

2015 Cancer Unwrapped Winning Essays

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Hope and Faith

Fatima Al-Shimari

Dr. Ginsburg, “mama”, and “baba” all stared at me while I tried building up the courage to utter the sentence that would change my family’s life forever. Arabs never mentioned Cancer by its name, Saratan; instead, they referred to it as “That disease.” I stood there with blank stares from everyone around me while the doctor expected me to tell my father, my buddy, and hero that his own body had betrayed him; not during his time serving in Iraq’s war of 1980, or his period of imprisonment by Saddam Hussein’s tyranny, but by a cellular mutation that even Dr. Ginsburg could not fathom. I looked at my dad helplessly lying on the hospital bed, but I could not open my mouth to speak in fear of bursting to tears.

“Why had my parents not requested an interpreter”, I thought over and over again.

I had never missed a prayer before; five times a day since I was seven years old, praying to Allah, and asking him to bless my family with good health and unity. Had I been doing my prayers wrong?

When the doctor realized I could not translate, he again articulated slower this time, “Mr. Al-Shimari, I am afraid you have cancer. Stage four Adenocarcinoma of the stomach.” This time my dad comprehended a single word, cancer.

“Fatima... cancer... isn’t that the disease, that disease? Is this doctor saying I have Saratan?”

Why did the doctor mention the C-word again? Did he not see the pain he had already bestowed upon my family? When the doctor stated that he would be taking another biopsy to be certain, I knew exactly what I had to do. I excused myself to the waiting room, and in tears, prayed to Allah that this would all be a mistake. I recited every prayer I knew, asked the prophet for every ounce of mercy he possessed, and begged forgiveness for every sin I could remember committing from stealing pencil cap erasers, to stepping on ants as a child. Forty-five minutes later, God did not answer to my prayers. I prayed with passion, hoping that any supernatural force in the universe would recognize my despair.

I made deal after deal with God asking him to heal my father and when none of it seemed to work, I started questioning his presence.

My dad battled Cancer while I battled my religious identity. Why had God done this to us? My dad had never done anything wrong. Nevertheless, no sin or human deserved this kind of mental and physical punishment.

When my hope that God would miraculously cure my father started to wither away, I saw something that I had been too busy to notice before. Despite my father’s condition, he remained faithful to his lord. In fact, it seemed as if his condition had made him even closer to his faith. This puzzled me and when I fabricated the courage to confront my dad about this relationship, his response was simply, “This is God’s will.”

My father's relationship to his faith helped him stay strong through his suffering.

It no longer mattered to me whether God existed or whether my prayers were accepted or even that my dad remained faithful to his religion despite his adversity. In fact, I was obsessed only with my father's relationship between hope and faith. Could humans use faith as a means of coping with adversity beyond their control? The answer is definite. Faith provided a supernatural outlet for my father, which did not require any scientific or medical means of reassurance. It existed beyond the biopsy results or PET scans. Faith was there simply because an individual believed in a truth beyond the scope of their perceived reality. Hope was the inherent connection that existed between the individual and the scope of their faith. That relationship was undoubtedly a powerful one. For my father, more powerful than any chemotherapy, or diet recommendations could assist in his healing.

It was vital for my father to have escape even if it was in the metaphysical, and yet this relationship has increasingly played a role in my life. In imagining the world without the injustices that exist within it. In seeing a brighter future for families dealing with societal oppression, adversity, and discrimination. My father was a simple man, as with his relationship to his faith. However, it was his belief in the abstract that gives me the power everyday, to imagine a world better than it is today, even when my surroundings perceive otherwise.

One Hundred Thousand Wasted Hours

Ryan Arnold

Time is an illusion. It is intangible, a mere figment of consciousness; you can't sculpt it like a piece of clay. Yet for whatever reason, it seems to slow down, speed up, and morph spontaneously whenever anything significant occurs. This "time dilation" occurs whenever hardship strikes you, and until humans understand quantum mechanics and theory enough that we find a way to warp time and tunnel through the fabric of the universe, we will never have control over it. Even without any physically malleable qualities, it controls everything we do and plan, and it dictates what can be changed and what is lost to the ages. Something as ethereal as time has the potential to be infinitely more precious than any diamond or exotic car, but nearly everyone one takes it for granted... I know I did. However, unlike diamonds and sports cars, time can never be purchased or reclaimed if you want a second chance. Not today, not tomorrow, in a year, or an eternity. Once it's gone, it's gone. If you wasted it, it sucks for you. If it wasn't the best of times, to bad. Cancer has a way of making time seem to vanish, and when the time you had with a loved one runs out, all you wanna do is go back and say what you didn't have the chance to say before.

My time over the past five years has been nothing short of a roller coaster of emotions. I've been bullied ever since I was little because of a speech impediment (I stutter) and I deal with the fear of doing so daily. Furthermore, my parents divorced during my freshman year in high school. The emotional toll was heavy, like chaining my leg to steel ball. The worst part was after the divorce, my father and I drifted apart. I was never close with my father, but the effect was amplified. I knew of all the things he had done. He degraded the family's financial situation to a point where my mother had to inherit his mountain of debt, go into bankruptcy, and get more stressed out than anybody deserves to be, all the while refusing to work and help pay the bills. He constantly fought with me for ridiculous and childish reasons, and I did nothing but retaliate and get infuriated. He took up drinking heavily and self-medicating himself to ease the pain of the situation. Because of this, I blamed him for all my sorrow, and for the first time in my life I felt frothing, undeniable, blinding rage.

I didn't know it at the time, but he was showing symptoms of being clinically depressed and bipolar. He got diagnosed with this last winter, which explained everything. Nevertheless, I was still furious with him. When someone lives in broken home for many years, you relinquish the idea of forgiveness, something I can attest to personally. I still wonder why my family deserved to go through this, and why our time was wasted. Maybe it was to build character, or we had bad karma, or whatever the reason may be. All I know is that I regret feeling the way I did, because all I want right now is to go back and start over.

The ambiguous concept of lost time hit me like a runaway freight train very recently on Thursday, March 5th, 2015. On that day my father was diagnosed at the age of fifty nine with stage four metastasized melanoma. His oncologist said there are tumors in his lymph nodes, lungs, and spine and with experimental treatment, he could have a couple months left. He may not even see me graduate high school. My relationship with my dad is shattered on a good day, but when I got the call from my mother that he was in the ER due to cancer, I forgot about the

past. I ran out of English class and drove fast enough to cause the edge of my vision to blur trying to get to the hospital. When the shadow of death advances suddenly upon anyone you care about, nothing else matters. Nothing.

I immediately regretted the way I acted towards my father and felt disgusted with myself for whatever negative I said before everything fell apart. In the instant I got the call, I realized that even after all we went through, I still love him. He's my dad, and I'll only ever have one of him. The saying "if you love someone then let them go" is, quite frankly, ludicrous. When you love someone, even after the both of you go through an emotional minefield, you never want to see them go. I've got six months left with my dad at the most, and the both of us are terrified of what's coming; all I know is that my father is being ripped from my arms before I'll ever be ready to say goodbye, and the gravity of the situation is destroying my will to care about anything.

Right now, he sits in his home on Samish Island playing his guitars (he's gotten really good!) and trying his hardest to be positive about the whole situation. The worst part of this whole situation is the fact that he had to find new homes for his dogs, who became his surrogate children after I went hiatus. Cancer has effectively reaped my dad's dogs from whatever time he has left in his life, and that was the hardest thing to see. Hell would freeze over and I'd ice skate with the Devil before I'd give up my dogs, because they're my two best buddies. I can't imagine how heartbreaking it was for him. That was the beginning of the emotional black hole he's getting sucked into now, and I don't think he'll ever see the light of day again in the near future.

I don't want to admit it, but I think he's given up. I made him promise me that no matter what, he'd never stop fighting and never let cancer get the best of him. But the combination of the cancer, stress, heartbreak, terror, and pain medications have made that promise impossible to keep. He realizes that the fight was never winnable, just a hopeful figment of the imagination. The arduous part for me is that I'm too stubborn to realize this, and now I'm battling my own demons trying to come to terms with the fact that very soon I'll never get to talk to him or see him ever again. He'll only be a memory, an electrical signal arcing from one neuron to the next, and I've painfully recognized that the only vivid memories I have of my dad and I are us fighting and antagonizing each other. I'm not going to get the opportunity to go back and create new, fond memories of us together, I'm going to be stuck with the ones I want to forget. But if I forget those memories, then I'll have nothing left of my father except his belongings, which are worthless and nothing more than the atoms and molecules that make them up. Great memories are the most valuable things people carry with them and never think about. But what is a bad memory worth? This is the conundrum I'm in: I don't know if I want to forget the eloquent memories of my father which consist of the two of us screaming at each other and him wasting away due to cancer, or if I want to remember the time I had with him...even if it was unfavorable. Are my bad memories worth the pain of remembering my father, or will they prove to be too daunting for me to handle? It's a case of "pick your poison", and I'm not sure if I want the snake venom or the cyanide pill. Either choice is going to kill me, it's just a choice of which one will cause me less pain. If only my dad had more time, if only I had more time, if only we all had more time.

How I Lost My Hero

Destanie Ellis

Coming home from school each day as a little kid, I was greeted with a hug and a smiling face. Even if my day at school was bad, my dad always made the best of the situation: taking me out for a ride in our old Chevy to get hamburgers or playing video games with me at home. He would always give me advice on how to handle my situations and he would stick up for me and tell me to “keep my chin up, because no matter what you’ll be okay”. I was his princess.

One day, when I was very young, I was told by my mom that my dad was sick. He was diagnosed with leukemia-lymphoma when I was a baby. Being only six or seven when this was explained to me, I didn’t fully understand the meaning of the word “cancer”. What was this “sick” everyone was talking about? Couldn’t he just take some Tylenol and be better, like I did? Slowly I began to realize that whatever this sickness was, it wasn’t good. My childhood was filled with weekly doctor’s visits, sitting in the car for a two-hour drive to the nearest cancer treatment center. Of course, my dad being the country man he was, would turn up “KMNT 104.3” as loud as it would go and we would sing all the way there. I think personally that my dad inspired me in my love of singing and music, as it was something he always enjoyed.

I never minded going to the cancer center. The nurses were always very kind to me; reading me books or playing games with me. When I got a little older, I started to ask all kinds of questions. “What does this do?” I would ask as I watched them give IV’s to my dad. They would always explain what the procedure did, and how it would help my dad get better. According to the nurses (Who all ended up becoming very close friends with my dad) on the days I wouldn’t come to dad’s treatment, I was all he could talk about. I was always greeted by new nurses with an “Oh, you’re the daughter Charlie talks about so much!” My dad was a very popular person. Everyone in my small town (and every other town in Lewis County for that matter) knew who he was.

So when the cancer got worse... everything for us changed.

My dad started to become more irritable as the cancer progressed through his body. His ill-spoken words turned from frustration to full on cruelty, words that killed my soul and broke my body down. This of course threw me into a world of darkness and hate; locking myself away in my room every day and never talking to him, drowning out the yelling with headphones and loud music. Sometimes, I remember sitting on the floor and screaming my lungs out, hoping my desperate cries of distress would stop the fighting going on through the walls. Sometimes it worked, while other times it just fueled the fire. He became rude towards my mother, and as I became a teenager I felt the need to stand up for her. This in turn resulted in more pain for all of us.

It’s not that I “hated” my dad. I was just deeply saddened and hurt to see his mental and physical state deteriorating before my eyes. Of course I was confused. Why was this happening? Why was the happy go lucky person I knew from my childhood not the one I was seeing now? What

had caused him to be this way?

The trips to the doctors I used to enjoy now haunted me. He was getting worse and worse and I feared each appointment, not knowing if it would be his last.

The day came upon us suddenly. It felt like one of those moments where time stands still, and then rushes past you at the speed of light. Days felt like only hours. My family went into a cold numbness when we were told the chemotherapy and radiation would no longer be an option for my father. He, being the stubborn person that he was, refused to accept it. He took weeks of unnecessary treatment, telling himself that this wasn't the end; that the doctors could keep giving him medicine and it would all get better.

I had spent so much of my life pretending that his sickness didn't exist that I went into shock when I realized it was never going to leave his body. It was taking him over, like a fire in a dry field of wheat grass. He slowly lost his ability to walk, and not long before that a bad dose of radiation badly burned his face, leaving him unable to talk as well. The powerful, strong man I had always known had now withered away, and I refused to accept it. I continued to go to school, to numb myself with small talk and halfhearted conversations.

The day my father's soul left this world was a cruel, cruel day.

He had been admitted into the local hospital a week earlier. It was December 10th, 2012 when the lord took him from us. He did not die peacefully, even though I wish I could trick myself into believing he did. I was in school, and around 8am I started to feel very strange. Random tremors would rack through my body, my stomach felt nauseous, and it felt as though someone was attempting to bash in my skull in with a hammer. I knew that today was the day my mother and I were going to go visit my dad in the hospital, and I was picked up early from school. I thought we were going to go, but we just sat in the parking lot of the school for a long time without saying anything. I was extremely confused until my mother turned to me and told me that my Dad had passed on. He had fought his battle for almost 13 years. I didn't know what to think, let alone what to feel. I sat in silence the rest of the evening.

My father's death shattered our small community. The day of his passing, I texted my best friend at the time to tell her what had happened. According to my teachers, she burst into hysterics. My entire class was notified of the situation. All of them mourned with me. My dad had been their babysitter, their guide. He showed an insane amount of kindness to anyone close to me. When we held our ceremony of life for him, our small hall was filled with almost 300 people, lining the walls when we finally ran out of little grey folding chairs. He was so well known, and no one could comprehend that his soul had left us.

Today, I am 16 years old and it has been three years since my father's passing. I still cry over all the things I know he will not be with me for; my graduation, my wedding, and any children I have. But as each day passes, I tell myself that he is up there, watching over me. I know he is proud of me. I also know that he wouldn't like to see me crying, mourning him when we all know it was a blessing for his body to finally be rid of the suffering and the pain. In my heart, I

am happy to know that my dad is happy again. I like to tell myself he's living on a big farm up in heaven, taking care of all of the horses and animals that have come to join him in the afterlife.

And I know that someday, I will join him on his ranch in the sky.

Winter: My Favorite Season

Makaila Gangler

I wouldn't go as far as to say that I was a nerd in grade school, but let's face it, the stereotypes matched up rather perfectly. I wore thick glasses, possessed a slightly quirky sense of fashion, and hadn't really discovered the concept that is plucking one's eyebrows. So rather than engaging in a rousing game of tetherball like the rest of my young peers, I much preferred crouching against the brick wall of our small town elementary school during recess to lose myself in the Harry Potter series. And when one segregates herself from the recess-life of the fourth grade, it could be presumed that she might be lacking in the group of life skills labeled Social. In other words, I didn't have many friends. Not because I didn't want any, believe you me, I wanted friends. It just seemed as though there was no way of going about making friends when you were a tall, gangly girl wearing a hand-me-down Garfield graphic tee.

Finally, long after I had accepted that having buddies just wasn't in my life plans, one of my classmates decided to join me on the wall at recess one particularly overcast November day. For probably five minutes, he sat at an appropriate distance from me, just staring straight ahead as I pretended to read about the Sorcerer's Stone and wondered what the heck this cooty-covered, towhead boy was trying to pull and even more so, what the heck he was holding. Suddenly, using his hands to push himself, he ungracefully scooted closer to me until there was only about 2.5 inches between his shoulder and mine. He then blurted, "Wanna see pictures that I been makin'?"

I looked down to what he had been holding and realized that it was indeed a very neat stack of papers with drawings and chicken-scratch writing, or like he had said, pictures. Before I could answer he forced his pages on top of my already occupied lap and spoke again: "You'll fer sure like my pictures 'cause it's really cool stuff."

I glanced at the first paper, which had a very funny looking green cartoon woman on it. It was labeled, "My Girlfriend"

Austin Winters, I decided, would be a perfect best friend for me and boy, was I right. Every day from then on, we sat at the desks next to each other and played games we had created ourselves at recess. Austin was hilarious and he didn't mind that I was awkward and didn't really understand how to communicate in normalcy yet. He started to be what I looked forward to every morning when my mom woke me up for school. I never missed school and neither did he, so it was convenient. That is, until he started showing up less and less. And when he did show up, he came in dragging and he looked tired. His hyper attitude and hilarious remarks never changed, but I could tell something was up.

One day, another one when Austin was not there and I sat alone, our teacher Mrs. Corey announced the reason for his recent absenteeism. She explained to us that Austin Winters had leukemia. She described what it was to us and knowing that we most likely didn't completely comprehend the extent of it, summed it up to Austin was very sick and needed all the support from his classmates that he could. I was honestly hurt that he hadn't told me that he was sick. I

wanted to make him feel better, but I remember that Mrs. Corey told us not to bug him much about it and just be really nice to him. So that's just what I was going to do.

After Mrs. Corey had given us the news, Austin didn't come to school for about 2 months straight. The day that he was to come back was something I had been looking forward to since the week prior when Mrs. Corey told us that he was coming. Austin Winters walked into the classroom that Monday approximately 20 pounds lighter and missing, well, all of his hair. A majority of my classmates just stared, unsure what to say to him. That day was all about Austin. He stood in front of the class and displayed to us an enlarged photo of the super hero he had created while he was at the hospital "getting better". The super hero's name was Bacon Boy and he fought crime with his ability to shoot grease out of one hand and bacon bits out the other. Alongside Bacon Boy was his sidekick Sargent Sausage. Everyone absolutely adored him! We had no work that day, all we were to do was cherish our time with Austin, and that's what I did. Austin and I talked and he told me that he didn't tell me he was sick because he didn't want me to worry or tell other kids. I understood and forgave him, of course. This was the last day I shared with my best friend.

Our class and eventually, the whole elementary school began making flyers and buttons that had Bacon Boy on them and said things like "Pray for Austin" and "We believe in Bacon Boy". We fundraised for Austin and his family by selling Bacon Boy t-shirts through that school year and that whole summer into the 5th grade. His parents came to visit me once or twice and tell me how he was doing, but I wasn't able to visit him because he was so tired, they had said. Despite our efforts to hope and pray for him, Austin Winters finally lost his fight with leukemia on September 18th.

I remember coming to school after being gone on a long weekend and having a couple kids crowd me to tell me that Austin had died. I was sure they were playing a sick, sick joke; how could they be serious? Austin wasn't supposed to die, he was still alive. He had to be. I didn't believe them on bit. But when I sat down, my teacher walked over to me, her eyes rimmed with tears, to assure me that they weren't kidding. My 11 year old brain could not and did not process this information until I arrived at home that afternoon and it finally hit me. My best friend was dead; he was gone forever. I cried, oh man I cried. It wasn't just tears, mind you. It was body rattling, voice cracking, choking on my own voice, genuine sobbing.

It seemed so unfair to me that I had finally made a friend and he had been stolen from me less than a year after he entered my life. It was so insanely hard for me to stop being sad about what had happened. The ache I felt in my chest when it hit me never left, it simply subsided. In fact, writing about him right now has summoned it back and let me tell you, the pain is excruciating. However, I've come to the conclusion that Austin Winters would be terribly mad at me for crying and being sad about his absence. Because even at age 9, Austin was wise. He was kind and his main goal was to make the people around him laugh, even when he was so broken down from chemotherapy and constant bad news. So I made the decision to be happy for the times that Austin made me giggle uncontrollably, rather than sad because he couldn't do it anymore. Austin Winters and his whole family was the epitome of being positive in negative situations and that boy, at barely a decade old, changed not only my attitude and perspective, but also my entire life. Now, the absolute only thing that makes me sad about Austin's hasty departure from this earth is

that I will never be able to thank him enough for taking notice of me sitting on that brick wall in the fourth grade.

A Father's Love

Katie Kendrick

When a father first looks into the eyes of his daughter, something weird and wonderful happens. Suddenly his heart, that the world has attempted to turn to stone, melts. Nothing is more important than the health and happiness of his baby girl. For my Father and I this moment came later than most. My Dad refused to pick me up for the first six months of my life. Under the threat of divorce from my Mother, he finally did. Family lore says he was never the same. My earliest memories are that of an enormous man, with flaming red hair, a graying beard, and dirty hands. Daddy was a mechanic and I spent all the time I could with him in the garage. Whether it was simply handing him tools, or watching him weld, I delighted at the idea of helping him. More often than not, I was probably a pest, but he never sent me away. Each night, he would come home with a plastic Safeway bag and I would throw my arms around his legs and squeeze. He would do his best not to fall on his face, obviously overwhelmed by the strength of his six year old, pull a frosty chocolate milk from the bag for me and head into the kitchen to kiss my mother. Once my milk was finished and my mother was satisfied with the amount of bundling up I had done, all by myself, of course, I was very independent, we would head to our garage. Daddy would put a bolt in the clamp bolted to his bench and I would climb up on my stool and begin hacking away. We did this because he did not want to deal with a small child running around, getting into all manner of harmful chemicals, and expensive tools that he couldn't afford to replace. By the time dinner was ready, I would have finished a bucket of bolts and he would have finished part of the massive blue truck he spent most of his time rebuilding. We would head inside and eat, ending the night on the floor together watching TV.

What we didn't know was that soon life would be much different. My grandparents fell ill, and my mother began living with them. We lived with Mom and saw Daddy on the weekends. What we didn't notice in our time with him was the way he winced when he swallowed. Soon we moved into a house with room for all of us. Grandma passed and was buried. My mother still talks about how well I handled it. Then Grandpa. We tell people it was a broken heart that delivered him from this life into the next. Finally Dad told Mom that he needed to see a doctor. We got the results days later. Stage 3 esophogial cancer. The doctor told Dad he could choose to fight it, or he could let his cells quietly overtake him. He looked into the eyes of my mother, the love of his life, the woman who brought his children into the world, the woman who was still reeling from the loss of his parents. "I'm gonna fight It." he told her.

Our lives became a whirlwind of doctors, tests, pills, chemo, and radiation. My brother and I spent a lot of time with our aunt Kathy. My head still burns from all the pigtails pulled by my cousins. Eventually, Dad could no longer eat and a feeding tube had to be put in. He had to spend days at a time in doctor's offices, letting poison drip gradually into his body. His hair fell out, he lost weight, but none of that matters to a little girl. I was still totally and completely enchanted by the man who had let me stand on his boots and dance at my cousins wedding, who had taught me which wrench fit which bolt before I learned my ABC's, who showed how to clean a fish, who brought me chocolate milk every night. Nothing, not cancer, not death, could make him not my Daddy. After months of uncertainty, they set a surgery date. The doctors said that the surgery would take three hours, and that in it, they would finally remove the cancer from his body, and

that things looked positive. My brother and I were once again sent to our Aunt Kathy's house once more. We waited. Forty five minutes later, the phone rang and we were being ushered back to the hospital. They were sending Daddy home. I didn't understand the implications then.

A hospital bed was set up in our living room so Mom could take care of him. I spent many afternoons curled up beside him, doing my best to avoid hurting him. One night, I awoke to the feeling of my bed shifting. My mother was weeping. "Baby girl, Daddy's gone." Tears burst forth onto my cheeks and I followed Mom into the living room where she had begun making phone calls. My aunts arrived after, all at once. I was herded from Daddy's side onto the porch, once again exiled with Aunt Kathy. She, along with my brother and I sat in lawn chairs, staring at the stars. "When you miss your Dad," Aunt Kathy began, smashing the silence. "Look up, and whisper his name. The first star that blinks is him, waving." "Daddy." I whispered through my tears, looking into the sky, begging for an answer. A star glimmered in response and I felt hope rise in my chest. I knew we were going to be okay.

Cancer can kill cells, it can metastasize, and it can overtake organs, and blood and bones. But it can't destroy families. It can't make the smell of oil feel less like home, it can't take memories, it cannot kill love and most of all, and it cannot take hope. I will always love my father. The days after his death were the hardest of my life, but every time I went fishing afterward, or stepped into our garage, or got a good grade, I knew he was proud of me, and that he loved me. Nothing, will ever, take that away.

But It Was Just a Scab

Destiny Kulmus

You know that feeling when you're on a scary carnival ride, and you're gripping the handle bars so tight just waiting and waiting for the ride to come to a complete stop. It's your first time on the ride and you feel like its lasting forever, and you're just begging for it to stop. That's how I felt watching my dad go through cancer. In 2006, when I was just 10 years old, the strongest man I knew died a little inside. It started out as just being a little scab. "It will go away, I just hit my ear on something, don't worry," he would say. That phrase became a habit of his; only the words would change a little. "Daddy your ears bleeding again." "Oh it's just a scab I picked, it will heal soon." Soon became weeks. I could hear from my bedroom my mother and father arguing about my father getting his scab looked at. I would hear my dad say "it's just a scab! It's fine." On July 9th, 2006, the scab began to progress. My dad finally put aside his stubborn act and went to the doctors. My family and I waited patiently for the results. I will never forget the day my mom told me and my 9 older siblings that my dad became one of the statistic in the fastest growing cancer in the United States. I still remember to this day what I mumbled to myself that night as I was lying in bed: "it was just a scab..."

My dad was more tired than ever. He would go to work at 5 in the morning, come home at 5:30 at night, grab his food off the table, take it up to his room, watch television, and pass out. This became his daily routine. My dad was becoming a stranger. He wasn't the same happy, tough, jokester guy anymore. He was a slug: he was slow, quiet and drowsy. I remember my mother would say to me almost every day, "Shh your father's resting." Not only was my father's life changing, but so was mine and the rest of my family's. I couldn't be the little girl that played dress up, or yelled while singing karaoke, or the girl that would run up to greet daddy when she heard the front door open. I had to be quiet and careful of daddy: I had to be grown up. My mother's life was changing too. Dad was too tired to help out so my mom had to basically raise 10 kids on her own.

The doctors started therapy. They gave us hope. They would give my dad a radiation treatment every 2 weeks. By the 18th treatment, things were turning around. My dad wasn't a stranger anymore, he was almost himself again. It felt as if we were at the point of the carnival ride where it starts to slow down, your hair is blowing back, the sun is heating your skin just right and you can see the beautiful view from the very top of the ride. But everyone knows that part of the ride doesn't last long. The 25th radiation treatment was too much for my dad to handle without protecting the arteries in his brain. The radiation therapy made him extremely tired and run down. After he finished his radiation treatment, he had to go to a surgeon and have a piece of his ear cut out because the cancer was spreading. Now it was the part of the ride where you're so focused on the beautiful view, you aren't ready for what comes next... The drop...

It's now 2012. I am 12 years old. The 3rd week in October was a rough week for my dad. He became extremely ill. He was having really strong headaches, close to the spot where his cancer was. So, instead of being stubborn, he listened to my mom and went and saw the doctor. They diagnosed my dad with Vertigo. "He is just sick, with the flu," they'd say. On October 21st, 2012, my life was forever changed. I woke up for school. It was a normal day, but I was running

late. I heard my older sister, Brandie, yell “time to go, we’re going to miss the bus.” I ran downstairs to run out the door, as I saw my sister telling my dad goodbye as he was sleeping on the couch. We have this rule in my family that we always have to say goodbye to our parents. I ran out the door and Brandie looked at me and said, “Are you not going to tell dad goodbye?” I shrugged it off. We were late and I didn’t want to make us miss the bus. Plus, I’d see him when he got home from work. Not telling my father goodbye that day was probably my biggest regret.

That night my ears rang with the sound of sirens, I was in a dazed and confused state, and my eyes were crying out, begging for me to look away. My dad was laying on his bed crying in pain. He looked like a fish out of water gasping for air. His state of mind was something I had never seen before. I watched the paramedics carry him outside on a stretcher. My dad died 3 times in the ambulance on the way to the hospital. After several hours of pacing back in forth, the doctors told us that my dad had suffered a Bilateral Brain Stem stroke caused from his cancer radiation therapy not being done right. The doctors told us that my dad was a fried up vegetable and was going to die. He was in a coma for three weeks. When he awoke from this coma, he was a different person; but, not for the better. His brain was so badly damaged that he began to treat us differently. Having completely lost his filter and giving little respect most of the time: he would say things he never would have said before his stroke happened. My dad is now disabled and will never be able to work again.

I’m now 18 years old and I tell myself I never got to experience a dad. He’s not the man he used to be and never will be again. He makes me cry almost every day from the way he treats me. He is so badly messed up that he once told me he would protest to being my dad.

During this trial, I constantly asked myself what life would be like without a father. The steps I took to address my challenge included a lot of personal learning and growing. I had to learn how to be more patient, and how to still treat my father like my dad, even though he acted more like a child now. I had to learn how to not let the hurtful things he said to my family and I affect my personal life and to constantly remind myself that it was the stroke talking and not my dad. I learned to be more compassionate and caring, and I was able to find strength that I never knew I had to help me push through each day. This experience continues to help me realize that everyone has a cross to bear, some heavier than others, but we have to remember: life goes on. How we deal with these trials helps determine the kind of person we will become. We need to endure our trials because they teach us how to be stronger, and if we don’t, we lose the opportunity to gain strength and prepare ourselves for whatever trial is headed our way next. I’m still on that carnival ride, except this one is in my own backyard: it’s always running, there’s no park manager to close it down for the night.

I came to realize that after the scary drop at the top of the ride, the next time isn’t the same because you anticipate the drop from the very beginning now. I know that the drop is coming again for my dad. But this time, I will be stronger and better prepared for it. I know God only puts us through the trials He knows we are strong enough to handle. Now you know my story.

It's More Than Just a Definition

Lisa Lewis

Awaken from my long and peaceful nap, feeling drowsy and light headed. I stretched out like a cat awaking from its slumber. Shivers start to trickle down my spine, as the whispering breeze came in from the draft of the open window. I borrowed myself into my purple fleece blanket. I sighed, and then took a deep breath in.

"It was only a dream" I say to myself. I stare emotionless at my ceiling fan. I began to recall my dream. I dreamed of a better time, a more innocent time. I was in a jungle of little thorns and greenery, because I was on the hunt for magical red raspberries. They were known for their delicious taste and healing powers. My brother and I knew that if we were going to survive we had to consume the lot of them. So we would run down the towering bushes, row after row eating the raspberries. Bare foot, with the sun shining down on our smiling faces. We were happy and we were free. Our mom called us in from the kitchen window, telling us that it was lunch time and to come eat. Daniel and I looked at each other and laughed because we were already full from all the raspberries that we have already consumed.

Then I woke up. I woke up to a darker reality. My dream wasn't even a dream, it was a painful memory. It was the memories that always killed me. So did the pictures of the cheesy faces on the walls that stared back into my colorless eyes. The pictures mock me, they continue to remind me that things were different now. My mom's bell rang from her bedroom, "ring, ring" My presence was being beckoned for. I thought about the other kids at school, the ones with both their parents coming to their soccer games and musical concerts. It made me feel sick that I was here, in this dark, little house, playing the role of home nurse to my mom. I heard the ringing again.

"I'm coming mom," I quickly hasten myself to my mom's room. I open the door to the sight of my mom's weak but sweet smile looking back at me.

"Hey mom, I heard your bell, what do you need?" I asked, she smiled weakly again.

"Thank you Lisa for coming" she told me with great gratitude, I sighed.

"Well of course mom, always" She pointed at her water on her dresser.

"I can't reach it and I'm really thirsty" I nodded and walked over to her water and brought it to her. She tried to open it but couldn't, I could tell she was really tired today. She always was extremely tired, but especially when she was hooked up to her morphine bag, so I wasn't surprised. I opened her water for her, then helped her sit up a bit. I held the water bottle to her lips like a mother holds a bottle for their newborn babe. She only wanted a couple of sips. After three gulps she was satisfied. I then proceeded to close the lid and place it back on the dresser and helped her lay back down.

"Anything else mom?" I asked, because I always knew there was something.

"Hey Lisa are you okay?" I blink a few times and look back at my friend Alex across the table from me.

"Yeah, I'm alright, I was just spacing out."

I looked down at my blank piece of paper, I was suppose to be drawing in art class, but I just didn't have it in me today. I picked up the black carbon pencil and began to sketch out an eye, a happy smiling eye. Then I drew a pair of eyes, keeping attention to detail. I shaded the shadows around the nose and mouth. Once I finished my drawing, I didn't recognize the woman I drew. I drew my mom. I drew her before she was a living corpse. When her eyes use to sparkle when she laughed. When her hair would be down pass her shoulders, and she would wear in in beautiful waves. I drew her when she had full rosy cheeks.

My art teacher peeked over my shoulder.

"She's beautiful Lisa, nicely done."

"Yeah, She was."

"Was", I thought about the word for a second and realized it's very melancholy when you get used to referring to someone in past tense. That was the reality of my life now, having a mom was a thing of the past.

cancer:

noun

-the disease caused by an uncontrolled division of abnormal cells in a part of the body. That's the definition you will find when you look it up in a dictionary.

What you don't find in the dictionary, is the pain and suffering it causes to the victim and the ones around them. Everyone becomes a victim to cancer, even though I have never experience the battle myself, I have had to watch my mom battle a disease so deadly for a dreary ten years. That was ten years of my life taken from me because of some abnormal cell growth. The dictionary won't tell you about the effects of chemotherapy, or the side effects to the prescription drugs. They won't tell you what the smell of a decaying body smells like before it dies. The typed print, won't tell you the truth of the last goodbye.

Goodbyes are not forever, goodbyes are not the end, but mom I will miss you until we meet again.

Gift from Above

Amanda Osborn

A mother is a key aspect of every child's life. She is there to teach you lessons, make you laugh, be a shoulder to cry on, and help you to grow both physically and mentally. She should be there for all the key events- first day of high school, graduation, weddings, and grandchildren.

Although in most cases, it is common to have your mother at these events, my mom's experience was a bit different. At the age of fourteen my mom's mother, my grandmother, died due to breast cancer. My mom was suddenly the oldest of four, and left with a single father to provide for all of them. I may not have been there to experience the pain and sorrow of the loss of my grandmother, I still see the effects of it today. By losing her mother, my mom has been shaped into the woman she is today.

As I said before, my mom was the oldest of four. Her youngest sibling, my uncle, had just turned four when my grandma died. My mom suddenly became the primary caretaker of her siblings by making dinner, helping with homework, and making sure they were in bed on time. This made her grow up quickly, but also changed the relationship she had with her family members. She wasn't simply an older sister anymore, but was viewed more as a mother. It may have been hard for her, but my mom took this as an opportunity to seize life. With her time in high school she became an editor of the school yearbook, was homecoming and prom queen, and was also part of the student council. At a very young age my mother became a professional at multi-tasking and time management; skills that usually takes every other mother many years of practice.

Since my mom had already had experience in partaking in motherly duties, I understand why she has raised me so well. She has a way of doing things and those things get done. Meals are made in a timely manner and done to perfection, all the laundry is completed one day out of the week, and the house is spotless. I have always been grateful for a mom that has a sense of organization and stability.

Our relationship on a personal level has been different due to the way my mother was raised. Ever since I hit the age of thirteen, every year spent with my mother is an extra blessing. Since she didn't get this time period to spend with her mom, this is a new experience for both of us. She gets to experience the firsts in a new way, which is exciting for the both of us. Every little hurdle or time marker is that much more important to her as well. It was important for her to drop me off on my first day of high school, help me pick out a dress for my first high school dance, and even answer my questions on boy problems. And not to mention my whole senior year experience with getting ready for prom, graduation, and college-she's loving every second of being around. I find that she is more wise on every situation where I need guidance because in high school she had to figure everything out on her own, or with the help of her single father. She has instilled in me a sense of modesty and old school parenting, and even though it may be a challenge at times, I love her for it. Every year that we both get older, it's viewed as an extra blessing, because we have been granted time together that she never got to spend with her mother.

Due to my grandmother's battle with cancer, it also brings up anxiety and stress for my mother. Every year she gets a screening to make sure there are no possible cancer signs, and is preparing me to start these screenings in the next few years. Every strange lump, bump, or lasting signs of a flu can result in a trip or call to the doctor. Vitamins are an everyday aspect of my life, and let me tell you, there are a lot of them. I know it's only because of past experiences and to make sure I am healthy so a majority of the time I go with it. Cancer's huge effects on my mom's life shaped the way I am taken care of on a daily basis, which is something I have learned to accept.

Cancer has been given the reputation to take and never give. It takes away a person's health, life, and loved ones. Although cancer took away my chance to meet my grandmother, I also received the greatest gift-my mother. Without losing her mother she wouldn't be the woman she is today. My mom received her confidence from this experience, having to learn to be strong in the choices she makes every day that affects not only herself, but her family. She has become courageous from learning at a very young age to survive without somebody to hold her hand along the way. I get the opportunity to see this beautiful human every day, and I am already dreading the days we won't be able to spend together. I get nervous just thinking that she won't be here forever, but I am blessed for the days and memories we do have, knowing that not every girl gets this experience. Cancer may have taken a mother, but cancer also created the mother I have today.

Red Head

Shannon Keating

There were three weeks of buildup, to this moment. Fondly I brushed my orange, red hair, a tear slowly made its way down my face, and with it came the realization... I sat in the chair getting the last look of myself with my smooth, red locks. The wig maker began to shave section by section, careful to save every last strand. He was the last of his kind, an artisan from Osteria.

Anton started with my bangs which went just below my eyebrows. I remembered that four months ago I was concerned with how short my bangs were cut before homecoming. I thought about all the haircuts I had, realizing how little they meant when I was getting one of my last.

The next section that was severed was the sides. I longed for the hair that flowed since my youth. When I was a child everywhere I went people would stop me to tell me how beautiful my hair was. When I was with my mom in the checkout line at Costco, shyly hugging her leg while women gush over my red hair, telling me how special I was for being blessed with such gorgeous hair.

I wept for the loss of my identity and my youth. I had never known myself as anything other than a girl with long red hair.

My head was shaved, but there were still little stubs of hair that remained. It hurt; they were lodged in my scalp, ninety thousand little splinters whose goal was to aggravate me. Those nubs of hair that were once long and flowing drove me insane with the discomfort they brought. Losing the dusting of red that was painted over my pale scalp was harder than I could have imagined. I did have my wig yet, it was not the same. It itched. Wearing it was a constant reminder of what I had lost, and the pain that came with its creation. Although it was made of my own hair it was not me, it was only a feeble attempt to keep a part of myself I was not ready to let go of.

I could not deny the reality I was faced with. I had cancer. My treatment was short, a simple three months of chemotherapy.

New sprouts of hair began blooming all over my porcelain head. I adored them. Every night before I went to bed, I would lovingly rub hair growth oil on the buds, hoping it would somehow make a difference. The further out of treatment I was, the better I felt. As my hair grew back, so did my old self. I was once again a redhead, yet it was short lived. A mere six months after I was told I was in remission. I relapsed. I had to lose my hair. Again.

This time around was not so simple, five months of extreme chemotherapy, including a month in the hospital, and four weeks of radiation.

Three weeks after the start of my second round, my hair once again began to fall out. I laid in my hospital bed surrounded by fallen hairs. I knew that there was no point in trying to keep the inevitable from happening. My hair was merely a price that I needed to pay for my health. I had

already lost my youth to this dreadful disease. I had grown up. I asked the nurse to bring me a razor. I went to the bathroom, razor in hand, to shave myself back to where I was eight months ago. I stood there, and I shaved my head. I took control. Not a tear was shed; I had no reason to cry. I knew who I was: a strong, brave girl who would no longer be defined by what she look like. I was ready to face cancer once again.

My Friend, Cancer

Angela Meach

The chemicals ran through her body like acid, draining the life from her weak and fragile body. She turned her head - her mother lay exhausted from a long day of working. Her vision began to blur, her throat began to tighten. Before she could wipe the tears away, her mother slowly opened her eyes catching her daughter's tears. This was the moment she would never forget. Her mother reaches towards her cheek to wipe the tears away. Her mother smiled, "keep fighting baby, we are almost there." On the verge of death, she pulled through. After a yearlong battle with Leukemia, the battle is finally over and she had won.

I was diagnosed with Leukemia when I was eight years old. I was hospitalized for a year, and missed a lot of school. It was very difficult for me to learn, due to the chemotherapy. Because of it, I had to go to summer school. I lost all of my hair. Instead of the fairy tale you see in movies or on T.V., I was bullied. I was beaten up after school almost every day for a week by boys who felt that I was "contagious". On Friday of the first week, my mother noticed my bruised face and bleeding lip, and promptly took me out of summer school. This was when I met my tutor, Mrs. Shells, who pushed me to be the best that I could be. She did not see me as a weak and fragile little girl that everyone else saw; she saw my strengths and pushed me to my limit. Without her, I would have been held back almost 2 years. Instead, I am graduating high school with a 3.6 cumulative G.P.A!

When I finally went back to school in the 5th grade, the people who I thought were my "friends" became strangers. No one wanted to be friends with the "Cancer Girl". I soon learned how to be alone, and due to my weak condition, I was not allowed to go outside and play with all the other 5th graders; I became an outcast. Finally, I moved schools to Midland Elementary where I was around kind and loving people. This is where I became really close friends with Vanessa Navarro. She was the only person who could see past the no hair, scars and the mask; she saw me as a person. She is still my best friend to this day. With everything that has happened, she is always right there for me. From the ups and downs; from the beginning to graduation day, she will be right there next to me. Vanessa has always been there for me, yet I didn't know it was possible that someone would need me as much I needed Vanessa. To this day I regret failing the one person who would never let me down.

Amanda and I met June 25, 2013, outside of the thrift store next to the Graffiti Garage where the vibrant expressive paintings had been covered with dull white paint, waiting for new beginnings to emerge. With the bags in my hand, I watched a young girl fall outside in front of the window. I ran outside the store to help up this stranger; she laughed. Although confused, I extended my hand towards her and she grabbed ahold of it. At first, I began to think she was some crazy girl, but then she began to cry. I kneel down so that I was at eye level with her, she looked at me with tears in her eyes, but a smile on her face. "Thank you." she whispered, and slowly rose. She walked away, as I stood dumbstruck, left in front of the thrift store. A few weeks later, I began my volunteer service at Mary Bridge Hospital, with a program called "Friend to Friend." I had the opportunity to share my experience with my own battle with cancer, with current people who were still fighting. "Room 305" was my last room of the day to where I would meet and get to

know the patients. In this room, I met the girl who would impact my life more than I ever could have imagined. She told me that the day I met her outside of the thrift store, she had just been told she was diagnosed with Leukemia; the same cancer as me. It was her 6th day of chemotherapy, but she already looked like a different person. Every Saturday, when I went to volunteer, she was always my last room of the day. We talked about everything; she became one of my best friends.

Over the years, I looked forward to seeing her every weekend. I had someone who would listen to every problem that I had, and every pain that I felt, I shared with her. She was suffering in the hospital bed, but still had the strength to give me advice and smile. One day, it was really bad, the pain was over taking her. That day, I was not allowed in the room for 3 hours, behind the walls hearing her cry with agonizing pain. Finally, when I was allowed in the room, tears blurred my vision; this sweet innocent girl was left in a bed of sweat and tears. I walked towards the bed and she smiled a weak smile. I wiped the last tear on her cheek with my thumb, "I will be here for you, every Saturday." I promised this to her, but I failed her. The summer of 2014, I missed a total of 12 Saturdays with her. In the month of August, I received a call at 10 a.m. I soon found out that she had become worse, and that they did not know if she would make it. I had rushed to the hospital that day to find out that I was not allowed to see her because visiting hours were over and I was not on the volunteer list anymore.

Amanda passed away August 15, 2014. She would be 13 this year. I had failed to keep that promise and that is a lesson I will never forget. People can leave at any moment in time; it is important to spend time with those who matter. We are limited by the hands of time and every second should be cherished. Amanda will always be in my heart, and I will never take for granted the time I might have left with people who matter.

Without all of these experiences and people, I would not be the person I am today. The pain and every struggle created this strong independent woman I am now. I would not be here today if I gave up that night in the hospital bed, if I gave up after being beaten down by those boys. I am here today because I am fighter and I will not stop until each battle has been won.

My Not-So-Normal Teenage Life

Kat Tiscornia

I always wanted to be different. I always wanted to be that kid that had something that made them stand out from the crowd. I would have given anything to have an accent or be born somewhere exotic. Towards the end of my eighth grade year, you could say my wish came true. I wish I could say that my not-so-normal teenage life is because now I'm famous: the paparazzi follow me around wherever I go and I regularly hang out with Macklemore. But I can't. When I discovered a bump on my thigh, my family and I believed it was just a bad bruise. But as time passed we knew something was wrong. On March 3rd, 2013, a date I wish I could forget, I was given quite possibly the worst news of my life. I had a cancerous bone tumor known as Ewing Sarcoma. With only 250 cases diagnosed a year in the U.S., it was like winning the worst kind of lottery. My life changed drastically that day. I would never lead a normal teenage life again.

Right away, I began to undergo the hardest thing I had ever done, battling for my life. All of the small problems that I complained about before I got sick began to get replaced. It was no longer if my hair looked okay or if the guy I liked liked me back. Instead I worried about nine months of intense chemotherapy, a major surgery to rebuild my leg, getting feeding tubes up my nose, keeping up my weight while my tastebuds went crazy, and fighting to stay alive.

My experience through my cancer treatment was nothing like I thought it would be. Before I got sick the only kids I knew who had cancer were characters in books, on tv shows, and in movies. They did not seem real. I knew kids with cancer existed, but this had never affected me personally so I never thought about it. I never thought I would be one of them. That all changed when I was diagnosed. The kids, who were once just characters, became real people who I saw every day.

When I knew that my treatment would include chemotherapy, I immediately thought about every chemo situation I had read about or seen in a movie. Each one seemed different, but they all seemed to consist of the child losing their hair and throwing up constantly in a hospital while being visited by famous figures. Some of these stories contained facts; yes I lost my hair, but although I threw up I didn't do so uncontrollably. However, those stories never could begin to convey the emotions I felt throughout my treatment. I was prepared for being sick and having to spend days in the hospital. But nothing could have prepared me for the roller-coaster of emotions I would feel. How do you convey a feeling of relief when after nine days in the hospital you finally breathe air from the outside again? How do you convey a feeling of panic when the rest of your life feels on hold?

There were days I could do nothing but cry. I couldn't understand what I had done wrong. I felt I was being punished for something, but I did not know what that was. However, I knew that I could not spend every day crying. Somewhere along the way, I found the strength to look around me. I realized that I wanted, I needed, to be the voice for all the kids in the hospital. I began to speak and raise money for childhood cancer research and awareness. I found my voice and gained the confidence to do so, because it mattered so much to me. I wanted to help. I needed to show the world that the kids at the hospital, including me, were real not just characters in movies

and books.

I'm thankful to be able to say that I'm back in high school full time now pretending to be a normal teen. It's a little easier now with hair on my head, but I still walk with a limp because of the surgery to remove the tumor. I know my nickname is "Queen of Cancer". Some people avoid talking to me altogether. I guess they are worried about saying the wrong thing. On the day that I get the news that a boy I remember from the hospital has died is the same day my friend decides to have a mental break down over her hair. I can't get out of the conversation. I tell her that my hair doesn't look like Beyonce's either, but at least we have hair and that's something to celebrate. It doesn't go over well and I go off quietly and cry in the bathroom. Why did this boy have to die? It's just not fair. He has the same cancer as me. I can't cry long. I need to get to Biology for a test. I need to be normal, or at least act like it.

On Friday, when my friends are going out to a movie, I'm putting on my best dress and practicing my speech one more time. I've been invited to speak at another charity auction for the hospital. It's my chance to convince a large group of people to donate their hard-earned money for pediatric cancer research. After my speech a man comes up to shake my hand. As I draw my hand away I can see he has placed ten \$100 bills in my palm. I only think for a second about a new pair of shoes. This goes directly to my fundraising site and we're \$1000 closer to finding a cure for cancer. I can go to a movie another day.

Looking back at the person I was before being diagnosed is in a way looking back at a completely different version of me. Cancer changed me in a lot of ways. It taught me to understand that the day to day problems I faced before being diagnosed are really not that important in the long run. It taught me to be strong, confident, brave, and to live in the present. The experience I'm having isn't anything like that of a movie. I don't meet drop dead gorgeous guys in the waiting room of the hospital. However, I do meet people whose stories continue to inspire me each day. There are no Augustus Waters, but every person has a unique story to tell. We are bonded together by the fact that we can no longer be a part of our normal social scene. Our sickness made that impossible. We have become each other's family, the hospital our new home.

Although I am the person I am today because of my cancer, my cancer does not define me. It is the traits I learned through my cancer treatment that have created the new me. I guess the question is, do I enjoy the new me? Can I see all that this new me has to offer? I'm still working on these questions. If this was the movie *Freaky Friday*, I could go back to the person I used to be, to my normal life. I would definitely appreciate it more now. Since I can't go back, I have no choice but to accept and embrace the new person I've become, and my new not-so-normal teenage life.

