

CANCER PATHWAYS
CANCER Writing
Contest
UNWRAPPED

2022 Edition

A collection of heartfelt
stories written by teens
facing cancer.

Over the past 21 years, we've envisioned a world where no one faces cancer alone.

We've 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.

We've been a leader in empowering and educating teens on healthy behavior and choices that can reduce their cancer risk and improve health. 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. Our cancer survivor events create lifelong memories and friendships for families.

This is Cancer Pathways' (formerly Gilda's Club Seattle) 21st year, and we remain committed to changing the world for those facing the impact of cancer.

Visit us online at: www.cancerpathways.org

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ABOUT CANCER UNWRAPPED

Every year, since 2006, we have been asking teens to tell us how cancer has impacted their lives through our Cancer Unwrapped Teen Writing Contest. Over 6,100 teens across the U.S. have taken the time to put their experience in honest and heartfelt writing.

Each story is unique. Teens may talk about their own cancer diagnosis, or the impact it has had on them when a loved one was touched by cancer. Every year, teens read their winning essays aloud at our annual reception, now on a virtual platform, an intimate setting where families, friends, contest judges and supporters come together to hear stories. 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 are also grateful to the Lucky Seven Foundation and to Sally Nordstrom for supporting this program year after year and making it possible to amplify the voices of teens facing cancer.

2022 WINNING ESSAYS

Poison by Moira

12th grade, Washington

Personal Diagnosis

So.

You too huh?

Well, the least I can do for you is give you some advice along the way.

These caverns are filled with traps and tricks meant to harm you.

You can avoid most of them.

But there are five poisons required for you to pass through.

They may be fun colors, and some you may have heard of before.

But I promise that if you make it, these concoctions will leave you changed.

You have been warned.

Godspeed soldier.

There's a poison within me.

They tell you about the first poison. They tell you that it's going to make you better. They tell you that everything is going to be okay. But will it really? It doesn't feel like it's going to be okay. In fact, you are terrified as things are done to you, needles drill into your flesh with spotlights of white, penetrating light highlighting the atrocity. You were a child, but you were old enough to know that they should've been more transparent with you. You were old enough to advocate for yourself, but who would've listened to a child. All the words in the world won't make sense when they are not prefaced with an honest word.

"You're going to be fine."

How? How am I going to be fine? MY life fell apart at the seams and the doctors came in with platitudes before performing surgeries on ME that I didn't even know about. Surgeries that scared me, surgeries that changed me.

I hated my line. I don't know how you feel about yours. That tube was simultaneously my lifeline and my anchor. It's like a mermaid being drowned in seawater. You know you can't float, but you can't swim. What then?

I'm poisoning myself.

The second poison is warned about only on the depths of Reddit forums. It's found in the tales of terrible people who receive the comeuppance they deserve. I found the poison entering my veins when I picked up the phone hoping for the notifications scrawled across the shiny glass to be from the people I actually cared about. But no, I'm not lucky enough for that. The poison is bitter and it leaves you feeling even worse than you already felt. You were already reckoning with the fact that life as you know it is over and you're left sitting in a bed while your phone overloads with phony people and their hashtags turning you into a phenomenon. There's nothing you can do to combat it, people take your story of heartache and a tumultuous war against death and turn it into engagement on their stories.

You'll want to reach out to those who you care about. Granted, this is a hard time for them and they are having to deal with losing a friend, you have to be gracious with them.

"Do I though?"

NO! The only person you need to be gracious with is yourself. After all, everyone else isn't dying. It doesn't even feel like it. That's your cross to bear.

What's going on?

The third poison is subtle and leaves you with an ongoing tingling sensation. It ticks inside of you like a bomb about to splatter you across the walls. Time, the sick being it is, has it's way with you. A lion caged by cells that hope to pounce on it. It's the most manageable of the poisons but it sure isn't fun. There are ways to alleviate it's slow draining effect on you. Common activities include tv binges, walking laps, puzzles, card and video games, YouTube, and just talking. But those only last for so long. This poison gets caught in your throat, it's syrupy texture chokes you and leaves you begging for air. It's too cruel to give up though. It's two hands grasp you by the neck, strangling you till your will to live has just about run out. Then, it vanishes. Flying by and leaving you stranded with no clue of what just happened. It's a tricky one that way.

My vision is getting fuzzy.

Similar to the last one, this poison is small. All it takes is a drop. and it seems manageable at first. You feel as if this isn't going to affect you in the long run, but you can't shake the headache and the clenching of your heart that renders you motionless eventually. Almost exactly how cancer acts, this poison eats you up from the inside. It's acidic nature eats at everything you once held to be true about yourself. It takes your self-worth and burns it up like paper, the flame spotlighting everything you hate. Your bald head and lack of eyebrows glow back at you, the shiny oil of your skin reflecting the firelight. The flabs that have developed from such a sedentary lifestyle swallow you whole and the hope of chemotherapies effects fighting this are taken away by a well-meaning but misguided nutritionist. Your mind begins to weaken from a lack of stimulation, after all police dramas can do so little in terms of education. And then, when you least expect it, your eyes go. You don't see things right anymore. You look at yourself as merely a walking corpse waiting to fester and die. Eventually it gets better, but only years of development and exercise can heal the damage this one causes.

Please stop.

Once you've drunk all your other concoctions, there's one left. It's shiny and dull, white, and black. It's so clear you can see your reflection in the glass and so opaque you can't see past the first layer of murky ink. It's ashy in taste but also sugary. It leaves you with a high and then a crash. This poison is, to put it simply, the future. What lies ahead. Life after cancer is not all that it is made out to be, from either stance. There is so much beauty to be found. The beautiful sights that you'll see, the scrumptious food you'll taste, the life-giving friendships that you will make. There's so much more beyond the four white walls and dry air of the hospital. But, there's a reason that you were kept in those four walls. Outside enemies lie in wait. Physical therapy seeks to tear every muscle open fiber by fiber until you are made new. Invasive questions reopen old wounds and leave you flayed out like a salmon to be analyzed by a science class. And most dangerously is the memory loss. My advice to you is write it down, everything you see, feel, think, sense. Write it down. I'm two years out, and I would give anything to have a peek at those emotions. I want—no, I need to feel again. I am so disconnected from the caverns of cancer. I'm trapped in a cave, rocks collapsed from the ceiling trapping me. I can't go back, but I can leave you with this.

Stay on your toes. Keep moving forward. Guard your heart. And most of all, Beware the poisons.

I just want out.

I really hope you made it out.

It's lonely.
The caves are kinda dark.
I just want to drink the poison
Again.

Unwell by Alexis

11th grade, Nebraska

Loved one's diagnosis

She sits on the edge of the couch, putting together a playlist filled with old Matchbox 20 songs and a bit of Elton John here and there. It was a strange combination, but it had been a rough day. Her mom was at work. Her twelve hour shift that had lasted fourteen hours was almost over. The hospital was a needy place, she thought. Her dad lay on the floor in his room, his arm in a sling. His shoulder surgery had gone well but he must be feeling the effects of the anesthesia still. That's why his head hurt. Another groan and she asks if he's ok. He can barely talk through the pain but she manages to catch him nodding his head. Liar. She closes her eyes as Unwell starts playing on her phone. She'd give anything to see Matchbox 20 in concert but the tickets her dad bought weren't for her. "I'm not crazy, I'm just a little unwell." A door slams and she's jolted out of her stupor. She looks up to find her mom making her way to the bathroom. She'd assumed her mom would go straight for her incapacitated dad but it seems he can wait. 2 minutes. 5 minutes. 10 minutes pass until finally her mom is done showering. Her mom falls into the couch next to her. The girl tells her how her dad has been like this for hours. Since she last called around lunch, really. She reminds her mom of the weeks before, of him forgetting things and how he couldn't see his keyboard as he was trying to type. Her mom nods and runs back to her husband. "Soon enough you're gonna think of me. And how I used to be."

Six months pass and she's sitting on her bed this time. Unwell has become her anthem. Her dad's headaches have gotten worse since he left the hospital. Sometimes he forgets her name and what day it is. He doesn't work anymore either. She remembers the nightmare, a Glioblastoma Multiforme, a deadly little tumor. She pretends to sleep as her dad comes in. Walking is hard for him, so he shuffles his feet. It reminds her of that zombie show she just watched. He turns on the light to wake her up, whispering something she can't hear. He tries to leave, tries to walk back up stairs, but doesn't make it. He collapses. The hallway isn't big enough for his seizing, but he doesn't care. He vibrates, saying he's cold as he curls into a ball. Her phone is almost dead, but she calls her mom who calls her grandma. Her mom is working again. She only has three shifts a week but somehow the timing is always wrong. Her grandma arrives. She can't find them because she doesn't look downstairs, so the girl calls to her. Her dad is covering his ears now. Loud noises hurt. Her grandma makes her way to the back

hallway of the basement. The two of them are numb as they stare at the man they once knew. "Somehow, I've lost my mind."

It's been a year and a half since she lost her dad. He's not gone-gone, but she still speaks in past tense. He says that the spiders in his head are building webs. She thinks they must be the poisonous kind. He forgot that her birthday is tomorrow. Last week he forgot her name again, and tomorrow he'll ask if it's Thursday or Friday but it will only be Wednesday. He sleeps all day, but never at night. She doesn't sleep ever. Her dad starts fights sometimes. Her mom says he's trying, but she doesn't know. He doesn't know, either. He thinks it's been an hour, but it's only been a minute. Time really must be relative. She hates it, this, cancer. She hates change most of all, and yet, somehow, she's been flipped inside-out and tumble-dried. She'd call that change. She turns on her song, her playlist cued up to Matchbox 20. "Hold on, feeling like I'm headed for a break down. And I don't know why."

"I'm not crazy, I'm just a little unwell."

Reconciliation by Olivia

12th grade, New Hampshire

Personal Diagnosis

I'm in a hospital bed in the photograph. Tubes sprout from my chest, weaving towards machines just out of frame. My skin is almost translucent, contrasting with the warm pink of my favorite hat. Wisps of my remaining hair peek out from underneath, the curled insignia of childhood cancer on the brim. I'm smiling at the camera, my grin crooked and gap-toothed, not yet straightened by years of braces. I know that it's me in the picture, but I feel different. I have the same slope to my nose, the same blue eyes, the same ears (one sticking out slightly further than the other). I know that it's me.

Why can't I recognize myself?

The worst memories ache with phantom pain. I remember the sores lining my throat, reopening when the medications caused my stomach to upheave, over and over until all that came up was bile and blood. I remember the ache of bone marrow samples, six-inch needles piercing my spine. I remember the helplessness of slipping on the cold tile floor, pinning myself beneath the wheels of the medical pole hooked to my chest. I remember the day of my diagnosis, eight years old, asking my mom if I was going to die. My voice wavered. I barely understood the concept.

Tears streamed down her face. "We're going to do everything we can." She told me. It was the only answer she could give.

Eventually, the happier memories come back too. I remember asking nurses to sneak me heated blankets while my mom showered, cackling when she would find me within my cocoon. I remember dancing with a younger girl who had the same illness as I did. Her disco ball sent colorful lights beaming across the blank rooms. I remember making splatter art with the kids from my ward, filling syringes with paint. I remember pulling my little brother into my lap when he visited, using the buttons only nurses could touch to raise the bed as high as possible, just to make him laugh.

People often tell me to look for the good that came out of my experience. I resent this. I have struggled through the aftermath of my treatment for nine years. Remission means that the cancer is gone, but the damage it caused never leaves. I found joyful moments during treatment, but the more I realized how deeply the chemotherapy affected me, the more bitter I became. I lost a year to hospitals and gurneys; I developed a neurological disorder and a heart condition. Cancer stripped me of a part of my childhood, and who

knows how much of my future. The concept of anything good emerging from that seemed incomprehensible. It took years for me to realize that it was okay to be upset. There's no proper way to mourn the loss of the life I could have had. Processing that grief was my way of coming to terms with my experience, not scouring my pain for a silver lining.

Now, I use my life to help others. I work with organizations including the Children's Hospital at Dartmouth, the American Cancer Society, and the Hole in the Wall Gang Camp (a summer camp for children with life-threatening illnesses), where I use my story to raise money and awareness for kids like me. I'm also in a study of children who underwent chemotherapy in the hopes that doctors can use my data to improve cancer treatments of the future. I am using my experience to enact good. I want to do so much more.

Cancer changed me. I may not be the person my younger self thought I would be today, but that's okay. I know that I am worthy of the life that she fought to give me. One day, I hope to earn the ability to look back at her and recognize myself. I think I'm finally getting there.

The Sun Rose Again by Allie

12th grade, Idaho

Personal Diagnosis

It was as if all the light was being pulled from my body, pouring into the atmosphere and leaving a trembling cold behind. I stepped outside in 80-degree weather and couldn't control the shiver. I was freezing. I was sick. I was fading.

I remember going to the doctor and the specialist immediately stating that he was worried, that surgery would need to be scheduled immediately. I remember being so scared of the idea of an operation, fearing the needles that came with it. I had always been terrified of getting poked. I remember going into the surgery room, feeling a little dazed but still holding my mom's hand for a quick second before I smiled and got whisked away. I remember making friendly conversation with my surgeons until the anesthesia knocked me out cold, trying to ease the fear that gripped my heart before the medicine stopped all sense of time. Even when I was brought to my knees, surrendering to the chill throughout, I never imagined that I had cancer. The word stung like needles and burned like antiseptic in an open wound. Cancer was for the elderly, for frail infants. Cancer was a sad story you read in books or a plot point in movies designed to make you cry. I was a perfectly normal fifteen-year-old girl, doe-eyed and healthy. How could malformed cells strip me of everything I didn't have time to fully appreciate?

I told my friends it wouldn't be cancer, not just to reassure them, but to convince myself. And for the longest time, I truly believed that it couldn't possibly be. I lived in a state of blissful ignorance until the day I walked out of my Drivers-Ed class. I saw my mom standing at the bottom of the staircase, her usually present smile a million miles away, and my world fell apart.

The fear and absolute heartbreak in her chocolate eyes said it all, the biopsy came back positive. "Hodgkin's Lymphoma," she whispered into my hair through strangled sobs in the school hallway. My parents enveloped me in a tight embrace, and though those hugs usually melted my worries, I didn't feel nearly as safe now. The sun had set on the easy days I remembered, and I knew many dark nights lie ahead.

I was terrified to face the unknown, to fight this war alone. But I never expected what came shortly after my diagnosis. Hundreds of texts came pouring in from my closest friends and people I barely knew. Stories, like glimmering stars in the night sky, were gifted to me by cancer survivors and their loved ones. I was awestruck by how many

people cared; they were in this battle right alongside me. I was showered with presents, visits, and heartfelt letters. My cheer team showed up at my door with a basket of all my favorite things; this group of girls had my back no matter how weak I was bound to get. I was lifted from rock bottom by healthy hands, carrying me through the earliest stages of treatment.

With the strength of thousands around me, I was taken to the hospital in Salt Lake where I would be treated over the summer. My first night at the hospital is one that is forever seared into my memory. The piercing white lights above, the burning smell of hand sanitizer that infected the food I ate, and the broken smiles plastered on families' faces, who looked to be moments away from collapse. I laid on the medical bed, thin paper separating my body from touching the surface. I squeezed my mom's hand, attempting to hide the fear in my eyes as the cheery nurse disinfected my skin to prepare for my port access. The resounding click of the needle piercing skin sent electric shivers down my spine. The doctors pumped my body with cold fluids and medicines, and I was feeling okay. I watched TV and ordered room service. It wasn't until a couple hours later that I started to shake. I asked for an extra blanket, then two, then another. A nurse calmly checked my temperature and reacted with alarm when she realized it was 104.7. And still, I was freezing. Doctors came in and forced the blankets off me. After half an hour of absolute misery as deafening cold tortured my body, they gave me a pill that helped me fall asleep. I was awoken repeatedly by concerned nurses, needing to check my temperature again. But the worst was over. I just had two more days in the hospital before I could be released.

I returned to Idaho a few weeks into treatment to go to cheerleading practice; I wasn't going to miss my second year on the high school team no matter how sick I was. I found myself stumbling, barely able to complete a lap around the track with the other girls for warm-up. I sat on the bleachers, pulling at blonde strands of hair, and letting them fall to the concrete. A few nights later I stood in my shower, tears cascading down my cheeks as I watched my honey-gold hair swirl down the drain. I sat in a chair as my mom shaved the rest, each stroke on my scalp like a knife to my pride. Standing in front of the mirror, I barely recognized the skeleton of a girl that I used to be. She was pale, grey, and drained of the life that used to course through healthy veins. I was damaged, broken, full of sickness that few could understand. I tiptoed downstairs, my head physically lighter, but weighed down by shame. When I reached ground level, my dad kissed my bare head and said I was strong. Despite all my imperfections, he still called me beautiful.

After that, everything was strictly procedure. I took each needle, each transfusion, each blood draw with the decisive mindset that I was just working towards a goal. In school, I

never settled for less than perfection, and my diagnosis was only a project needing completion. I needed to beat cancer to prove I was good enough. I had a checklist of tasks, such as taking my meds, resting frequently, and drinking lots of water. And there was the finish date when I was supposed to be completely done. I would reach that day, no matter what it took. I had no other choice. Because it wasn't just me battling for my life, the world was backing this fight.

After months of combatting the disease that had overstayed its welcome, my last scan came back perfectly boring. There was no abnormal glow on the X-ray, indicating where the cancer had invaded. I could breathe a sigh of relief and feel the pure air course through my healed body.

In each passing day, my hair grows longer, and the pain fades into distant memory. The darkness had taken over, twisting its ugly tendrils around my lymph nodes and breaking down my helpless immune system. Drops of sunshine trickled through my veins with each treatment, light overtaking the dark. And after months of relentless battle, the light won. For all the people struggling with their own battles, you can win. For all the people that have lost, you can still live. Relish each morning and soak in the glow because for you, and for me, the sun rose again.

On a scale of 1 to 10 by Mia

12th grade, North Dakota

Personal Diagnosis

I wish that when doctors ask you to, “Rate your pain from 1 to 10” the numbers go beyond ten because every time they asked me what my pain felt like it felt more like a 20. My name is Mia Thinnes and when I was six years old I was diagnosed with a brain tumor.

It started when I was five years old, I had unexplainable migraines every day. My parents and I went to pediatricians, chiropractors, you name it, but no one had a solution. Then, mercifully, came the suggestion of an MRI scan. The first of many MRIs revealed a golf ball-sized tumor sitting at the base of my skull, mere inches away from my brain stem. My treatment consisted of 6 weeks of chemo and radiation in Rochester, Minnesota at the Mayo Clinic and 55 weeks of chemo in my home town Bismarck, ND. I had a port surgery when we arrived.

I missed the entire first half of first grade, and I would soon learn that nothing would be the same between me, my old friends, and my two sisters. I wasn't faster than the other students anymore, not like I had been. Most days I went to school for half of the regular time. I didn't go outside for recess, I wore a mask to school every day, and I was constantly prompted by the same student why I wore a hat all day.

I made it through elementary school with fewer friends than when I had started, but a better understanding of who the people supporting me were. I loved learning about new subjects and stories of adventure and mystery intrigued me. I had my port removed and until April of 2013, when my vision started to go blurry, life was all that I could make it.

My mom took me to the eye doctor after I could no longer see the church song lyrics projected on the screen a few yards away from me. The doctor pronounced the word cataracts like “Cats-are-act's.” and I soon found myself in a hospital room again. I think that the worst part about the recovery was the tape we used to secure the eyepatch around my eye. Since the age of nine, I've been wearing glasses.

In my favorite stories, heroes are tested again and again by the antagonist to see if they will finally buckle under the pressure. I'm no hero, but my story is similar to theirs. In October 2014, I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer.

The doctors said that I was lucky because they caught it at an early stage, I would not need to have chemo or radiation, and they only needed to take one side out.

Regardless of my parent's wishes to take both sides of my thyroid out, they proceeded with the surgery. After spending an agonizing night in the hospital with my throat on fire we started to make our way home.

The telephone rang a shrill sound and informed us that we had to come back and have the other side taken out because it was also cancerous. With the doctors continuously apologizing, I was put under anesthesia and operated on for the second time. I woke up the second time with fire in my throat maximized to triple. I thought it ironic that no one ever asked me how I felt about the surgery.

Every morning I wake up, take a medicine called Levothyroxine, and wait for a half-hour to eat breakfast. During this time I proceed through the regular routine of a seventeen-year-old going to high school and think to myself what things would be like if the doctors hadn't found the tumor when I was six.

Sometimes I feel like a child in a young woman's body. I want to play with toys and run around outside all day without a care in the world. If I could get the time back I would go outside and play with my friends and sisters. Maybe then I wouldn't be as lonely and shy as I am today, but those are just ifs.

In a way, what happened to me is what made me become who I am today. I consider myself a fun-loving free spirit. I try my hardest to be kind to every individual I meet, and I have plans to go to college to become an elementary teacher. I find joy in storybooks, poetry, and have done some fiction writing myself. Nothing is more important to me than my family.

On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you describe the effect cancer had on you? Again the scale goes far beyond ten. Through a brain tumor diagnosis, chemo and radiation, port surgery cataracts, and two thyroid surgeries my whole life has had ups and downs, twists and turns, and sometimes stop and yield signs. 1000%, my experience with cancer has changed me and I wouldn't change it for the world. Thank you for reading my entry! I hope to hear from you soon.

Yellow Roses by Liana

11th, California

Loved one's diagnosis (family member, friend)

Her favorite flowers were yellow roses. We'd get them for her on every occasion; her birthday, anniversary, and Mother's Day. Seeing those flowers on the table on some of the happiest days in my life, I never would've expected to see them one last time, at her funeral. My mom, Rozita, was the most caring person I've ever had the pleasure of knowing. Nothing mattered more to her than love. Love manifested in our family, and we always stood by each other through it all.

When I was in the second grade, my twin sister and I sat next to our parents, who had something to tell us. Mom was sick, she had cancer, and she'd be seeing doctors more often from now on. She would start some treatment called chemo, so we had to be extra careful to not get sick. Most eight year olds don't have an extensive knowledge about cancer, but the possibility that I might not have much time left with her always stayed in the back of my mind.

For a while, the chemotherapy weakened her, but rather than weakening our family, it brought us closer. I'll never forget the first night she couldn't stop throwing up, and called paramedics sobbing. As a third grader, I should've been paralyzed with fear, but instead, seeing everyone rush to help our family made me realize how many people cared for us. My mother always had everybody's best interests at heart, and seeing her get the same treatment warmed my heart. Slowly, the treatments worked, and her stage 3 breast cancer finally turned into a year or two of remission. It was difficult to understand that it wasn't completely gone, just dormant, like a volcano waiting to erupt. I still don't remember exactly how it happened, but around the time my sister and I started middle school, her cancer flared up again. This time, it metastasized throughout her body, her bones, lungs, and other organs. We had those uncomfortable conversations, what would we do if Mama wasn't around anymore, and if we would make sure to take care of Dad. I never accepted that she could actually leave us, meanwhile every day of her life was a battle.

My mom became my best friend. I'd sit in her embrace for hours at a time, just appreciating her existence. What I'd give now to be held in those arms again. We would go shopping, on coffee dates, and to movies together, anything to live in the moment with her by my side. When I'd break down, even if no one could get me to talk, I'd always open up when she came to my bedside. She'd sit on my bed and stroke my hair until I fell asleep. It amazes me to this day how she carried the weight of the world on her shoulders and still managed to reassure me that my problems mattered most. A month before everything went wrong, she started to always feel tired, and kept apologizing for not having the energy she used to radiate. I was carefree, thinking

nothing of it; sitting in her bed, caressing her shaven head, our original roles now reversed. I made a mental vow to care for her forever, and accept that my problems could always wait, for I devoted myself to solving hers.

To this day, the thing that bothers me most is that there was nothing I could've done to keep her here longer. One night that I'll never forget, her patience ran out. I'd seen what I thought was the worst, yet I never could've prepared to handle what I saw that night. The world was crumbling around me, and there was absolutely nothing I could do to help. She went to the hospital for a month. The last time I spoke to her was on New Year's Eve. She said, "I love you," and I said goodbye. After that, she fell into a coma. The cancer had hit her brain. But to my stubborn understanding, nothing had changed - she was still the fighter I knew her to be on the inside.

I had a dream one night. My mom told me she was done with the sickness. I woke up ecstatic, assuming she'd be talking and walking again. But that's all it was. A dream. Hours later, I got called out of class. My sister was waiting for me in the counselor's office. It felt like a movie, walking down the hall, thinking that there's no way my mom could be dying. I had a feeling, I just knew. There's no way this was happening to me. Once we got to the hospital, it was confirmed, she had a few days left at most. My last words to her were "I love you," the same she had told me exactly a month before. Her death impacted our whole community. Anyone who had been lucky enough to cross paths with her grieved. I had never seen such a connected support system. I cried no more than a couple times, because I was so content with it all. All I've ever wanted is for her to be happy, and what more could I want than for her to be pain free, even if I can't experience it with her? Besides, I know in my heart that she never truly left me.

Things are a little different now that three years have passed by since the last time I saw her face. Three years of contemplation, three years of being consumed by the "what-ifs" and the "how abouts," and worst of all, the never-ending "I can't imagine." What if my mom had passed away just a few years later - would it have hurt more or less? How about if I had hugged her a little more when I had the chance - would that have made it any easier? And I can't imagine having to live through all the milestones of my life without her by my side. I still can't imagine playing my last volleyball game without her ever having seen me play on a team, except my senior night is in just a few months, but I haven't had a conversation with her in thirty-seven. I can't imagine graduating high school without her at the ceremony, except I am set to walk across that stage in about one year, but I haven't held her hand in three. I can't imagine trying to pick my wedding dress without my mom being there to help me decide, except I'll have to do that in what feels like forever away in the future, but I haven't felt truly complete since about an eternity ago.

Jealousy is a feeling I've gotten used to these past few years. I'm constantly jealous of my friends for being so close to their mothers. It warms my heart to hear their stories

and see them light up inside, but I can't help feeling like I've been robbed of that experience. How much longer can I continue to be happy that her struggle is over when it means that mine is elongated even more? Especially at my age, I see a lot of girls become best friends with their moms, as they work together to navigate life as a young woman. It's unfair that they get to hug their moms, but I'm left hugging the teddy bear the hospital gave to her during her last stay, the one where she never left. I'm working on getting over the jealousy though, and even though I'll never overcome it completely, it's true what they say - it does get just a little easier with every passing day.

It's ironic that these instances happen more often the more time that passes by, but occasionally, the grief still hits me on random days. I miss her. I can't help it. It doesn't even happen because of any particular reason, I just miss her. But if there's one thing that I've learned from all of this, it's that feelings can't be forced. I can't force myself to be okay, but I also can't force myself to mourn. All I can do is remember, both the good and the bad, no matter how much it may hurt, and keep her memory alive.

As I've grown older, I'm constantly told how I look and act so much like her, just like a reflection of her, and I couldn't be more grateful. Thanks to her, I try to help others in everything I do, and continue her legacy. I strive to be like her, my mama, the epitome of a warrior, of love, and of light. She shone brighter than anyone I've ever met, brighter than the color yellow, yellow like the shirt I wore the day before the monitor flatlined, yellow like the sun that hid behind the clouds the day she passed away, yellow like the roses that'll always have a special place in my heart.

Getting Real With You by David

12th grade, Texas

Personal Diagnosis

So let me just get this out of the way. This will most definitely NOT be your typical “oh-I-got-cancer-but-made-it-out-and-became-a-perfect-person-for-it”. No, this is a story in which I’m going to get real with you, I’m going to let you know about the twisted evils that flow through you when you get diagnosed with a life-threatening disease.

DAY 1:

This has been going on for quite some time now. I’m getting random bruises everywhere. My body hurts like I’m some 90-year-old man, but more than all of that, I’m tired. Every morning I wake up and I feel like I’ve just pulled an all-nighter, and each day of school feels like it drags on forever. After multiple inconclusive doctor visits and a persistent case of scarlet fever, my mom, being the awesome, caring, protective neuroradiologist she is, takes me to the hospital to get checked.

DAY 2:

My mom is sitting next to me in a waiting bed. She’s trying to play it cool, but I can tell when she’s nervous. The doctor comes in and says this is not a huge deal and that I should just go home and get some rest. My mom, however, would never settle for such a compromise. She goes to the doctor and demands just about every blood test known to man. About 50,000 pricks later, the doctors come in and urgently tell my mom and me that I need to be transferred to a new room.

DAY 3:

This room is much nicer! The bed is made of actual cloth instead of that weird rubber, and there’s a window, TV, and even a bathroom within the room; my own personal bathroom. I could live here! (Oh, how little I knew). The doctor asks my mom to speak outside, which is weird for me, but I disregard it, still marveling at the luxury of my new room. A couple of minutes later, my mom walks in like she’s just seen a ghost and comes to sit down next to me. Without a clue in the world, I ask her “What’s going on?” I can’t remember the exact words she responded with, but I can remember the thought I had after the talk we had: “lol I’m probably gonna die.” Maybe it was because I’m just a kid, or it’s because this is happening so quickly, but I’m not processing what’s happening to me. However, the severity of my condition would soon fall upon me: I had just been diagnosed with Acute Promyelocytic Leukemia.

DAY 4:

Remember when I said I was going to get real with you? Yeah, that’s happening now. The first thing I remember was a prick in my right elbow. Just a simple blood test to make sure I wasn’t dying. Not a big deal right? Well, try getting a needle through your arm, at least twice a day, for many, many, many days. My arms are almost bruised

black, I get maybe 20 hours of sleep a week. A potential phobia for needles is developing. I don't want to laugh, smile, maybe even breathe- all I can think about was the impending pain of the next blood test

DAY I've lost track at this point:

After what felt like eons of nonstop blood tests, I get the luxury of a central line, a massive tube that goes through your arm, into your heart, via surgery to dump chemo and draw blood without making a puncture every single time. At long last, I am gifted the sweet, sweet luxury of rest. I will never again take the sacred ritual known as sleep for granted ever again. However, this blessing also came with a curse: the IV machine- a contraption that processes the chemo and other liquids into your bloodstream, with the sole purpose of annoying you at all times. Any time I moved, any time I put the slightest pressure on one of the hundreds of tubes stapled to my body: BEEP, BEEP, BEEP!!! I can't move without alarms blaring in my ears. The wires and tubes swirling around my body felt more and more like spiderwebs. I'm not having a great time.

DAY I've lost track at this point +1:

This is it. This is the week where everyone- doctors, family members, even myself thinks it's over. My health has been on the decline for a while, and it seems like it's time for me to go. There are so many things that could have gone through my head at that moment, but only one thought emerges: "This sucks." I'm not thinking about my cancer, but rather, my life before it. I spent each day waking up, going to school, swimming, doing homework, watching TV; the boring life of a kid. I realize that if I die today my life would have amounted to nothing. "Well if good grades and exercise aren't going to do it for me, what will?" I had an epiphany: what's most important in life are the things that aren't meant to last. Joy, laughter, a nice TV show, or a delicious meal, are all ethereal. This world can take you, and any potential legacy, without any warning. What matters is how you spend your impermanence: either chasing after superficial numerical values that can't define a person or by living each moment like it's your last and squeezing life out of every last drop of joy it can offer you.

FINAL DAY:

After some near impossible determination to experience the wonders of life beyond the 6th grade, my guardian angel of a mom, and a great team of doctors, I make it through the of dread. Today is the day I'm getting discharged. This room is full of so much pain, grief, depression, and loneliness, and I'm happy to leave it behind. I've been in the ICU for a month but it felt like a month frozen in time. Now that I'm out, my surgical scars serve as a reminder to make the most out of every single day.

DAY ∞:

After one year of outpatient treatment, I could finally start living again. Experiencing the world with this new lens, I gained new insight. The relationships you have with others are the most important things in life. During this outpatient experience, I had an amazing

friend who would come with me for 4 hours a day, every day, just to talk, play, hang out, and be there for me. He gave me something to look forward to, which isn't easy in those kinds of circumstances. More than that, I owe just about everything to my mom. If she didn't push that doctor to get those blood tests, I would very much not be breathing right now. If it wasn't for her, I would have spent every day in the ICU cold, alone and scared. Those relationships and with the people around me are the reason I'm alive to write this story today.

Homesick by Reed

11th grade, Mississippi

Loved one's diagnosis

I had no idea you were a gift I couldn't keep. That our time on this earth was glass, able to shatter and be swept away at the mercy of a diagnosis. I thought, in my naivety, that you would always be there for me, and I never thought about what life would be like in your absence. One doesn't think about the grim inevitabilities of loss when their life is so full in the present. In those moments, you think that this bliss is just the beginning, just an ordinary, unremarkable stitch in the net that's always there for you. You never imagine that somewhere along the line, that net will be snatched from under you. That those moments were so much more important than you gave them credit for.

Is there a secret I don't know about? Is there a book that you study that equips you with all of the answers? Who do you turn to? These are the inquisitions I asked myself over and over. You were my compass, and when you left me, I got lost. Homesick. I should have asked you more questions, asked you how to go on after you. You always knew the answers to life's more philosophical questions. I'm getting older and want to tell you so much about how I turned out. I have so many thoughts and stories that I want to recount for you, and I don't know where to put all of them. Could I send them to you on the wings of a turtle dove? Will you let me know they got to you safely? Sometimes I imagine you already know- that you're watching over me, your face gleaming in pride in the moments where I yearn for your soothing presence.

So many of our memories are not calcified in photographs, but immortalized in certain smells of pine and powdered sugar, or colors in a familiar sky. These are the kinder moments when I remember the good times, when you would take me to the beach or beat me at Scrabble or tell me incandescent stories from your youth. Then there are the malicious, unrelenting, stinging reminders of the sheer permanence of your loss. The chirping of birds that never ceases to translate in my mind to the cold, constant beeping of hospital machines.

Over the course of your cancer journey, I attended a thousand funerals of who you used to be, which maybe made it easier when I eventually had to say goodbye for good. After you were gone, people were skeptical around me; they didn't know what was okay to say, like I was a clay vase prepared to shatter when confronted with the slightest push of confrontation. Flowers piled up, saying what no one knew how to convey. People found their own language to express the unfamiliar pain they assumed "must be so difficult for me." The truth, though, was that I wanted to hear everything. I wanted all of the condolences, all of the anecdotes, all of the reassuring fragments of solaces. Maybe if I heard enough, I could string them into an equation, a definitive and solvable problem

that would offer me the solution to all of the complicated, unflattering, ugly feelings I was keeping. Or maybe something a friend of my Mom's friend would say would really click and magically let everything fall into place.

Over time, however, I have come to find comfort in the unknowing, the unsolvable. I found that it is in the quiet reflections where the real answers come. Once the insatiable seeking ceased, I discovered a reluctant peace in the knowledge that despite what happened, I will always remember how beautiful it was to love you and be loved by you.

Longing for Memories by Arielle

9th grade, Indiana

Loved one's diagnosis

How do you miss someone you've never met? These are lyrics to a song by Alexander 23. To be frank, I've never been a fan of it. I always thought the lyrics were cheesy. It wasn't until I was laying in bed one night, unable to fall asleep, that this lyric started lingering in my mind. The song is about longing for someone or something indescribable. Now, it's important to understand that I am an extremely rational person. I like to make sure that I fully understand and can rationalize my emotions. So as I mulled over the lyric, I made the decision that I couldn't miss someone that I hadn't met so I couldn't miss my mother.

I have exactly two memories of my mom that are purely mine: the time when I woke up early from a nap and she sent me back to bed and her return home from the hospital when she gave me a pink blanket with monkeys on it. My mother was diagnosed with Stage 4 stomach cancer in 2010. She had to undergo intensive chemotherapy that took all of her hair and left her small body even smaller. She passed away in 2011, 13 days before my 5th birthday.

I have a very vague recollection of the time directly before and after her death. I remember my dad spending more and more time at work, either to make up for monetary losses or to have something to immerse himself in. I remember my grandmother moving in to help my dad take care of us. I remember family friends reaching out with phone calls and flowers. I don't remember her. I remember meeting with a guidance counselor in kindergarten who would let me play games and eat lollipops. I remember spending time at home and biking in the driveway. I remember eating cool ranch Doritos in a hospital, but I don't remember her. All my knowledge of her has been told to me by someone else. Every memory I have of her has been supplemented by photos. I don't remember her luxurious fashion sense. I don't remember her inability to follow the speed limit. I don't remember her love for science. I don't remember her ability to make people laugh. I don't remember her stubbornness. I don't remember her smile.

Now that I have lived without my mother far longer than I lived with her, I can say that I don't miss her. Not because I don't love her or didn't love her, but because I don't have enough to miss. I can't miss her jokes, her hugs, or her love for me because I just don't remember them. In middle school I would whenever I saw people with their mothers because I understood that I would never have that experience. I would never get to participate in mother-daughter events without feeling like an imposter. I would never be

able to receive motherly advice. I would never get to go get my nails painted with my mom. Eventually, however, I began to realize that I didn't long for my mother, but rather, I longed for a mother.

Over the years, I have tried to reason whether this is for better or worse. On one hand, I have almost no recollection of the woman who loved me, birthed me, and held me dear and I will have to deal with that for the rest of my life. Yet on the other hand, I was left with less to deal with when she died. Although this sounds depressing, I have seen what happened to those who did know her and have memories of her. It's been almost 11 years and they still become sullen when they think of her. They still struggle to say her name. Their eyes still become dark whenever cancer is brought up.

Cancer isn't fair. Not only for the people who are diagnosed, but for the people that it leaves behind. They are left to wrestle with the loss of someone they held dear and naturally everyone will wrestle with it differently. My father barely mentioned her and has only recently started talking about her again. My aunt still gets emotional when she sees me because she sees our similarities. Other family friends speak about her with joy as they reminisce happily on a woman who had profound impacts on their lives.

I dealt with it by trying to reason with my emotions. I felt extremely guilty about being seemingly unaffected. I wanted to understand why I felt this way and realized that it was because I felt as though I didn't have anything to affect me. I still feel somewhat guilty for feeling this way. It's like I'm not doing her justice or being respectful to those who were affected much more than I was. I continue to understand that no two people will react to a diagnosis or the loss of a cancer patient in the same way. I have reached a place where I have come to terms with the way I feel but have also accepted that it's ok to recognize the effects that it had on me. When I was younger, I chose to believe that I was in no way hurt by the loss of my mother but as I grow older, no matter how hard I try to be unaffected, my eyes will still water when I think about what could've been.

Ecosia by Sajal

11th grade, California

Personal Diagnosis

My earphones, with off-white wires tangled from overuse, serve one purpose: to blast music loud enough for angsty-punk-singer screams to drown out the distressing sobs of a mother failing to nurse her sick husband.

Upon hearing of Papa's diagnosis, I—scared, stressed, somewhat hysterical—typed “skin cancer” into the Ecosia search bar.

7.31 billion results.

www.ecosia.org/search?q=common-symptoms-of-skin-cancer

In subsequent days, I spiraled down an internet rabbit hole—skimming through medical journals and research abstracts, watching college biology lectures on abnormal mitotic cell duplication, downing cold, black coffee to chase away my drowsiness.

www.ecosia.org/skin-cancer-facts-and-statistics/#search/chance-of-death

I needed facts and figures. If I could understand cancer down to the molecular level, I could help Papa get through it. Numbers are precise, predictable, painless. Feelings (shudder) are not.

www.ecosia.org/how-to-support-a-family-member-with-cancer

Squinting, I struggled to decipher the text through my weary, tear-swollen eyelids as they drooped to a close, pleading for sleep.

www.ecosia.org/climate-change-is-increasing-your-risk-of-getting-skin-cancer

Pause. How does climate change—fluorinated gasses, rising temperatures, extreme weather patterns—correlate to uncontrollable cell growth? And what does this mean for Papa?

Click.

1983 yielded 500,000 new cases of skin carcinoma. 2012 yielded 5.3 million. My now wide-awake eyes foraged through Ecosia's digital jungle of statistics for what induced this vast proliferation. Due to ozone layer depletion caused by human-generated, halogen-source gas emissions (i.e., fossil fuels), we're losing our natural protection against the sun's harmful UV rays. As more sunlight penetrates Earth's atmosphere, more people develop deadly somatic mutations and metastasizing malignant tumors—and this is just the tip of the melting iceberg.

There are countless cancer-inducing factors—genetics, old age, melanin content-per-cell—but emotionally encumbered by my grandmother (who died from cancer) and my father (who's presently fighting for his life in the ER), I can't help but wonder if global warming exacerbated their conditions. Two-in-five people battle cancer at some point in their lifetime. My story isn't special. We continue killing our planet when we're actually, albeit unknowingly, killing ourselves.

Thus, I aspire to revert the spike in new annual cases and minimize death by climate-proliferated disease. My ambitions lie in environmental engineering, in researching and developing cost-effective renewable energy technologies that replace fossil fuels, thereby reducing halogen emissions to attenuate ozone layer depletion.

www.ecosia.org

Indubitably, I love Ecosia—the search engine that planted 140 million trees using search ad revenue—for aiding me in my spontaneous quests to rigorously research everything from carcinogens to climate change.

Ecosia inspired me to volunteer at my local park through my city's Adopt-A-Park program. By establishing 2500 square feet of native California landscape, my fellow volunteers and I collaboratively transformed a mound of dirt into a flourishing community garden, where hummingbirds and bumblebees flitter between the Sunset Manzanitas and California Poppies. No matter the weather, we congregate twice a week to nurture our sprouting plants, shoveling mulch in frigid torrential rain, pulling weeds in sweltering 95-degree sunshine. To further maintain the health of our native plants, we engineered a reliable irrigation system by building pipeline manifolds that lead drip system tubing around each garden. While the 14 trees we planted pale in comparison to Ecosia's 140,000,000, our work was a step in the right direction.

Solving climate change feels like a Sisyphean task—futile. However, Ecosia instills in me a sense of hope for a future in which coders and engineers harness technology

ethically and sustainably to build greener energy infrastructure, creating concord between the technological and natural worlds.

Power off.

But now, I climb out of my internet rabbit hole, ending my Ecosia escapade. I can't drown myself in a plastic-polluted sea of research forever; I can't escape feelings (shudder) forever. Disconnecting my earphones, I face the music.

Open the door—

Bald with deep wrinkles creasing his formerly youthful face, he looks like a stranger. I can't save Papa.

Deep breath—

But I can preserve the environment to protect the public health of future generations—in his honor. It's not everything, but it's something.

Step inside—

“Hey, Papa. How're you feeling?”

Chemo: From the Perspective of a Daughter by Jillian

11th grade, Rhode Island

Loved One's Diagnosis

Struggle is nothing but a concept until it isn't anymore. I watched my mother struggle through months of treatment and it was only then that I could begin to comprehend the truest meaning of the word. Listening to the verdict of her diagnosis and shaving my mother's head were nothing compared to the weeks that followed.

August 4th, 2020: First session of chemotherapy.

My mom's weekly cycle began on Tuesday. That day when my mom came home from treatment it was like nothing had changed. I was surprised to witness her so capable after the morning's events. It was the next day that things began to go downhill.

I began to become aware of my loss of control. There was nothing that I could do for her except hope for the following day to be better, but it only got worse. Friday and Saturday were the worst days of her cycle. I remember how strong she was trying to be. No one could have prepared me for the pain I witnessed on my mom's face in those two days. No amount of comfort I gave could have helped. This is the most difficult thing about having a loved one touched by cancer. The loss of control. I found myself lying beside her resting body studying her treatment binder. I took to highlighters and sticky notes to memorize all I could.

"Consult a doctor if a fever occurs."

"Take pills at the correct dates."

I found myself repeatedly checking her temperature, first with my hands so as not to wake her and then with a thermometer. I would then organize her medications into daily pill boxes while checking to ensure she had taken the previous day's pills. I guess you could say this was my way of coping, nevertheless, it became my routine.

August 18th, 2020: Second session of chemotherapy.

My mom once again came home and went straight to sleep only to awaken and exert an unwonted amount of energy. This day marked the second round of the two hundred and ten day cycle. However, the days that followed this second week were much different. I came to know that the more treatments she had completed the worse the bad days got and the more frequently they occurred. I took to household chores to suppress my feelings of uselessness. Wednesday: laundry, check temperature, dishes, laundry, check pills; Thursday: check temperature, vacuum, check pills, dust; Friday: clean bathroom, more laundry, check temperature, check pills; Saturday: dishes, check

temperature, check pills. It was on Sunday that my mom would begin to feel better and life would resume to normal. These next two days I would have my mom back.

September 1st, 2020: Third session of chemotherapy.

The struggle started all over again.

September 8th, 2020: Fourth session of chemotherapy.

Treatment switched to every week.

September 15th, 2020: Fifth session of chemotherapy.

September 22nd: Sixth session.

September 29th: Seventh session.

Hope is the only thing a person has when they lose control of their own life. The question is: how can one remain hopeful when going through hell? It was today that my mom told me she doesn't think she can keep going.

The months to follow began to merge together. My week began on Tuesday and ended the Monday before her treatment. Attending school and time with friends became only a mere addition to my life which was devoted to ensuring the comfort of my Mother.

December 15th, 2020: Last day of chemotherapy.

This was it. The very last week my mom would have to endure such pain. I remember hugging my mom as we both cried. The worst of it was over. Now we wait until December 15th, 2025 when my mom will officially be cancer free.

My Mother's Eyes by Kelly

12th grade, Texas

Loved One's Diagnosis

If the eyes are the windows to our souls, then I believe that they are also the frames through which our souls view the world.

I always loved the way my mother's eyes looked. They were large, beautiful, almond-shaped, with crow's feet on the edges that only develop from years of laughter. However, what I admired most was that her eyes fit her personality. Growing up, I saw a correlation between the eye shapes and personalities of my parents. My mother, with her wide eyes, was an open-minded person and was described as a "ray of sunshine" by her coworkers. Meanwhile, my father's smaller eyes matched his narrow perspectives and short temper. I used to watch my mother work tirelessly as she single-handedly raised three young children while my father was away in China. She found strength in humility, and I was proud to inherit her loving eyes. To me, our matching eyes symbolized our everlasting bond.

When I was 13, my mother was diagnosed with stage 4 lung cancer. Before my mom was diagnosed, I never took the time to think about the repercussions of losing a parent at a young age. I would just think, "yeah I guess it would suck, but it's probably not going to happen to me." When I was six, my mother found me curled up in a ball beside my bed and bawling because I realized that there would likely be a day where I would be alive while she wasn't. She hugged me and told me not to worry because "that probably won't happen for a long time." We both didn't know that we would have less than a decade with each other left. We both didn't know that we would be robbed of our time together. We both didn't know that she wouldn't live until ninety and that I wouldn't be lucky enough to experience grief for the first time at sixty. Everyone else in my family lived until their nineties, so why would we not assume the same for her? Why would the sweetest and kindest person I've ever known not live until she could see her grandchildren? It wouldn't be fair. It wouldn't make any sense. It wouldn't happen.

That's what my family and I believed. That's what I believed until I heard my mother cry downstairs on a random Sunday night during my eighth-grade year. I had no idea why the strongest person I knew was crying. Mom never cried...

That night, all of my priorities shifted. All of my superficial worries vanished as my only concern became my mother's health. I took her for granted for so many years, and now

was my time to pay her back and show my appreciation. My work ethic was no longer used to inflate my middle school ego, but instead, to reassure my mom that I could take care of myself if she did not make it to my high school graduation. One of her greatest fears was to leave her job of raising me incomplete, and I was determined to prevent her from ever feeling that way.

Over the next two years, I watched as my mom, the keystone of the family, crumbled to dust. Her violent coughs echoed through my home and rang inside my head. My time at home was a constant whirlwind of blood-stained napkins and staring contests with plastic containers as they filled with fluid from her lungs. The more they filled up, the more my body filled with anxiety for the future. Despite it all, I found solace in being by my mother's side and spending time with her while I still could. I was in a constant state of limbo, juggling between two worlds of home and school. The latter, I could control. I set up cancer fundraisers and excelled as a student and musician. All other obstacles seemed like a breeze in comparison, so I threw myself into new activities and gained confidence by breaking things down into manageable chunks. Finding joy in the little things in life translated to school days brimming with smiles, laughter, and hugs. My classmates were always there for me when my home life seeped into the school hours. School became a safe haven away from all the coughing where I could be with my support system of friends, improve myself, and demonstrate to my mom that I would be okay without her.

However, some days tore me down. My family spent many holidays over the years in hospitals, and there would hardly ever be a mental break during those times. I was left with my mother in a hospital room one winter break, and it felt like we were animals in a zoo exhibit as a group of medical students came with a doctor to study my mom's condition. The depressed looks on their faces were demoralizing. Was it naive of me to believe that she would be okay? I didn't know. I didn't let myself believe otherwise, but the effects of the constant anxiety I experienced over my mother's health have left me feeling exhausted to this day.

Whenever my eyes swelled up after a night of crying, I would desperately attempt to depuff them. I refused to let my mom see my shrunken eyes from crying, and I needed to see that physical resemblance of her in me again to keep me going. My grit came from knowing that the most I could ask from myself was to try my best. I tried to take things one day at a time for as long as I needed to.

My mother passed away the summer before my sophomore year. Stepping outside of the hospital after she passed, I sat and watched the rest of the world move at 50 miles per hour. Everyone else's compact worlds were unaffected. Flashes of red, blue, black,

and gray zoomed by. July 17, 2019, was just another day at work for everyone else while my whole world had just fallen apart.

I stayed awake that night bawling, believing that I had lost all of her. However, in the midst of my grief, I was stunned to still see the kind, bright eyes of my mother looking back at me in the mirror the next morning. Despite all of my crying from the day before, my eyes looked more like hers than ever.

From that day on, I see my eyes as a gift from my mother to show me that she and her lessons will always live on in me. Nothing in life is guaranteed, and I have learned that I can overcome anything if I choose to not forget my priorities of family, take anything for granted, or fret over insignificant things.

Even as the fear of forgetting my mom grows every day, I now remain calm when I see small, puffy eyes in the mirror. My mother's life lessons have been permanently imprinted in my mind. She is still teaching me things and guiding me through rough times. I have learned that all troubles pass with time and that my eyes always eventually return to normal. Through my eyes, as they shift and change shape with every cry and each new experience, I am finding my own person. That is all my mom ever wanted for me.

Labels by Sery

12th grade, Arizona

Personal Diagnosis

As we go through life we get labeled by everyone we meet, it's done out of love, hate, or ignorance. Even nature sometimes labels us abnormal. We can choose to play into those labels or we can prove them wrong. I choose to label myself.

On August 15, 2015 the doctor came with my results. He took my parents out of the room; I saw them standing in the empty hallway scared. It wasn't until days later when the counselors came to see me that I understood what was happening. I had cancer. The official diagnosis was Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia, also known as ALL.

When I realized my bone marrow was producing abnormal cells, cancer. I didn't know how to feel. I was sitting in a hospital bed numb. My brain was stuck in permanent pause. I had never experienced something like this, so I wasn't sure how to feel or what to expect.

The bone marrow tests, the spinal fluid test and the daily blood tests were conclusive. My bone marrow was producing cancer cells. I was cancer, death.

I was annoyed with people who were trying to help because all they seemed to do was upset me. Their job was to convince me I had cancer. Cancer was my reality, my label and would eventually kill me. They came into my room equipped with survival rates, statistics, chemo and professionals in creating diagnosis and labels. The hospital even invited a professional counselor into my room to help apply the new label. I just became angry; angry hearing them pity me while they gave me these disingenuous smiles. The counselors stopped coming to my room as I rejected my new reality and ignored the label. I tried my best to understand the new label but I also understood if I accepted the label I must accept death. I couldn't go back to when things were "normal." As much as I hated the nausea, the daily and constant needles and the fake smiles, I had to endure. I tried to make things more tolerable so I brought pieces of home with me: my pillows, toys, pictures, and even food.

Now I was transformed into the young adult with cancer, in the Phoenix Children's Hospital 7th floor for cancer patients, with doctors that specialize in treating cancer, and the official diagnosis of cancer. Prognosis unknown. The "cancer" label is highly

unpredictable, with miracle cures, god hiding in the hospital chapel, and with certain death.

From 2012 to 2015, in 3 years I was hospitalized 60 times. I didn't mind it at the beginning, but the rose-colored glasses came off and I started to see things for what they were. I was taking over 10 different medications. The protocol dictates for 3 years of chemotherapy. Each medication was designed to kill cancer and all cells in my body. The chemo was designed to convince every cell in my body and my mind, death is inevitable. The food in the hospital started tasting like shit. My hair fell off and food lost its taste. The chemo was working, everything was slowly dying. The chemo attacked everyone around me, everything, everyone, even hope. The privacy I so desperately wanted was never attainable: permanently attached to a bag of chemo, my mother, several nurses during the day and night, and a constant noise by machine monitoring the medication. Every 20 minutes a nurse or doctor was taking my blood pressure. Constantly asking me "how do you feel?" And I wanted to answer and I wanted to scream ---- I have cancer, how do you think I feel? But I was not convinced. I stayed quiet.

Just like my medication, the hospital life had side effects. My comforts from home weren't enough anymore. I was bored, angry, confused, and dying. I was officially labeled a cancer patient. I was a skeleton covered by a thin pale layer of skin. They had a room there for the "cancer patients" to socialize with other immunocompromised patients, but I was always a shy and awkward child and socializing was just another tool designed to accept "cancer". Instead I watched Gilmore Girls on repeat. It's the story of a girl around my age enjoying life, doing things I couldn't, and having experiences I hoped to have someday. Television and puzzles became a way to protect my mind.

During doctor's visits, they always asked me questions, and I always had an easy time answering. I learned all my medications, allergies, the port size, and side effects. Somehow knowing my medications and allergic reactions made me feel in control of my own horrible situation.

Three years later I was finally done with my treatment. I would not accept the label, maybe they got tired, or maybe they finally understood I was not going to die. They gave me a new label, remission. I never wanted to hear that word, the death label "cancer" again. After three years of carrying the cancer label I was still alive and the hospital enrolled me in the "cancer" survivor's clinic. Apparently the "cancer" trip never ends and remission is just a pause.

At first I was scared of the word “cancer” because it painfully consumed my life. The “cancer” went from being something I did not understand to something defining every aspect of my life. For years, to everyone I was “ the girl with cancer.” A year ago I came to the realization that the “cancer” label had taken enough of my life. I finally understood that the all-consuming word “cancer” is synonymous with death. I didn't want that word to define me. I realized, by being afraid of it I was letting it do exactly that. This label feeds on fear and death. As time passed I stopped believing I was “ the girl with cancer.” My mind moved from “the girl with cancer” to “the girl that defeated cancer.”

While I was being injected with chemo for 3 years I remained unconvinced. Cancer visited me with all its friends and allies; doctors, nurses, counselors, chemotherapy designed to kill every cell in my body, cause excruciating pain and failed. My mind rejected the label and its meaning.

Between chem and pain I was still doing my homework, reading and planning my life. Now I hold memberships in three honors societies: the National English Honors society, the National Foreign Language Honors Society, and the National Society of High School Scholars. I used the “cancer” label to motivate myself to be the best, be stronger. I want my life back.

Even though the “cancer” label took my hair, my health, a normal teenager life and inflicted horrible pain on my body for over 3 years of my life it never convinced me. Cancer promised to kill me everyday for 3 years and it failed. I was relentless and determined to move forward.

Ultimately the only label that matters is the one we give ourselves. Maybe I was lucky. Regardless of luck, everyday is an opportunity to define ourselves and our reality. Even something like cancer can be a wakeup call or a death. It's a choice.

Internal Monologue of Writing a Eulogy by Emerson

11th grade, Florida

Loved One's Diagnosis

I knew one day I'd write this speech, one day it was inevitable; parents die and you the child lives on. I knew that this moment was going to happen, but why so soon? Everyone will tell you as a child that life isn't fair but to always play fair. My family played fair, we were good nice people; we truly were. But my dad was extraordinary, he found the most love to always give, you could never tell if he was mad or frustrated, all you found in his eyes was admiration and love.

We played fair, but cancer doesn't play fair. So now I sit at my table trying to write this speech that encapsulates who my father was. What was he to me in the last 13 years, in the last year when cancer took over his whole body, who was he? Well everyone knows who he was, heck most of the people at this celebration likely knew him longer than me. But, yet I sit here, trying to imagine what I could say about my dad.

“He was incredible, he savored every kind of food, he was passionate about travel; he was supposed to take me to Paris for my 16th birthday. He loved volleyball and shared that love with all of my siblings. He adored so many things but not as much as he cherished people. He loved being around people and talking with them, learning everything they knew, and sharing what he knew. He was the definition of a people person. “

And, yet I don't know what to say. It isn't fair that I can't drive and I have to write a speech that tells the world just what kind of light blew out on July 25th, 2018. I will stand in front of a crowd and tell them just how much I will miss him and how hard he fought, glamorizing the true aching I feel. The aching has been present for just over a year. So I'll speak of an anecdote;

“My father loved experiencing everything. And this was no different when he bought Max and me our first surfboard. He held it on his head and swam with us past where we could reach, and he held the board while we laid down getting ready to ride out the wave. He would cheer and whistle as our small hands stuck up in the air with great success. That's the way he was, excited by the success of his children and experienced pure joy with ours.”

But, a happy anecdote doesn't feel the same when you can't read it without tears, and the audience can't bear to listen to the joy he brought because it was gone. So what do I write? Do I write about the horror my family and I faced, tell them: how his body slowly died, first his movement, then his brain. He forgot my name and my sister's, he forgot how many kids he had or their ages. He forgot the very things that drove him to be better and to be amazing. But, this only brings somber and gloom to a day that is to celebrate his life.

13 years of memories, laughter and family all burdened to nothing but sadness, all these emotions I have to fit into this small oration. I'm not sure people want to hear the reality of suffering, because it will only hurt more, so I write what everyone wants to hear:

"We will miss his laugh and his spirit, his cooking, and his jokes. He was the best person in my life and I will continue to live for him and with him watching over me. Not a day will go by wishing that he was still here but I'm happy that he is at peace and probably drinking his favorite wine and watching a good action movie right now in heaven."

This superficial representation of bereavement will ease the minds of many, making them believe that the days of crying and choked breathing are over. That grief has come and gone. That I am okay without him.

Cancer doesn't play fair, it leaves an internal and physical mark on those it leaves behind. My family is stuck in a rut of therapy and crying and wishing that this is all a dream and we will wake up to his espresso filling the air and his weird love of Lana Del Ray evident on the speakers. From the outside, we are okay, we have dealt with the aching in our hearts, and we are pushing forward with life.

They will never feel the pressure upon my chest with the screaming cries at night as cancer damages him, or the limping from tumors that broke his ribs, they don't have the last visual of him as a still frail cancer-ridden body all of a sudden at peace with the world and gone. And, I'm happy for them, they'll remember him as Erik Noteboom, the leader, the educator, and the incredible man he was, but I can't help but feel a twinge of envy.

"He was a good man, he loved every person here and I am beyond grateful that he was my father."

That's good, right? It shows sorrow but also gratitude to those that made his life full. It shows the deep sentiment cut short to ease a hurting soul that now sat before me in this

great room. But, it was wrong and unfair to cloud my true feelings to alleviate the other grieving hearts.

Cancer doesn't play fair for those it infects and those it affects. But yet here I am at 16 remembering the pain in my heart as I wrote the final remarks to my father. I would then back out of saying anything at his celebration of life because I couldn't say 3 words without tears rolling down my face. I didn't want people to know how bad it hurt, how bad I was hurting. So I sat and watched everyone else speak of my dad, telling tales he never got to tell me, or showing pictures I've never seen. People surround me with good wishes and my least favorite comment is "everything happens for a reason". I felt the weight of the world on my shoulders for the next few years, I starved myself trying to prove myself, I stayed up late cramming to get satisfactory grades. I did whatever it took to keep the eyes off me and make sure that I felt my dad would be proud of me. I internalized the hurt of the world, I didn't let anyone in and I didn't let anything out. I was bound to explode.

"But I'm okay, thank you. I miss him but I am happy he is at peace. So I am okay. How are you?"

My go-to sentence was when someone dug deeper than I wanted at the grief I felt inside. I was supposed to be okay, it's been 2 years now and I'm not okay? But now I know that grief doesn't have a timeline, in my own time I will be able to talk about him and smile rather than cry. That I can learn about him and be overjoyed with the lives he touched rather than jealous that they got more time. I found the strength to keep going, I found it in myself, in my family, in my community, and in my friends.

"He was amazing, he is everything I hope to be. How I wish I got to speak about him in the present tense. I am grateful for the time I was given. I miss him more than you will ever know, but one day we will be together again"

Those 3 sentences closed out the chapter of my life when I stood in front of friends, relatives and my dad's coworkers sharing what grief looks like 5 years after his passing at the opening of his memorial room. It is unfair what I had to go through and what I put myself through, but that's life. It's brutal, it's sad but it's also amazing and magical and worth experiencing. My dad made me who I am, he gives me the motivation to live every day to the fullest.

Enough is Enough by Dena

12th grade, Maryland

Personal Diagnosis

212. 450. 1825. 5598. These numbers probably don't mean much to you. They're just random digits on a page with no connection to each other, or anything else for that matter. Harmless numbers on a blank piece of paper. Four of them. Just sitting there. Your eyes just scroll by them. So uninteresting. But, what if I wrote those numbers a different way? What if instead of numbers I wrote names: Uncle Rick, Nanny, Papap, me? Would that mean something to you? Would you look at those same four numbers and wonder what these numbers and these names have to do with each other? I'll tell you, they have everything to do with each other. They have everything to do with me and my family. My family thinks about the connections between these four numbers and these four names every single day of our lives. Why, you ask? Cancer. Cancer is why.

Four members of my family have cancer. One is too many, but four? It's overwhelming at times. The fear, worry, stress, tears. I want to tell you about them. Help you see what I see each day so you can understand what our family has gone through. It won't be pretty. Cancer never is. But how better to understand it than to see it uncovered and ugly.

Let's start with Uncle Rick, 212 days. This is how long it took for undetected colon cancer to spread to his liver, rupture his intestine, infect his body, and mercilessly take away a father to the best two cousins on earth, a husband to my favorite aunt, and the only uncle I've ever known. He was 49 years old. He loved mountain biking, running half-marathons, motorcycles, Penn State, yard work, local theatre, music, reading, pizza, and spending time with his kids and me. Uncle Rick's funeral was almost a year ago. I still can't believe he is gone. My mom is still calling my cousins and my aunt to talk, to try and get them through the "firsts" without their dad. But, what do you say? How can you help when a dad is gone forever? When an Uncle is gone? There is a hole now. A very big hole. I'll be honest, I'm not sure how to fill it. Can it even be filled? Should it? I don't know. I may never know. I'm just floating...hoping to bump into an answer out there somewhere. Hoping. That's my Uncle Rick's cancer.

450. That's my Nanny. She's 94 and was just diagnosed with breast cancer. The doctors say she can get her tumor removed, go through chemotherapy and radiation. But, the cancer she has is relatively slow growing. So, will all of that really be best for her? The pain of surgery, the sickness of chemo...at 94? In the end, she chose to not do anything.

She wants to live the rest of her life, however long that is, with a tumor growing in her. How is this fair? On one hand there is Uncle Rick wanting and taking every single treatment he could find. Pushing through the pain and sickness for one more day. On the other sits Nanny, silently shaking her head no. No treatment, no “fuss” as she calls it. Where is the fairness in that? An unbelievably aggressive cancer in a young, healthy man in the prime of life, and a slow growing completely treatable cancer in an old woman who already has lived a life longer than most other people on the planet. It’s not fair. At all. That’s my Nanny’s cancer.

1825, is Papap. He asked me to help him brush his hair, that’s how I knew something was wrong. I was eleven. Multiple Myeloma was the name of the reason my Papap was withering before my eyes. So far, his journey is the longest cancer battle to date. He will never be cured. He will take chemo for the remainder of his life. Because of this, he is susceptible to every little sickness that comes along. The stress every single day of trying to sterilize a world of potential death threats, it’s exhausting for all of us. He gets tired of it, too. Then he pushes back when we try to make him see how careful he needs to be. My grandma and him fight about it. We all fight about it. I am terrified every single day. Now COVID is here. It’s like I can’t breathe. What if he lets his guard down at the wrong time? Will I lose him, too? The watching, the waiting, the worry. It never, ever stops. Ever. That’s my Papap’s cancer.

5598, Dena, me, I’m the last one. Or, rather I should say I’m the first one! I was only six months old when I was diagnosed with Neuroblastoma. I don’t really remember much from then. I hear stories, see pictures, but I have no “real” memories. But, make no mistake, it doesn’t mean I’m not affected by it. I am. But, what affects me has to do with the aftermath of having cancer. It’s the permanent damage done to my body that will never heal, never go away, never get even slightly better. I shouldn’t complain. After all, I’m alive and so many others aren’t that have cancer. I try not to get down about it. I’ve learned to adapt. I suppose that’s what my cancer is about. Adapting. I’ve gotten really good at it. I’ve also learned that I can’t just give up on something because it’s hard. Quitting isn’t an option for me. So, even though my cancer has left me with something bad, it’s also given me many things that are good. And I’m cancer free now for almost 10 years! That’s my cancer.

What is my cancer story? My cancer unwrapped? It’s 212, 450, 1825, 5598. It’s Uncle Rick, Nanny, Papap, Me. It’s four numbers, four people, one family. It’s the joys of being cancer free. It’s the anguish of watching a casket being lowered. It’s everything else in between. It’s cancer.

Why I Fight by Adyson

12th grade, Utah

Loved one's diagnosis

My memories of my dad are like snapshots from a polaroid laid out on the table. Some of the images are crisp and clear; so tangible that I can almost feel the moment they capture, and some are slightly blurry, making them feel just a bit out of reach.

My dad throwing me over his shoulder to carry me to bed. Him laying on the couch watching ESPN with his socks hanging half off his feet. His odd habit of sucking on his shirt collar when he was thinking. Our shared love of turkey steaks; a Utah delicacy. Sneaking in his hospital bed to snuggle him and feel his warmth. Him coaching me in soccer and cheering me on...when, in truth, I. Was. Terrible. Him wearing a, very tacky, 'best friend' necklace I won at an arcade for weeks on end. Daddy daughter dates, Justin Bieber dance alongs, and Disneyland trips. The green flecks in his eyes.

These little snapshots, these little pockets of memories, they are what I hold most dear. When someone shares one with me and another picture becomes clear, I add it to my heart and hold on as tight as I can, praying that I'll never forget.

My dad was my hero. He IS my hero. And I hope that by reading this, he becomes a bit of a hero for you, too.

My dad radiated sarcasm. Other people use it occasionally, but he made it his own language and you just had to love it. (It's one of the traits he gave to me and I wear that as a badge of honor)! He was warm and caring, he loved to learn, and he wore his 'computer nerd' title with pride. He spent his days running the networking of a large company and his nights as the most involved dad that ever lived. He was always happy to read us a bedtime story, play outside with us, and even play dress-up and wear the funniest clothes. He loved playing intricate card games, and studying up on the rules. Was he a nerd? Oh yes! But in the coolest of ways. He knew how to always be himself, and he always wanted that for my sister and I. He was one of a kind.

I was just 4 when my father was diagnosed with Kidney Cancer, A disease that usually waits until you are 65 and overweight, somehow got to my healthy, young (37 year old) dad. I don't remember him being diagnosed. I don't remember any big changes from my childhood, because honestly, there weren't any. My dad made sure of it.

He kept his job, working 40+ hours a week while getting immunotherapy injections every single Thursday. I now know that they made him extremely tired, and sore....but back then I had no idea. He would come home and be the same amazing father he'd always been, no matter how tired and miserable he must have felt. And he kept that up for almost 4 years. The immunotherapy was working and his cancer was stable and somehow he carried on; sometimes with 12 cankers in his mouth and fatigue that must have felt unbearable. He constantly showed us that he was grateful for his time, grateful for his life- and he didn't intend to take it for granted.

During this time a lot happened behind the scenes. My parents strove constantly to marry the balance of us being completely oblivious to cancer, and being ready for the changes that could come...and come they did.

About 4 years into his drug treatments, they began to fail. And the cancer began to grow. I was young, just 8 years old, but I was very in tune with what was happening around me. Anxiety and fear became my constants and I noticed the strength quickly leaving my dad. He could no longer pick me up and throw me onto my bed. He had multiple hospital stays and jumped from chemo treatment to chemo treatment trying to find a way to keep the cancer at bay.

One treatment left him in the ICU for two weeks at a time, one involved him giving himself shots every Friday night, shots that would basically 'inject flu symptoms' into his body. He lost his ability to control his body temperature and my sister and I would take turns snuggling him close and layering him with blankets. He lost the energy for most of the things he used to love, like golfing and fishing, but he somehow always found it for us. My parents did all they could to shield us from the ugly side of his illness, while preparing us for what may come. Most importantly, my dad did all he could to make sure we never had to question his love for us, or whether he was willing to fight hard to stay with us. That is a certainty I've come to treasure. That knowledge has shaped me, made me realize that what I want most for myself is something that I feel that passionate about, that willing to fight for.

My dad passed away October 11, 2013 after fighting for 9 years. The entire week before he passed, my home was filled with family and friends. The crisp fall air filled the house, along with a lot of laughter, and a lot of tears. And then one day, he slipped away from us.

He was done fighting. It now became my turn.

I watched my dad suffer through some unimaginable things, and have heard stories I was too young to hear back then about all he did for us to stay alive. I can't really imagine how hard it must have been for him, to fight, to get poked and prodded at constantly, and to do it all knowing that he would likely have to leave all he was fighting for. That kind of love is special, and to know I was, and am, loved that hard? It's humbling.

I fight because he never gave up. I fight to be a good older sister to my siblings. I fight to set an example to others of perseverance. I fight to go on road trips with my friends, to camp, to go to concerts, to eat all my favorite foods, to make all the memories. I fight to learn, to grow, to see the needs in others because I have empathy that I may not have had without this trial. I fight to remember him, to do what he would have done. I fight to live the life he would want for me.

He's my hero. He earned that title with every hug, with every memory and with all the snapshots memories that I hold dear. I miss him. I intend to keep fighting to make him proud, to make his fight worth the fight that he fought for me.

Every day After by Abigail

11th grade, Wisconsin

Loved one's diagnosis

Every day After

A dusty old photo album holds the picture of me wearing a backpack and a nervous smile standing under the big maple tree in our front yard, on my first day of kindergarten. A sense of dread fills my stomach every time I look at that picture, just as it did an hour or so before that picture was taken. I don't remember much about that day, but I will never forget how I felt when my teacher read us a book trying to comfort a classroom full of nervous kindergarteners; I had been nervous, but unfortunately she didn't provide any comfort to me. The book was about how it's okay to feel scared or nervous because as soon as you get home from school your mom will be there to wrap her arms around you. At that moment I realized that all of my classmates had a mom who was there to comfort them and that losing your mom wasn't a normal part of childhood. Later that day as I walked through the front door of my house, I was reminded, for the first time, and everyday after, that I will never be able to walk through the door to the comfort of my mother's hug. My mom, Rebecca Lynn Klein, has been gone over eleven years, and there are countless moments in time that serve as a reminder of her absence from my life. I assumed my parents were invincible, but as I grew up, I came to the realization that there's an end to everything.

At age four my dad sat me down and told me that my mom wouldn't make it much longer, but at the time, the reality of those words didn't sink in, and they wouldn't sink in until the morning of August 18, 2009. I can still remember my dad's solemn face and the somber tone of his voice as he said what everyone dreads to hear. As I sat there holding my mother's hand, I thought back to all of the times that she had held my hand while crossing the street. Her hand in mine, my mom struggled for breath until my dad leaned down and whispered in my ear, "Mom just went to heaven."

"Right now?", four-year-old me asked. A tear ran down my face.

He wiped it and said, "It's going to be okay, B." This was a concept that my young mind was not able to process.

After my dad told me that my mom wouldn't be around much longer, I tried my hardest to prepare for the day she would leave because I assumed that would be the worst part. Unfortunately, the hardest part ended up being the days, weeks, and months without her which was something I could never prepare myself for. I always envied my friends when they would tell me about a conversation they had with their mom because the only thing I had close to that was a video my mom had made months before she passed away. She had made the video for us to watch as we grew older because we were too young at the time to understand what she wanted us to know. Although my dad

mentioned the video from time to time as I was growing up, I wasn't ready to watch it until August 18, 2016, exactly seven years after Mom passed away. When the TV came on, the first thing I noticed was how different she looked. Her long brown hair now consisted of two inches. I saw her scars she had from her fight with cancer both physically and mentally. At times she looked so weak. Seeing my mom in that much pain was so hard to watch; however, this is not the way I like to remember her. When I think of my mom, I think of how she fought until she couldn't anymore, how she stayed strong through everything--not for herself--but for everyone else. Watching that video gave me something to hold onto. It gave me something to remember her by, and even though it was a video, her laugh still filled the room just as it did eight years ago. At times it felt like I was sitting down and having a normal conversation with her. She ended the video by saying, "I just want you all to know that I love you very much and you're my whole world. I just want you all to be happy." And then the screen went blank and it felt as if she had passed away all over again.

I'm fifteen years old now, and I still watch that video to this day. At one point she says, "It just didn't seem fair. I don't get to see my husband walk Abby down the aisle, and I probably won't be able to see any of my kids graduate." At this point, that's what hurts me the most, all of the missed opportunities and memories. She wasn't there for my first day of school. She wasn't there to help when I fell off my bike for the first time and scraped my knee. She's not here now to take me out driving, help me through school, or give me relationship advice. And like she said, she's not going to see me get my diploma, or watch my dad walk me down the aisle, and my kids will never be able to meet their grandma.

Although the loss of my mom caused me great pain, it has also taught me things that I will carry with me forever. It taught me to enjoy life while it lasts because you never know what is going to happen. Her death taught me to never take advantage of things, even the small things in life. Most importantly, the death of my mom taught me that no matter what happens in life, you have to take that and grow from it instead of letting it bring you down.

Pairs of Two by Ava

11th, North Carolina

Loved One's Diagnosis

Two has always been my favorite number. It's even, prime, and wonderfully simple. Even so, my favorite thing about the number is that it's perfectly predictable. So many things come in pairs of twos; I have two eyes, two ears, two hands and feet. I have two bookshelves in my room holding my favorite books, most of which have a prequel and sequel. Every day I burn two candles on my desk, after I complete my two way trip to school. I thought I was prepared for every harmonious pair presented to me, but I was wrong. I was not prepared for cancer.

2020 was going to be my year. After all, it's a decade of twos! How could it go wrong? I maintained this positive, naive mindset until early April, when I began to worry. My parents started disappearing multiple times a week, and I was sure I knew exactly what was wrong; they were getting a divorce. These secretive outings spanned for hours at a time, and often my parents snuck in late at night, teary eyed. I thought I had read the writing on the wall; although it made no sense to me how two of the most loving people in the world could part, I was completely convinced. So convinced that, when they finally sat me down and said "Ava, we need to talk," I immediately blurted out, "You're divorcing, aren't you?"

They burst into laughter, and unbeknownst to me, this was one of the last times we would laugh together for a very long time.

My mom had two breasts - cancer found them both. My parents explained this to me calmly, so calmly that it didn't seem real. How could they be so calm when I felt like my world was crumbling around me? I would come to bitterly learn that this was because everything said about cancer is an understatement. I was told she would lose a bit of hair, be a little sick for a while, and then everything would be better. This didn't stop the tears from suddenly rushing to my eyes, nor did it lessen the pain when this bandaid was ripped off and I discovered how harrowing cancer treatment actually is. It's not just losing hair and feeling sick - it's losing your life without dying.

My dad had two kidneys - thankfully for him, cancer only found one. After my mom's initial diagnosis, my dad began having severe anxiety induced stomach pains. It got so bad that his abdomen was scanned and, while they found nothing wrong with his stomach, they did discover tiny tumors in his kidney. Despite the diagnosis, he is considered incredibly lucky; most people do not discover renal cell carcinoma until it is far too late to be treated. This always baffled me - he was diagnosed with deadly cancer and still considered lucky. I would also come to learn that nothing about cancer makes sense.

Even so, one of the worst things about cancer is that it is persistent. You think the diagnoses are the worst of it, that the initial shock and anger and sadness can't get worse, but it's not even the tip of the iceberg. Many people experience cancer in an indirect, detached way; you may hear about a distant relative or friend getting cancer through the phone. You may send your condolences, maybe even a card or small gift. You'll think about them occasionally, and hope they're doing well. But living in a home with cancer eats away at you. You feel its presence haunting the hallways and lingering between the walls. You feel it in the silence, in the ticking of the clock in the living room that you never heard before cancer muted your world. You feel it in your gut and behind your breasts - some of us literally. You try to escape it by going out with friends, taking walks, drowning yourself in work, yet at the end of the day when you make your journey to bed, you feel it there too, sleeping beside you, whispering in your ear to keep you wide awake. You feel it as you cry silently in your bed, after you've brushed your teeth twice, checked in on two parents, lived two lives.

I felt the effects of cancer in tangible ways too. I felt it at the empty dinner table full of food our friends delivered us, none of which my mom could stomach. None of us truly could. Twenty two bouquets of flowers blanketed our house, and I felt it as the sickly sweet smell turned into a pungent rot as they slowly wilted away. My mom loves flowers, but had no strength to take care of them. It always seemed that no matter how much I watered, groomed, and fertilized, they always slipped away from me into withering decay. Often at night, I could hear my little sister crying in her room across the hallway, and I felt it when I could not console her because, well, what was there left to say? For far too long, cancer robbed me of my words. They got stuck in my throat and jammed between choked sobs. It's hard for me to describe the pain, the anger, and the boredom of it, and the long awaited joy I felt the day both my parents were finally cancer free. I will never forget the look of triumph and exhaustion on my mom's face the day of her last treatment. Witnessing recovery filled me with hope for my own future, and showed me just how resilient cancer survivors are. I hope to learn from and carry this kind of resilience with me throughout my life, and I know that as I face many hardships, I am lucky to have two of the strongest people I know right by my side.

The Ending by Olivia

12th grade, Iowa

Loved Ones Diagnosis

A young girl sits cross-legged in the corner of the couch, shrinking into herself as if trying to disappear completely. She studies the loopy pattern of the carpet, torn between keeping her heart intact or looking at her father for what may be the last time. Selfishly, she wants to remember him as he used to be.

She wants to remember the strong, broad man who used to swing her onto his shoulders. The man who spoke so eloquently, whose calm voice could soothe all her worries. She wants to remember the man who twirled her around the ballroom at every Daddy Daughter dance, even when his feet were tired. She wants to remember all of the good things and none of the bad, but she knows that isn't fair. He has always been there for her, and she knows she has to show him the same sort of love. Their moments are numbered, and she mustn't waste precious time being cowardly.

She turns to him, then immediately wishes she hadn't. She is drowned in a tidal wave of guilt but she can't help the way she feels. She has watched him wither away for so long and now that they are at the end, it is hard to look at him and see how viciously his body has been ravaged.

His features are warped by the disease that has overtaken him. It must've been a lifetime ago that his eyes were lively and bright, his lips upturned into an easy smile. His skin was never this ashen, his body never so gaunt. The chair he sits in looks too big for his weakened body, and he vaguely reminds her of a child. She wishes she could wrap her arms around his slight frame and protect him from this world just like he always did for her, but she doesn't know how to. She desperately wishes she could say something to take the pain away, but her throat has swollen closed and no matter how hard she fights, she can't force herself to speak. Just when she needs them most, her words fail her.

Instead, she reaches out and takes his rough, flaking hand in her own. His skin is permeated with deep cracks that are adorned with spots of dried blood. The chemotherapy has torn him apart in every conceivable way, visible or not. Their gazes meet, and a look of understanding passes between father and daughter. They both know his fate, whether she is ready to accept it or not.

She clutches tightly to him and hopes that, for now, it will be enough.

A young girl presses her back into the wall as if hoping it will somehow swallow her up. The sporadic beeping of machines sounds like a lullaby to her tired ears and she struggles to keep her half-lidded eyes from drifting completely shut. Her body is begging for rest, but she has no time for sleep. If she abandons him at a time like this, she will never forgive herself.

He's lying in a hospice bed, the blanket she made for him tucked under his chin. A sick feeling of dread twists her stomach as she watches him, wondering which breath will be his last. Selfishly, she hopes he stays forever. Keeping him like this, unconscious and pumped full of pain meds, would be better than losing him altogether. She closes her eyes and prays to a god she isn't sure she believes in anymore that her father will miraculously live.

The room feels cramped with so many people gathered around, gawking and poking at her father as if they have any right to do so. She doesn't like the way they talk about him, as if he's already dead and his body is merely a vessel. She wants to scream at everyone to leave, but her throat feels swollen shut and her voice is nowhere to be found. She's just as useless as she has always been.

A young girl staggers numbly out of the hospice house and into the stormy afternoon atmosphere. She drops onto the curb and pulls her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them in an attempt to hold together the shattered parts of herself. Her efforts are in vain, of course, because so many pieces of herself have broken off and died with him. She wonders if she will ever get those parts of herself back, but she doubts it. After watching his muscles slacken and his chest fall, she isn't sure she'll ever be the same.

The late August sunshine is nowhere to be found, hiding its face somewhere in the tumultuous grey sky. The clouds weep, their teardrops stinging her skin. The mockingbird's song has shifted to a low, mournful ballad, and even the pesky mosquitoes have enough respect to leave the girl alone. She realizes that the universe is as devastated as she is, and somehow that makes her feel a little less alone.

She stares at her feet, her mind empty when she hears a small, chirping melody. Her head snaps up, brows furrowed in annoyance as she seeks out the bird who dares to act as if nothing is wrong. As her eyes travel the skies, her gaze catches on something.

Amidst the grey clouds, a small circular pocket has begun to form. It expands just wide enough to allow a thick ray of sunshine to escape, bathing the world in a warm yellow glow. The girl can hear an echo of her father's voice, promising that he will send a sign after he passes.

She rises to her feet quickly, taking a step into the pool of sunlight. She tilts her face towards the sun and allows herself to bask in the gentle warmth of it. She stares at the sun for as long as she can before her vision turns white, and even then she does not look away. For a moment, however brief, she feels a deep sense of peace.

One in a Million by Sydnee

11th grade, Kentucky

Personal Diagnosis

I wait for the pill bottles to stop rattling in the pink Adidas duffle bag as my mom slides it under her chair in the doctor's office. I sit on the examination table and watch my mom fiddling with her fingers while we wait for the doctor to come in. We had been up since three because my mom and I had to drive from Elko, Nevada to Salt Lake City, Utah so I could receive my chemotherapy.

The only thing I do is fidget with the beanie on my bald head. I screamed for my mom the day my hair started coming out. Doctors' appointments and masks had become normal, but I could never get over the loss of my hair. It seems petty now, but for five-year-old me it was all-consuming.

I was diagnosed with Acute Lymphocytic Leukemia when I was three years old. While I may not remember every moment of the four years I had it, I remember enough. I remember the pain I felt physically, but the pain I felt mentally is even more strenuous. I can work through the fact that smelling bubble gum makes me nauseous because that reminds me of the anesthesia I used to fall asleep to in the hospital. However, I can never forget the tears my mom shed, and the worry lines my father developed. I can never forget how our own family turned their backs on us. Aunts, uncles, and cousins all slowly drifted away because they could not bear it. I had to watch the toll cancer was taking on my family. My brothers could not do normal teenager things because they feared they would bring back a common cold and it could kill me. My parents had to work, but also take care of four children. I felt like the cancer was not only suffocating me, but it was suffocating the people dearest to me.

To me it was just a sickness, but for my family it was different. I was too young to understand what my family understood all too well. The hardships for my family began when my oldest brother was diagnosed with a severe form of Acute Lymphocytic Leukemia. After two bone-marrow transplants, brain surgeries, and chemo, he was still not improving. He received Anointing of the Sick and eventually he started getting better. My parents had to watch their baby suffer as he was slowly slipping away until a miracle occurred. Seemingly this would be enough challenges for a lifetime, yet I got leukemia a few years later. So, when another one of their babies was diagnosed with cancer, they were wondering what they did wrong. The doctor said it is one in a million to have so many unrelated illnesses in a family. Of four children: two had ALL and one had diabetes. That was no comfort to my family, but it was to me. He was right; my

family is one in a million, or six in a million at least. I watched my parents deal with me being sick, care for three other children, and pay bills. I knew no matter what, I would have my family.

I remember I was proud of being a cancer survivor for years. Until seventh grade when I told someone I thought would be my life long best friend I used to have cancer. She did not believe me, so she looked it up and the first thing that showed up was an article from Elko Daily newspaper. By the next day the whole school new I had juvenile cancer, but they also looked at me like I was a liar. For the first time in my life, I was not proud of beating cancer. I did not understand how after all these years cancer was still suffocating me. I grew wary of who I told after that point, and I became closed off to others. I do not know who or what pulled me out of my funk, but eventually I learned that it was nothing to be ashamed of. If anything, it was hardcore; I mean a three-year-old beating cancer, what are the odds?

It is hard. That is the only way to describe the chaotic events of my life; however, those events allowed me to become the person I am today. Persevering is not just a word to describe me; it is a fundamental part of my character. To most, these events would be insurmountable and a reason to have it easy. To me, these encounters taught me to achieve the impossible. I want to utilize this perseverance to achieve my dreams of becoming a pediatric oncologist. After my history, this choice seems obvious; I have always felt a calling to help people through the hard times in their lives. Cancer has permanently changed my outlook on the world. If cancer taught me one thing it is to laugh, love, and work harder than ever to be the best person I can be. The outcomes of these hardships may be a result of my perseverance or maybe it is simply luck, but I like to think that it is a combination of both.