorate the house, still laugh at the old jokes, even though it's not quite the same without your infectious laughter. I wish you were still here.

Your legacy lives on in the Air Force too. The dedication ceremony for the heritage room they built in your honor was nothing short of breathtaking. You were always such a strong leader, Mom, always pushing boundaries, always creating spaces where people could learn, grow, and feel like they mattered. When they dedicated that room in your memory, it felt like the whole world paused for a moment to honor the impact you made. The people who came, so many who you touched over the years, spoke of you with the kind of admiration that filled me with pride. You led with integrity, compassion, and a strength that inspired everyone who worked with you. You didn't just serve your country; you changed it.

We made sure to honor your favorite places too. One year after your passing, we went to Disney World, your favorite place on Earth. I could almost hear your laughter echoing through the parks, see your excitement as you stood in line for the rides, and the joy on your face as we all gathered for the parades. You had this magical way of making every moment feel like an adventure, and Disney World was a place where you could just be a kid again, a place where everything felt possible. I will forever cherish the memories we made at Disney.

We continue to live through you Mom, as your strength remains with us. We carry your courage through our actions and your love in the way we hold on to each other. Your lessons don't end just because you're gone. They have defined, sculpted, and moved us forward. I want you to know that you have inspired me to take your torch and further my education, even when I had no intentions of going to college before your passing. I want to help, inspire, and better others as you have done in your career. So I take your inspiration and motivation to help guide me in becoming an elementary school educator to have that same impact you had on others. I want to help children have that leader I was able to have in my life, so they can be motivated to accomplish their goals and dreams. I know you are here with us every day, even in your absence. When things get tough, I catch myself hearing you in my head, telling me that I am stronger than I give myself credit for. I laugh and remember how you turned ordinary moments special. So when we love, I feel you, leading us, teaching us how to appreciate every day with each other as a gift on this wonderful journey called life.

The pain of losing you is still there, Mom, but so is the gratitude for having had you in my life. I will never stop missing you, but I will also never stop living in a way that honors you through my actions, my love, and the way I carry your legacy forward. We continue to live for you, Mom, and through you. You are not gone. You are still here, with us, in every memory, in every lesson, in every quiet moment of strength.

I love you, always. Forever your son.

From Tap to Tumor: A Father's Battle with Bladder Cancer by Tanay P.

11th grade, Michigan

Cancer. It's a word that feels heavy, like a storm cloud hanging over your head. You hear about it in movies, read about it in books, or maybe even discuss it in health class. But when it hits close to home, it's no longer just a word—it's a reality that changes everything. It is a disruptor that reshapes lives and represents a battle that demands courage. This is my story of how cancer entered my life, how it changed me, and how I've learned to fight back in my own way.

It started with my dad. He was the kind of person who never complained, who always put others first. So, when he mentioned blood in his urine, we didn't panic. The doctor thought it was a kidney stone—painful but manageable. But then came the ultrasound, and everything changed. There was a mass in his ureter; our lives were turned upside down.

The next step was a cystoscopy, a procedure where a thin tube with a camera is inserted into the bladder to get a closer look at the mass. The doctors hoped it was just a harmless polyp, but the only way to know for sure was to remove it. That led to a seven-hour robotic surgery. Using advanced robotic technology, the surgeons carefully removed the mass, cut a section of the ureter, rejoined it to the bladder, and sent the tissue for a biopsy. A few days later, we got the call. It was cancer, bladder cancer. My dad wasn't a smoker. He didn't work with dangerous chemicals. There was no family history. The doctors attributed the cause to environmental factors. So, why him? As I dug deeper, I learned about the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, which my dad had experienced during his years of work there, as well as lead contamination and total trihalomethanes (TTHMs). Toxic chemicals, forever chemicals like PFAS and PFOA, which don't break down in nature and have been linked to cancer. Could such substances have caused my dad's illness? The doctors couldn't say for sure, but the possibility made me furious. We trust that the water we drink is safe, but what if it's not?

Cancer isn't just about the diagnosis or the treatment. It's about the fear that lingers long after the surgery is over. For my dad, the battle didn't end with the removal of the mass. Bladder cancer has a high recurrence rate, and he's had multiple recurrences since then. Each time, it feels like we're back at square one, fighting the same enemy all over again.

To monitor and treat the cancer, doctors at Michigan Medicine used blue light cystoscopy, a procedure where a special dye is injected into the bladder, making cancer cells glow under a blue light. This helps doctors detect and remove any remaining cancerous tissue. They also

used cauterization, a method where heat is applied to burn away the abnormal cells. These procedures helped prevent the cancer from spreading further, but the fear of recurrence never really goes away.

My dad's treatment also included chemotherapy, where powerful drugs are used to kill cancer cells. Some bladder cancer patients undergo BCG immunotherapy, a treatment where a weakened form of the tuberculosis bacteria is introduced into the bladder to trigger an immune response. But cancer isn't just a physical battle—it's a mental one too. It changes the way you see the world. It makes you question everything. Why did this happen? Could it have been prevented? What if it comes back? These questions haunted me, but they also pushed me to take action.

Instead of just being frustrated, I decided to channel my energy into something positive. I started researching water pollution and wastewater treatment, learning how we can generate renewable energy from wastewater to treat it without harming the environment. I got involved in electronic waste recycling and joined programs like Swap A2Zero, which focus on reducing waste and promoting sustainability.

I also began volunteering at the Teen Advisory Council at C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, where I saw kids much younger than me who were battling cancer. Some of them had never known a life outside of hospitals. Yet, despite everything they were going through, they found joy in the smallest things. Their resilience inspired me and reminded me that even in the darkest times, there's always a glimmer of hope. Cancer has taught me that life is fragile, but it's also incredibly resilient. It's shown me the importance of awareness, action, and hope.

If there's one thing I've learned through all of this, it's that cancer doesn't have to mean the end. It can be a new beginning—a chance to live with more purpose and to appreciate the little things. It's a reminder that science is stronger than fear, that medicine is advancing every day, and that hope is always worth holding onto.

Cancer may have changed my life, but it hasn't defined it. Instead, it's given me a new perspective, a new mission, and a new appreciation for the strength of the human spirit. And that's something no disease can ever take away.



The Gift of Death by Angelina S.

12th grade, Idaho

Alanna had thick, golden curls that mesmerized anyone who met her. She was radiant, sassy, and full of life—always demanding her way with the fiery determination of a child who knew exactly what she wanted. Even as her illness progressed, stripping her of the physical traits that once defined her, she remained the same strong-willed little girl. Her hair thinned until only two fragile strands remained, her skin changed colors, and her body struggled to keep up. Yet, beneath it all, she was still my little sister. Watching her endure the unimaginable, I learned what true strength and love looked like. I also learned the painful truth of Winnie the Pooh's words: "How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard."

Alanna was only four years old when she first started experiencing excruciating stomach pains. Like any concerned mother, mine initially thought it was just a stomach bug—nothing a little rest and care wouldn't fix. But when the pain became unbearable, my mother rushed her to the hospital, where we received news that shattered our world. My grandmother was the one who delivered the blow to me: "Lina, mijita, your sister has cancer." I was only seven at the time, far too young to understand the gravity of those words, yet old enough to recognize that something had irreversibly changed. Alanna was diagnosed with Stage 4 neuroblastoma, an aggressive childhood cancer that would challenge her in ways no child should ever have to endure.

What followed was a whirlwind of hospital visits, medical bills, and an ever-present antiseptic smell that seemed to cling to our lives. My mother and sister practically moved into the hospital, while I adjusted to their absence. I became accustomed to our new reality—the one where I rarely saw my mom, where doctors and nurses became part of our extended family, and where people constantly showed up at our doorstep offering a "helping hand." But all I really wanted was to feel normal. I didn't want the pity-filled looks or the whispered condolences. I just wanted to rollerblade down my sidewalk and eat popsicles on my porch, pretending—if only for a moment—that life was the same as before.

Then came the word we had all prayed for: remission.

For a moment, hope was tangible. My sister had a chance at life again. I envisioned her growing up, experiencing love, adventure, and all the joys of childhood. I let myself believe that we had won. But cancer is relentless, and it wasn't done with her yet. The news of its return hit us like a freight train, this time more aggressive, more unyielding. Despite endless rounds of

chemotherapy, a bone marrow transplant, and every possible treatment, her tiny body grew weary.

One day, I came home to find three white vans in my driveway and strangers rearranging our living room. I was confused until I heard a single word: hospice. That was when I knew—without anyone having to tell me—that my sister was dying.

My father, who never showed emotion, suddenly urged me to stay home from school. He wanted me to sleep in the living room, next to Alanna, as if he knew that time was slipping through our fingers. One morning, I was awoken by my grandmother, who rushed me into another room. She held me close and whispered, "Sweetheart, your sister has passed away."

I felt nothing. I simply stared at the bright television screen, detached from reality. I watched as the funeral service came to take my sister's body, saw my parents break down in agony, yet I remained untouched by grief. At seven years old, I had no idea how to process what was happening. Cartoons and bedtime stories never prepared me for this. The world continued to move, people continued to cry, but I was frozen in time, unable to comprehend the magnitude of our loss.

It wasn't until months later, in the middle of an ordinary day, that the weight of her absence finally crushed me. The realization that she was never coming back sent me spiraling into a darkness I didn't know how to escape. Instead of sadness, I let anger consume me. I lashed out at friends, became distant from family, and carried a bitterness that I didn't understand. It took time—far too much time—for me to recognize that I wasn't just angry. I was grieving.

Eventually, I learned to embrace the pain instead of running from it. I allowed myself to cry, to mourn, and to heal. My older sister, Lisa, became my anchor, guiding me through the storm of emotions I had suppressed for so long. Through her, I realized that grief is not something to be conquered but something to be felt, understood, and accepted.

Losing Alanna was the hardest thing I have ever endured, but her life—and even her death—gave me a gift that I will carry forever. She taught me to cherish the people I love because time is never guaranteed. She showed me the importance of resilience, of embracing vulnerability, and of allowing myself to feel deeply, no matter how painful it may be. Most importantly, she taught me the true meaning of love: that it is so powerful, so profound, that saying goodbye can break you. And yet, I wouldn't trade that love for anything. Because, as Winnie the Pooh so beautifully put it, "How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard."



A Letter to Heaven by Clara W.

12th grade, Alabama

Dear my Guardian Angel,

Dad, I miss you. Five years ago, when you and Mom sat down to talk to Sylvia, Elise, Opal, Cami, and me, I just knew something was not right. The memory of it all plays in my head constantly like it was yesterday. Mom sat down and said, "Girls, we have to talk to you." That night ended up being one of the worst nights of my life, aside from the day when you left the earth and went home. I lay in my bed that night replaying Mom's words a million times, "The doctors told us that your Daddy has stage four cancer." Even though Mom told us that stage four cancer is incurable, I tried not to believe it. I sobbed and sobbed until I finally fell asleep.

The months that followed were like an endless winter: dark, gray, and seemingly never-ending. From countless doctor visits to the many life-sucking rounds of chemo that you endured, you always tried to stay positive for your girls. You thought, "How could I leave my wife with a thirteen, a twelve, an eight, a three, and a one-year-old daughter?"

The family gatherings at your parents' house with all the cousins, aunts, and uncles slowly started to change. Everyone tried to remain positive, but it seemed as if there was always an elephant in the room. We all knew you were going to die. You kept being your witty self for as long as you could, trying to make everyone laugh as you had always done. Watching you go from your normal, funny character to an exhausted, depressed man was the worst part of it all. I had never imagined something like this would happen to me, but of course, no one does.

As days went on, and as you got sicker, the reality started to set in. I would ask myself, "Why does this have to happen to me? He's so young. He has a whole life ahead of him. He is supposed to be my kids' grandfather. He is supposed to walk me down the aisle. He is supposed to be there at my graduation. He is supposed to die when I am an old lady." These thoughts filled my head the majority of the time. Our whole family barely got by day by day. But, during the summer of 2020, we were blessed to be able to go on one last vacation with you. You had decided to stop chemo because it was no longer working, and there was no point anymore. We traveled to Branson, Missouri, as a family; it was our last vacation together. Even though you were not able to do much, you tried to participate in as much as you could. For some reason, you felt better and were more able than you had been in months.

After that vacation was over, we spent our last month and a half with you at home. Countless visitors came to our house to see you over that time. Most of the people who stopped by were people that we had never seen or heard of before, but they felt impacted by your life enough to come and get some final words with you. During your last days, I wanted to talk to you so badly. I wanted to tell you how much I loved you and how you were the best daddy a girl could have. I wanted to thank you for everything you had done for us, but words could not have even made up for everything. I wanted to tell you, "Don't go; please fight," when I knew that was not possible

anymore. I wanted to just hug you and cry since there was nothing I could do to make you feel better. I wanted to talk to you like I used to, back when you were never serious and always made jokes with your girls. But, in your physically and mentally fragile state, I was too scared to talk to you. It was like you were the dad that I once had; you were all different. Life was sucked out of you, and you were exhausted. You just wanted to be home.

A couple of weeks before your death, you and Mom started to pick out your casket, gravestone, and funeral details since you were expected to die within a couple of weeks. Mom even asked all family, friends, and associates of yours to send any pictures or stories of memories to her. She compiled two slideshows: one with pictures from your life with your favorite songs behind it and one with videos of people sharing memories about you for our immediate family. One Sunday afternoon, on August 16th, 2020, the whole family—your parents, siblings, nieces, and nephews—gathered in our home to watch your funeral slideshow of the pictures from your life. There was not a dry eye in the room following the showing. Everyone said their goodbye to you after, but it was scary. You could barely walk, you could not talk, except for some mumbles, and you had no idea what was going on. Each cousin, aunt, and uncle took their time to tell you goodbye. Everyone but me. I was too scared to talk to you, and I thought to myself, "I have a couple more days with him anyway." Instead, that night at 9:05 p.m., you took your last breath. Your friend was in your bedroom talking to you, even though you probably didn't understand what he was saying. I remember him yelling to us, "Girls! Girls!" We knew what it was. My mom, the two older sisters, and I ran into your bedroom while you took your last breath. Through sobs, we kept saying, "I love you, I love you, I love you," as if you would even hear us anymore. We lay with you for hours until the police showed up to fill out your death certificate. Even though we all knew you were going to die for months, it all became surreal that night. I guess I had been holding onto hope for the past several months, thinking maybe in some way, you would be healed. I kept thinking, "God won't let you die. He couldn't."

Now, a little over four years later, life is normal without you. I hate how that's even possible. I see my friends having good relationships with their dads. I see other people's dads joke around with them. I laugh too, but I do it to cover up the fact that it tears me up. I think, "Why did it have to be my dad?" I think about all the things that you will not get to experience with your beautiful wife and your five daughters, your girls. You will never get to meet your grandchildren, you will never get to meet my husband, and you won't be at my wedding. And, it pains me to admit it, but everything about you is starting to fade. Often, I will watch the videos that Mom put together about you. I do it to remind myself that you aren't forgotten and how much of an impact you made on people's lives. I can't hear your voice in my head anymore; it takes me a little longer to picture you each time I do, and I don't know what advice you would give me anymore. People will say to me, "What would your dad say?" But the thing is, I don't know what you would say. I don't remember. And it hurts so deeply because the one thing you were scared of most when you knew you were dying was that we would forget about you. And yes, although I may not remember your voice, I will always remember the tremendous impact you made on my life. I will never forget the lessons that you taught me. I will never forget how big you were on respect. I will never forget how you taught us to always say "yes ma'am" and "yes sir." I will never forget your immense faith

in Christ. I will never forget how you taught us to take a step back and laugh at ourselves. And guess what? My favorite compliment to receive is, "You remind me of your daddy," or "You have humor just like your daddy." Dad, I promise that I will try to make you proud each and every single day. It hurts that you're not with us, and I know you miss your girls so intensely. But, one sweet day, I will get to wrap my arms around your neck and give you a big hug like I used to. Thank you for watching over me, Daddy. I love you.

Love, your Clay-jay

