

Dear Cancer

Sommer Sison

Dear Cancer,

It has been over one year since you have taken my mother from me. She is gone, yet your aberrant presence still lingers in my life. Sunday mornings I sit at the table, waiting to hear her light footsteps drum against our wood floors, eager for the breakfast she is about to make. I wait and I wait, until this daze abruptly concludes as the growls from my stomach brings me back to reality, remembering that you are the reason she's gone. Eighth period, A.P. Biology, I daze off and mindlessly jot down notes whilst doodling along the margins of my paper; a happy family. It's the genetics unit. One minute my mind is free, head resting on the palm of my hand, without a care in the world until the clouded echo of my teacher's voice says your name, Cancer. I uneasily jerk up, rearrange my posture, and sit attentive. Just your name alone scares me. It refurbishes my repressed memories of you. As much as it pains me to resurface our history, I want you to understand how detrimental you truly are.

Growing up I've always heard murmurs of your forbidden name, but never from anyone had I personally known. Mentioned in the media here and there, your name was thrown around like a mythical creature that was only plausible in nightmares. Yet you managed to escape the realm of my imagination and become my reality. Driving home from a basketball game, my 13 year old self sat unyielding parallel to my distraught brother. My only visual recollection was from the corner of my eyes seeing the hump of his back hastily rise and fall and every now and then his entire body would oscillate. I on the other hand was overcome by a wave of confusion and shock. The conjoined noises of soft wails, tires rotating, and outside traffic play faintly in my memory as I expel myself from reality. Already questioning the imminent future, I've been contriving preliminary preparations for the worst case scenario once your name crawled off my father's tongue.

Recovering from this set back was not how I portrayed my family's predicament to play out. For one, my maternal family discovered the BRCA gene that birthed you was evident in all three daughters: my mother and my two aunts. You've attacked my whole family and I couldn't help but wonder if I was your next victim. Within the first two years, my mother had multiple surgeries, both a mastectomy, vasectomy, and a cosmetic breast implantation, yet life seemed completely normal. We had our daily family dinners, we continued our travels, and we collectively watched my brother's basketball tournaments: nothing had changed. Physically my mom still looked like my mom. With a full head of hair and a lively persona, the only thing off was the gleam of melancholy prevalent in her eyes. My warrior of a mother did all she could to give her three kids a normal life at the cost of her own emotional suppression and despondency. Our family lived in this ignorance bliss for the next year or so until another mammogram revealed that a tumor in her breast had redeveloped; you were back. Finally deciding to aggressively fight back, my mom endured numerous rounds of chemotherapy, radiation, pain killers, and gene therapy. The agony our family experienced worsened exponentially.

On March 4th 2018, my mother's journey in world was cut short, but the pain of grief that is rooted with in me does not compare to the constant state of distress that I was in for the last four years. Towards the end of my mom's life you spread from her chest to her brain. She forgot how to eat, she forgot how to walk, and most of all she forgot me. I along with every single family member stopped being a daughter,

son, and husband and became a caretaker. From the moment my siblings woke up, we tended to our mother, lifting her from the makeshift bed in our living room to her wheelchair, and then to the bathroom to help her urinate and brush her teeth. My grandparents had to watch their daughter regress back to an adult baby, spoon feeding her lunch and changing her clothes. After a long day at work, my father devoted his afternoon to making sure that my mom was happy and comfortable. Finally on her deathbed she was unable to talk and eat. I had to witness my vegetable of a mother bloated, hooked up to a never ending supply of tubes, but daily I still drove straight to the hospital after school so she wouldn't be alone. Attempting to converse with her, telling her about my day was the hardest part. I choked on my tears mustering up a few sentences, pretending for a second that she comprehended the words I said, pretending that this was normal. The only thing that kept me sane was the constant smile my mom upheld. She frequently mixed me up with my aunt, sister or the nurse but every night before I left, she responded to my 'I love you' with a hand squeeze and what I tell myself, a reassuring smile.

No child should experience the level of trauma you put me through. Watching your own mother degenerate before your eyes leaves you unhopeful for a chance at happiness. Lying to yourself and your mother that the family will be okay, giving her my blessing to leave this world was my greatest challenge. After my mom's passing I attempted to seek help from therapists and school social workers, but only found that I was talking to a person who could give no sagacious advice. All I yearned for was legitimate help, not temporary sympathy. Then, one night of a school mission trip a group of teenagers shared their struggles that they dealt with. One girl in particular spoke up about how her experience with your malevolence has caused her immense stress. Partially familiar with this girl, I reached out and explained how you have ruined the past four years of my life. To this day, we frequently disclose our family predicaments to one another, and I'm grateful to say I have finally found someone who makes me feel valid. For many kids who have a sick parent it is typical to feel belittled. When your whole life is revolved around your family's difficulties, stepping out into the real world makes you realize that no one truly understands. Although I have friends who graciously check up on me, it is difficult to let someone in on your personal life knowing that all they can do is say 'I'm sorry.' For me I have not become reliant on those around me to help me out of dark places, instead I have become my own light. By remembering the happy memories with my mother it helps to commemorate the importance of perseverance, in hopes to restore my happiness that you stole.

From the moment I was told about my mom's illness to her last breath, I was angry at you. Yet, in the least selfish way possible, the goodbye I said to my mom was also a goodbye to my constant state of fear, guilt, and sadness. This teenage ignorance I had towards society was hastily shattered, finally understanding how precious life truly is. Everyone, including myself, has this unrealistic expectation of living life until we're gray and old with our loved ones but I didn't think I would be that girl who lost her mother at 16. But when reality hits, it hits hard. I vicariously live by the ideology that everything happens for a reason, and by seeking what this situation was supposed to bring to me, I've concluded that my personal growth and understatement of life has blossomed.

Beginning my adventures of adulthood, I know that the independent mindset that was shaped by my struggles will carry me far. The strength I mustered to persevere through high school showed me the capacity of my mental endurance, which is why I've decided to continue my education in a competitive field like medicine. The nights where I had to step up to fill the parent role for my siblings taught me responsibility. The days I had to manually feed my mother taught me compassion. The years I put my family responsibilities first has taught me the meaning of sacrifice. After a tragedy, it is easy to claim that someone's faults do not define them and disregard the individual's growth. I say the adversity you

have put me through has without a doubt made me the person I am today, the good and the bad. Not only has my personal character matured, but my goals for the future have been influenced by my hardships. Growing up with a sick parent has highlighted the importance of quality medical assistance, encouraging my determination to impact the workforce. Not only do I hope to assist the sick, but by entering the medical field, I am preparing myself for my own genetic fate. Remember me, Cancer, you will pay for the damage you have caused.

Without love,

Sommer S. Sison